

commentary

from other pens...

Dems sieze on scandals, but issue cuts both ways

Democratic candidates are talking more about corporate scandals in their bid to hold onto control of the Senate, running ads in many competitive states and weaving the theme into campaign speeches.

In Arkansas, Colorado and Texas, candidates from both parties claim their opponents are vulnerable on the subject. In Minnesota, South Dakota and Tennessee, Democrats have decided to make the issue central to their campaigns, but Republicans think other issues will dominate.

Democrats are trying to find an issue that will help them hold onto a 50-49-1 edge in the Senate. But the corporate scandal issue could be complicated by both parties' close ties to business, some analysts say.

"I'm not sure this issue is a clear winner for Democrats in the Senate contests," said Bruce Buchanan, a political scientist at the University of Texas. "I'm guided by the Senate race in Texas, where it cuts both ways."

"For either of them to throw stones living in a glass house is risky." Republican John Cornyn, the Texas attorney general, and Democrat Ron Kirk, former mayor of Dallas, both have ties to big corporations which make it difficult to make accountability a central issue of the Senate campaign.

"People are concerned about this issue, but neither side in this race seems to have a major advantage," said David Beckwith, a spokesman for the Cornyn campaign. Kirk aides agree it's crucial in the home state of failed energy trading company Enron, but say it's not the dominant issue.

The issue has taken center stage in Colorado, where former U.S. Attorney Tom Strickland, the Democrat, is challenging Sen. Wayne Allard, the Republican.

The Strickland campaign is trying to paint Allard as a close ally of Qwest, a Denver-based telecommunications company that is the subject of a federal probe. Allard's campaign aired an ad touting his support for legislation passed by Congress and signed by President Bush to toughen enforcement on corporate wrongdoing.

Strickland aides say Allard fought measures in the past that would improve corporate accountability and only changed his approach recently because of public anger. Aides to Allard counter that Strickland worked for a firm that lobbied for Global Crossing, another telecommunications company that is under investigation after its collapse.

In Minnesota, Democratic Sen. Paul Wellstone, a former college professor, is highlighting the years he has pushed for corporate accountability while criticizing Republican Norm Coleman, an attorney and former mayor of St. Paul, for taking contributions from corporations under investigation, including WorldCom and Global Crossing. Wellstone hasn't put up ads on the topic at this point.

Coleman aides describe the GOP candidate as a former prosecutor and say his campaign is passing along the contributions he got from those companies to funds set up to help the companies' employees.

It's not clear "who will benefit most on that issue," said Larry Noble, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics. "Both the Republicans and the Democrats have been receiving money from corporations."

"We may end up with a situation where the Republicans take a greater hit," he said, "but the Democrats are not free and clear."

The effectiveness of a campaign focused on corporate scandals could depend on whether the nation's economy continues to slide, said Norman Ornstein, a congressional scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Democrats are convinced the corporate issue can work in their favor and have been putting up ads on the topic in a half-dozen states.

