

commentary

from other pens...

Dems see Hispanics as House election key

Elections for the House will give both Democrats and Republicans their best chance this fall to demonstrate how effectively they can attract the loyalties of the fast-growing Hispanic vote.

In a dozen competitive House districts, Hispanic voters will have a major role as either a near majority or a crucial group of swing voters who could decide the race. The group that rivals blacks as the nation's largest minority will play a role in dozens of other districts as well.

Understanding the shifting demographics, President Bush has led a determined effort by Republicans to make inroads with the Hispanic vote — openly courting Hispanics, working to build close ties with Mexico and supporting immigration legislation that angered some conservative Republicans.

"The courting of the Hispanic vote by the Bush administration is going to have its first test in 2002," said Harry Pachon, president of the non-partisan Tomas Rivera Policy Institute.

What is not known, he says, is whether "all the high-visibility appointments, the symbolic visits to Mexico and the bringing to the forefront the Hispanic issues on immigration... will play out at the congressional level?"

Democrats are responding with an effort to attract Hispanics as they believe these voters may help the party regain control of the House.

Rep. Bob Menendez, D-N.J. said that Hispanics "may well be the anchor" in providing the six seats the Democrats need to win the majority in the House.

"A highly mobilized Hispanic electorate in key congressional races could return control of the house to Democrats," agreed Antonio Gonzalez, president of the William C. Velasquez Institute in San Antonio.

States that gained seats through redistricting in 2000 did so at least partially because of Hispanic population growth — especially in the South and West, said Rep. Nita Lowey of New York, chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Democrats have their eyes on pickups in states like Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Texas and have almost an assured pickup in southern California, where Linda Sanchez has already won a new district drawn for Democrats.

Voter turnout among Hispanics has been lower than the national average, especially in areas where the Hispanic population is new to this country. And turnout could be even lower in midterm elections.

Republicans counter that Democrats are overly optimistic about their Hispanic prospects. They say the GOP has strong candidates in these House districts, an appealing message on the economy, education and values and a president working hard to win over Hispanics.

"We'll do much better with the Hispanic vote this time than last," said Rep. Tom Davis of Virginia, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee. "President Bush has made that easier."

While Hispanics have a tradition of backing Democrats — especially since Republicans angered them in the mid 1990s on the immigration issue — their party allegiance is far from certain.

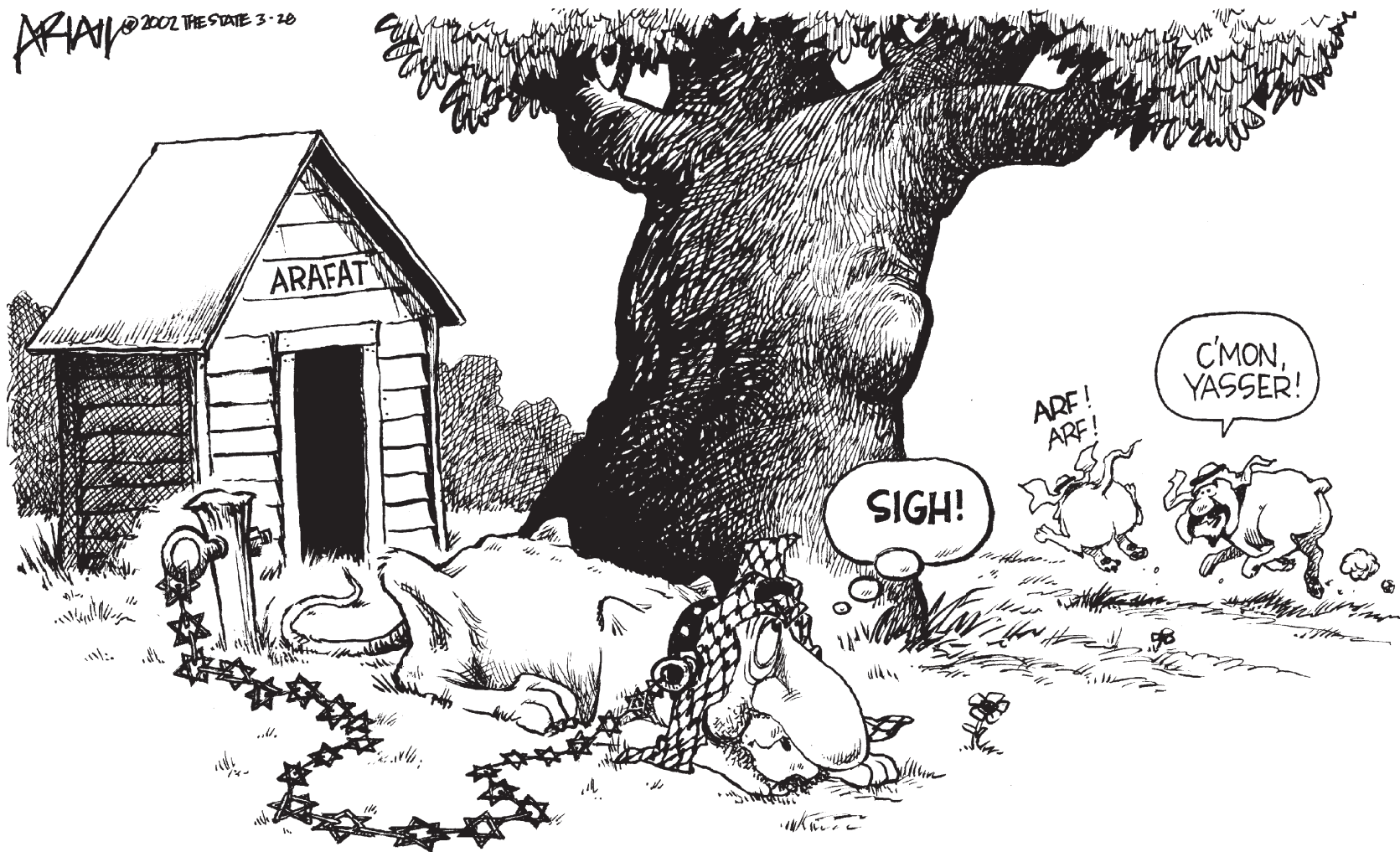
Hispanics — particularly Mexican Americans, who are the largest Hispanic group — tilt toward Democrats in percentages in the 60s and 70s in many parts of the country, while the Cuban Americans in Florida lean heavily toward the GOP.

