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Picking Congressional Winners

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The students made their predictions Oct. 31, completing an August assignment to choose a closely contested Congressional race, predict a winner and the margin of victory. Each student follows polls, news reports, campaign finance reports and debates and writes a 20-page report documenting his or her research.

The Rev. John Putka, S.M., director of UD's Congressional Internship Program and a political science lecturer, gives the assignment each election year to students in his Legislative Politics and American Political Systems classes. Two years ago, his students picked 76 percent of the races correctly.

UD senior Chris Cerone believes Democrat Kay Hagan will pull off a surprise upset of incumbent Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole in North Carolina with a 3 percent margin of victory.

"Hagan didn't have much of a chance back in July, but Barack Obama and other Democratic leaders have given her their support, and now she's ahead by 1," Cerone said. "I really feel she has the momentum."

Strong third-party candidates are also likely to play a role in making 2008 a Democratic year. Minnesota Republican Sen. Norm Coleman will lose his re-election bid to Democrat Al Franken by 3 percentage points, senior Peter Drouhard predicts. Coleman barely won in 2002 after his opponent died weeks before the election, and Independent Dean Barkley is polling very well and may take up to 23 percent of the vote.

"Barkley's pulling support equally from both candidates, so he's not 'Ross Peroting' Coleman," Drouhard said. "Coleman is just too tied to President (George W.) Bush's policies, and I think the coattail effect will happen to Franken as well."

Junior Adam Eversole and sophomore Matt Drapp both have been following the race in Ohio's 2nd District for the U.S. House of Representatives, and both agree Independent David Krekorian will affect the outcome. They disagree on who will win.

Eversole believes incumbent Republican Rep. Jean Schmidt will lose by 3 points to Democrat Victoria Wulsin.

"Schmidt barely defeated Wulsin in 2006, and polls show Krekorian could get 8 to 10 percent of the vote," Eversole said. "The economy is the number one issue, and Krekorian is conservative on the financial and economic issues, so he will likely pull votes from Schmidt."

But Drapp believes Krekorian will attract moderate Democrats and will pull votes from Wulsin, giving Schmidt a narrow 2-point victory.

Although the assignment only required students to track one race, some, like sophomore Brendan Lacey, used the research tools they learned to study local races.

While researching the U.S. Senate race in Colorado between Republican Bob Schaffer and Democrat Mark Udall, Lacey checked out campaign financing reports of candidates running for the House in his own district in Ohio.

He also said the assignment required a lot of ongoing research.

"This wasn't like other research papers, where you can go to the library and look up what has been written on the subject," he said. "The research is always changing, so you always have to be paying attention."

Sophomore Scott Martin, who predicted Louisiana Democrat Mary Landrieu would keep her Senate seat with a 6-point victory, said the assignment will forever change how he watches elections.

"I don't look at elections the same way everyone else does anymore," he said. "I understand all the details of campaigning and fundraising and what it takes to win."

Although their grades don't depend on the accuracy of their predictions, the students plan to watch their races closely.
"It's about personal pride, everybody likes to be right," Drouhard said. "If I call my race correctly, I might do a little dance or something."

On the record

Some of the predictions from the Legislative Politics class:

Louisiana Senate: Mary Landrieu by 6 percent;
North Carolina Senate: Kay Hagan by 3 percent;
Minnesota Senate: Al Franken by 3 percent;
Colorado Senate: Mark Udall by 2 percent;
Ohio House District 2: Victoria Wulsin by 3 percent/Jean Schmidt by 2 percent

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