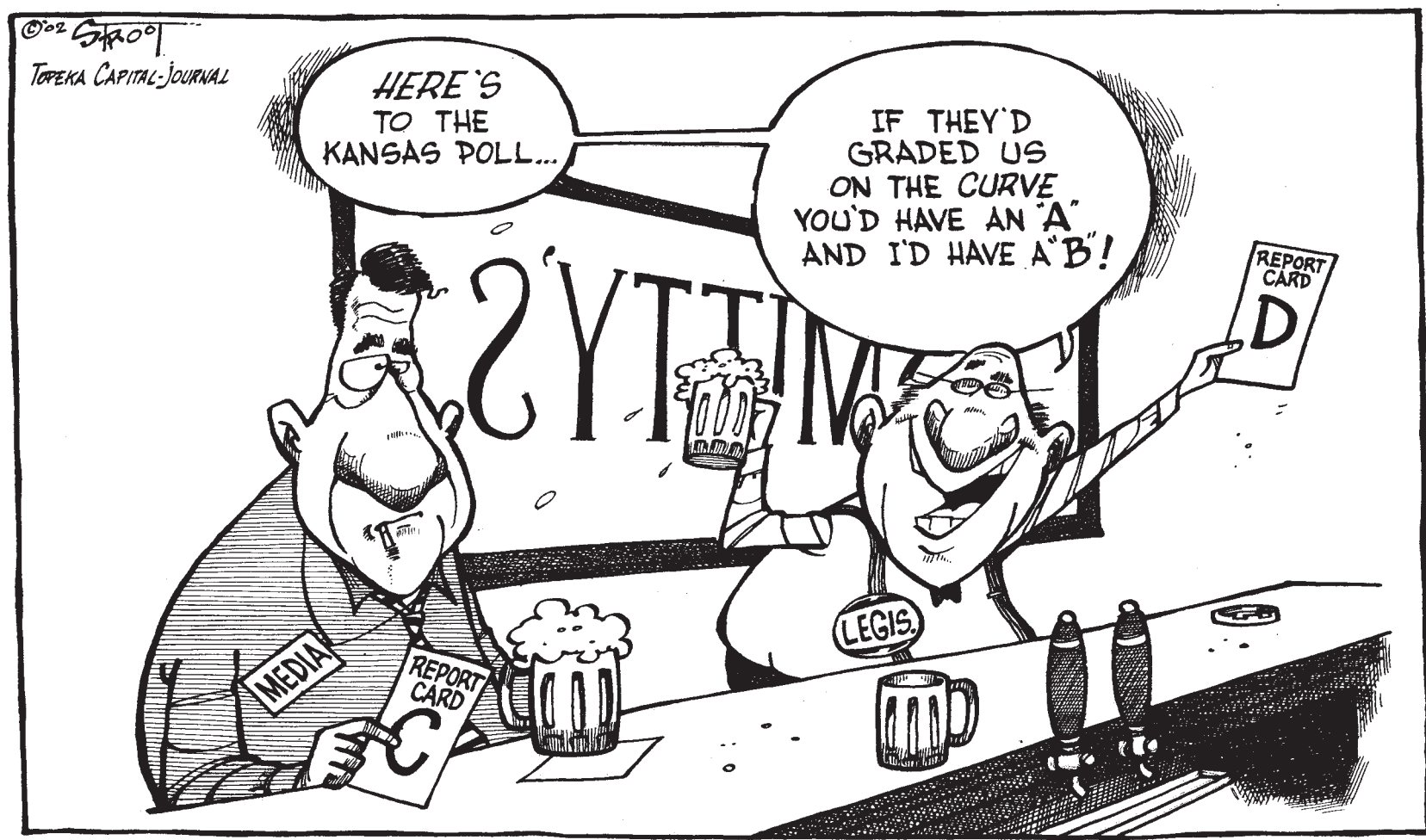
Recent polls, both public and partisan, suggest Republicans are viewed as more sympathetic to big business than to ordinary Americans.

"It's an issue that is popping up in every single state," said Jim Jordan, executive director of the Democrats' campaign Committee.

Mitch Bainwol, Jordan's counterpart at the National Republican Senatorial Committee, sent a memo recently to GOP campaigns urging candidates to emphasize the underlying strength of the economy.

"The Democrats have turned the economy of the United States into their personal political playing field," Bainwol said.

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



Sebelius has battle on her hands

TOPEKA — Democrat Kathleen Sebelius looks almost invincible in the governor's race right now. She has won two terms as insurance commissioner in a Republican state and entered the general election campaign for governor with about \$1.27 million, unsullied by a primary race.

A recent pre-primary poll suggested that significantly more likely voters preferred Sebelius to any of the three Republican contenders. GOP voters nominated State Treasurer Tim Shallenburger, the most conservative contender and the one who did worst against Sebelius in the polling matchups.

But the Republican primary is over, and Sebelius is likely to have a tough race, despite advantages she now enjoys.