Then-Gov. George W. Bush gained among Texas Hispanics in the 1990s and got support of 35 percent nationally in the presidential election.

"Hispanics still lean Democratic, but there are a lot of folks re-examining the positions of both parties," said Larry Gonzales of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

"What's occurred in the past two years is that Democrats have realized that the Latino vote is the hidden leg of their support," said Pachon of the Rivera Institute. "It's like an old girlfriend being courted by a new suitor. That's when you find out how much you love her."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for *The Associated Press*.



Postal cost increase shows lack of competition

The price of stamps is going up again. Three pennies this time, from 34 to 37 cents in June. It won't break me. I only use about 20 stamps a month, so the increase will cost me an extra \$7.20 a year on a total postage cost of \$88.80.

Other people might have to pay more than I do. Post cards are going up to 23 cents. Priority and express mail, certified letters, return receipts and most postal insurance costs are going up too.

If the cost of soda goes up, I have the choice of going to another store and buying it. When the postal service raises rates on first-class letters, I'm out of luck because it's the only game in town.

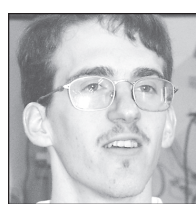
To deliver first class mail, a company has to get an exemption from the postal service, and has to charge at least \$3 per letter. It is a pretty effective government-enforced monopoly. Firms are allowed to deliver express mail and larger packages, but can't touch first-class letters.

The service has other advantages over other package delivery companies. It doesn't have to pay taxes on income, property or vehicles. It doesn't have to follow zoning laws or customs regulations. It can borrow directly from the U.S. Treasury at below-market rates, and it can demand debt payments from bankruptcies ahead of private firms.

Even with all the advantages the service has, it announced last year that it could save \$1 billion by turning some of its overnight deliveries over to FedEx. So even after paying all the taxes and other costs the service doesn't have to, FedEx can make money delivering overnight while the postal service can't.

Some economists have said the postal system subsidizes its overnight and express delivery services, where it has competition, by charging higher prices for first class mail, where it has a monopoly and nothing to keep it from raising prices.

The U.S. isn't the only country with a government monopoly on postal service, but the ranks are dwindling. The Swedish Post competes with two private companies. In Guatemala, the postal service itself uses some of the 250 private delivery services in the country. Germany and the United Kingdom have relaxed rules against private mail



doug stephens

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in recent years.

The postal service hasn't always operated under a monopoly. From 1839 to 1851, private companies used the emerging railroad and steamship lines to carry mail. They either operated in areas where the postal service didn't, like in thinly populated areas, or dealt with packages or money, which was legal. Soon, many companies hid letters in boxes, and started accepting small "packages," a euphemism for letters.

In 1843 a private mail carrier, Adams and Co., was brought to trial and charged with delivering letters outside of the official mail. The law was written before the proliferation of railroad and steamship lines, and only forbid delivery by foot or horse. The judge ruled the law as written did not apply to other modes of transportation. While the government scrambled to try its case in other courts, private individuals flocked to open mail services.

One of the most famous was run by Lysander Spooner, a political activist who argued that the Constitution only gave Congress the power "to establish post offices and post roads," not the exclusive right to do so.

Spooner agitated the government at every turn and was driven out of business in seven months, hit with fines, legal expenses, and seizure of his mail. Other firms kept low profiles and made some pretty good money.

The Postal Service, hit with this competition, was forced to streamline its operations or lose all of its business. Its prices simply couldn't compete. In 1843, *The New York Tribune* commented that a person could ship 200 pounds of flour down the Hudson from Troy to New York City for less than it would cost to send a letter down the same route.

No cuts to schools adds pressure for tax increase

TOPEKA — As their session nears an end, legislators are feeling more pressure to raise taxes to help close a \$700 million budget gap.

But some of that pressure is self-imposed, as lawmakers reject proposals to reduce aid to public schools.

Their stance is notable because other parts of the budget are seeing cuts consistently in proposals to eliminate the shortfall.

And state aid to elementary and secondary schools would seem a logical target for cutting, since it consumes more than half of the state's general tax dollars — \$2.3 billion of the total \$4.54 billion this year.

Some legislators attribute the favored status of public schools this year to the ability of superintendents, teachers and school boards to generate mail and political discontent.

Others say more legislators believe — as education officials have argued — that even keeping state aid at its current level will force sacrifices by school districts.

Whatever the reasons, legislators are making the job of eliminating the shortfall more difficult for themselves — and increasing the chances of a tax increase.

"When you take half the budget and hold it harmless, the numbers don't fit," said Sen. Tim Huelskamp, R-Fowler, a member of the Senate Ways and Means Committee.

Legislators cannot finish their business for the year without reconciling expected revenues with spending. And they cannot do that job with making a decision about school finance.

In the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, the state sends school districts \$3,870 per pupil, plus extra money for special education and other programs.

For the next budget, the House has approved increasing the aid by \$10 per pupil, at a cost of \$5.7 million. The Senate went higher, approving an extra \$20 per student.

Even conservative Republicans opposed to any



john hanna

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tax increase acknowledge that cutting aid to schools is difficult.

"You're dealing with your kids, your grandkids and your neighbors," said Sen. Stan Clark, R-Oakley, one of the conservatives. "It's all up front and personal."

School boards and superintendents have put the Legislature's budget debate up front in their communities by discussing possible cuts in programs and teacher layoffs.

Even if state aid were spared any cutting, many education officials say their districts will be strapped because of rising costs for health insurance and energy plus periodic negotiations with teachers for pay raises.

The Wichita district — the state's largest — has seen health insurance premiums rise \$3 million and property and casualty insurance costs go up \$500,000. Meanwhile, it must cover \$2 million in additional teacher payroll.

In community after community, superintendents have produced lists of money-saving options: laying teachers off, imposing fees for extracurricular activities, eliminating programs for troubled or poor students, cutting back on electives.

"I think school districts and administrators and teachers have done a good job of being specific," said Sen. Christine Downey, D-Newton. "They've been more aggressive in communicating with their legislators."

Too aggressive, some conservative legislators say of districts and teachers' unions.

Sen. Kay O'Connor, the Legislature's leading advocate of giving parents tax dollars to pay private school tuition, was taken aback recently by the sight of a Kansas-National Education Associa-

tion lobbyist briefing a group of students visiting the Capitol.

In her view, the students were hearing propaganda designed to turn them into political activists. "It's horrible, this exploitation of children," said O'Connor, R-Olathe.

Huelskamp said many legislators fear the power of the K-NEA or its local chapters to mobilize during campaigns. He also noted that school districts hire lobbyists, either directly or through associations.

"We pay them with tax dollars, to lobby us for more tax dollars," he said.

Education officials have heard similar complaints for years and say critics exaggerate the intensity of their efforts.

"We really haven't generated massive amounts of phone calls or letter writing campaigns," said Bob Vancrum, a former state senator who lobbies for the Blue Valley district in Johnson County.

Some legislators who consider themselves supportive of public education say the public has a general affection for schools.

"The state budget affects our lives," said Rep. Bob Tomlinson, R-Roeland Park, a teacher. "School budgets affect our dreams and our future."

Whether it's affection, fear of political retribution or concern about the future of education that drives them, legislators are reluctant to cut aid to public schools.

And refusing to cut school aid pushes legislators toward increasing taxes.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Correspondent John Hanna has covered Kansas politics and government for *The Associated Press* since 1987.

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