"It's never easy for a Democrat in Kansas," state Democratic Party Chairman Tom Sawyer said. "These polls will get tighter."

Joining Sebelius and Shallenburger on the Nov. 5 general election ballot are Libertarian Dennis Hawver, an Ozawie attorney, and Ted Pettibone, a St. Marys businessman. The Kansas Constitution prohibits Republican Gov. Bill Graves from seeking a third consecutive term.

Almost since Graves won his second and final term in 1998, Democrats have viewed Sebelius as their strongest candidate for this year's race.

She was the only member of her party to file for the office, allowing her to build an organization and raise money quietly. Her campaign began broadcasting positive television ads late in the primary election season.

Meanwhile, Shallenburger was immersed in a contentious race with Senate President Dave Kerr, of Hutchinson, and Wichita Mayor Bob Knight. He entered the final week of the primary campaign with less than \$86,000 in campaign funds and likely ended it with relatively few dollars in his treasury.

In addition, a pre-primary poll suggested that Shallenburger would be the weakest candidate against Sebelius. The survey of 731 likely voters



john hanna

• ap news analysis

was organized by the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas and sponsored by seven media organizations. It had a margin of error of 3.6 percentage points.

In a Sebelius-Shallenburger match, Sebelius was the choice of 45.6 percent of the respondents and Shallenburger, of only 24.1 percent. Another 30.4 percent were undecided.

But Shallenburger dismissed the numbers as irrelevant, saying, "That campaign hasn't started yet."

Shallenburger was right to point to such a poll as meaningless a full three months before the general election.

First, few Republican leaders expect Shallenburger to have much trouble raising money. He said he might need as much as \$1.5 million and is confident he can raise that sum. That would bring his campaign total to about \$2.1 million.

Sawyer suggested that Sebelius would need to raise another \$1.3 million, bringing the total since the start of her campaign to \$3.1 million. The spending record is \$2.61 million, set by Republican Gov. Bill Graves in his 1998 campaign for re-election.

But even if Shallenburger raises less money, his primary campaign showed he can minimize a fundraising disadvantage with volunteers. His conservative base connects him to a well-organized network of activists.

"I think Shallenburger will be very able to raise money, and he will have enough to run a winning campaign," said Sen. Derek Schmidt, R-Independence, a moderate.

Sawyer said that even if Sebelius raises more than \$3 million, she'll need the money to compete.

"This is a very Republican state," Sawyer said.

"It takes a little more for a Democrat to break through."

Sawyer was acknowledging a constant fact of Kansas political life. However good a Democratic hopeful for statewide office may be, that candidate confronts a big GOP advantage in voter registration.

More than 710,000 Kansas voters were affiliated with the Republican Party — about 272,000 more than those identifying themselves as Democrats.

"The bottom line for Republicans in Kansas is that you've got to give them a reason not to vote Republican," said Secretary of State Ron Thornburgh, a moderate. "I don't see that happening in this race."

Finally, history is on Shallenburger's side.

No Democrat has won an open governor's race since 1936, when Walter Huxman was elected when GOP legend Alf Landon gave up the job for his unsuccessful bid for the presidency.

In 1974, Senate President Robert Bennett emerged from a fractious GOP primary and many Republicans worried about his ability to defeat Democratic Attorney General Vern Miller. Bennett won.

Twelve years later, with Democratic Gov. John Carlin retiring, Republicans had another contentious primary and nominated House Speaker Mike Hayden. Some activists didn't see Hayden as the best choice to take on Democratic Lt. Gov. Tom Docking, the son and grandson of governors. Hayden won.

In 1994, Democratic U.S. Rep. Jim Slattery looked like a tough candidate as the year began. Graves, then the secretary of state, survived a tough GOP primary race. He easily defeated Slattery in the general election.

Sebelius will have to work hard and raise a lot of money to avoid the fate of her political predecessors.

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Those district elections seem unfair to me

Different folks, as they say, different strokes. When county commission elections come up, I usually feel left out. Same for the school board. Why?

Because in Kansas, only people in a given district get to vote for commissioners. And since it's rare for anyone to challenge an elected incumbent, there aren't many races for commissioner to start with.

When there is one, it seems, it's usually in another district. And I want to vote.

It's not that having districts doesn't make sense. In theory, at least, it ensures that the three commissioners come from different parts of the county.

But it leaves a lot of voters with nothing to do at election times except sit on their hands, especially in the year (like this on) where only one seat is up for re-election.

Which leads me to ask, by the way, why all county offices except this one commission seat have to be filled in the same year? Why not have, say, the sheriff and county attorney run one year with two commissioners, and the clerk and treasurer run with the other commissioner the next time?

It'd make county elections both more manageable and understandable, and more interesting.

Well, we elect the entire state Senate at the same time every four years, not on a staggered basis like the U.S. Senate. Hey, these things don't have to



steve haynes

• along the sappa

make sense.

In Colorado, and some other states, commissioners are elected from districts, but they run at large. They have to live IN the district, but everyone gets to vote on them.

I like that system. It makes you feel like all three commissioners are your representative, not just one of them.

This is not to say that one system is "right," and one is "wrong." Both work OK. I just like feeling involved, so I like the Colorado plan. But it would take some serious changes to state law to fix any of this.

Not so with school board seats. Kansas school boards can choose how their members are elected, either from districts or at large. Districts keep the largest town from completely dominating a board, so they have been popular.

With school and county offices, though, it's not common to have contests, especially when the incumbents run. So the entire question is somewhat academic.

where to write

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U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 1217 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 225-2715

State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building Rm. 174-W, Topeka, KS 66612. (785) 296-7676

State Sen. Stan Clark, State Capitol Building Rm. 128-S, Topeka, KS 66612. (785) 296-7399

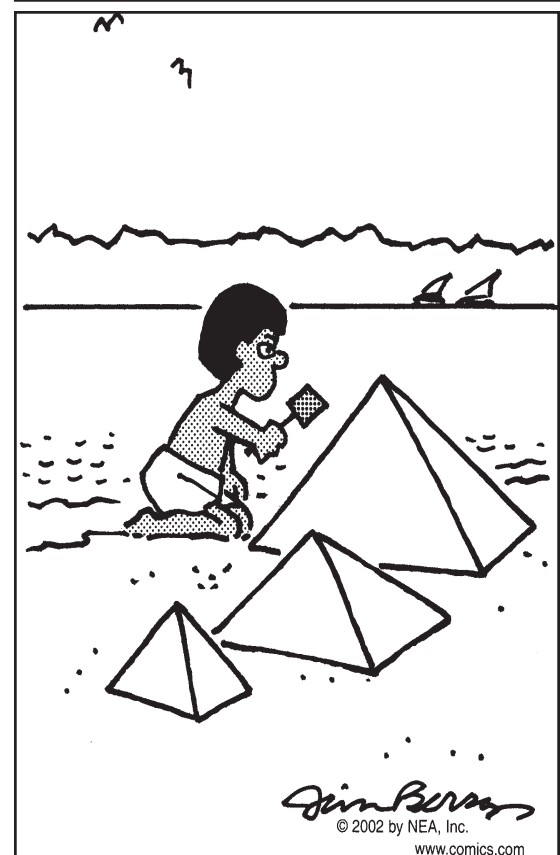
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And again, that may not be a bad thing. States where there is a lot of competition for local offices usually have a much higher corruption level than Kansas. My rule of thumb is to look at the amount people are willing to spend out of their own pockets to win an office; when there are big bucks involved, someone is expected a payday.

In a squeaky-clean state like Kansas, the checks are small and interest is less. But I'm not complaining. Check out the county elections anywhere south of here; it's scary.

But when there is a scrap, I still want to be part of it. And I wish someone would change that law. I can't afford to have a house in every district so I can shift my vote to where it will count.

berry's world



Jim Berry
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