

The (Down-Ballot) Race Card

Both parties have to be nervous about what might happen below the presidential level. Republicans know that their brand has been tarnished, nationally and in Texas. The R's were stunned to lose five legislative seats and the Dallas County courthouse in 2006. Another debacle would signal a trend. For the Democrats, the stakes are even higher. Their base, moribund for so long, has huge expectations that are hard to meet in a state still dominated by Republicans. If the D's stumble on Election Day, all the momentum achieved over the past two years could be lost. A bad performance would probably carry over to 2010, when the major state offices are up for grabs. A resurgence by the R's would give them control of redistricting in 2011—and we know what they can do with that.

THE STATEWIDES

If Obama can't win Texas, it's hard to see how other statewide Democratic candidates can. They would have to attract Republican votes. That might be possible for Rick Noriega if he can exploit John Cornyn's hard-line stand on immigration among conservative Hispanics, but he hasn't shown much campaign savvy so far, and he's nowhere when it comes to money and name ID. He will be further stymied if a rift develops between Obama and Texas Hispanics, who largely supported Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary; a black-brown split would be devastating for the D's. As for the Supreme Court races, Republicans Phil Johnson and Dale Wainwright are odds-on favorites to be reelected, even in a year in which the court has been besmirched by headline-making ethics flaps and controversial rulings.

THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

David Bradley, a four-term Republican incumbent who represents Southeast Texas, including part of Harris County, is one of the leaders of the hard-right board majority that has been so controversial of late. Republicans have a 10-5 advantage on the board, but a Laura Ewing victory could tip the governing balance to a coalition of D's and moderate R's. Can Obama's strength in the Houston area and in Jefferson County offset the traditional Republican edge in the rest of the region?

THE EAST TEXAS WD-40'S

"WD-40" is Capitol-speak for white Democrats of middle age who generally represent Republican-leaning districts. In a normal year, Mark Homer, Jim McReynolds, and Chuck Hopson would be favored, but Obama may be a load to carry in East Texas.

THE HISPANICS

These races don't necessarily involve Hispanics, but Hispanic turnout will be an important and uncertain factor. Democrats Joe Moody, Juan Garcia, and Ciro Rodriguez all have to worry whether the Hispanics who backed Clinton in the primary will be motivated to turn out to support the candidate they voted against. Both Garcia and Moody are running in traditionally Republican districts (Moody in El Paso, Garcia in Corpus Christi) and need a big Democratic showing.

THE BATTLE FOR HARRIS COUNTY

This is the big prize for the D's: an opportunity to stake their claim to Harris County, whose population exceeds that of 24 states. A big turnout for Obama is what they need to win these races. The highest profile among them will be Nick Lampson versus Pete Olson, as the Democrats try to hold on to the congressional seat once occupied by Tom DeLay. Michael Skelly, a wind-power zillionaire, has some business support against his hard-right opponent, John Culberson. Two state Senate races will be closely watched; the rivals to succeed Kyle Janek will probably be Chris Bell (D) and Austen Furse (R), Janek's handpicked choice. Joe Jaworski, a grandson of the late Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworski, is well funded against Republican Mike Jackson, but the district leans Republican. Hubert Vo, who defeated powerful Republican Talmadge Hefflin in 2004, finds himself on the defensive against Greg Meyers' slumlord charges.

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 10

Republicans are already an endangered species in Austin, but Michael McCaul faces an especially tough race. Larry Joe Doherty, a former nationally syndicated TV judge, is a political novice, but all local voters care about is the *D* after his name. The district stretches eastward through several rural counties and into Harris County, but the Austin part usually outvotes the Houston part—and should do so by a significant margin with Obama (who smoked Clinton in the Democratic primary here) at the top of the ticket. If McCaul manages to hold on, it won't be by much.

THE METROPLEX

Dallas and Tarrant counties have become major battlegrounds in the fight for control at the Capitol; as is the case throughout metro Texas, a big Obama turnout is key to victory. At least half a dozen other seats in the House are in play here, in addition to a Senate seat. Republicans hold a 20-11 majority in the Senate, and it has been a while since a Democrat has defeated an incumbent R. Wendy Davis was a popular Fort Worth city council member, but Kim Brimer is leading in early polls. Dan Barrett is the most vulnerable Democrat in the House: He won a special election over Mark Shelton last December in a Republican district.

THE BURBS

These races represent the future of Texas politics: demographic change in districts on the urban fringes. The Bryan Daniel-Diana Maldonado and Donnie Dippel-Tim Kleinschmidt races take place in districts that touch Obama-friendly Travis County. Drive north into Williamson County or east into Bastrop County and you encounter new middle-class subdivisions. These areas are now up for grabs. The Bill Zedler-Chris Turner, Allen Vaught-Bill Keffer, and Tony Goolsby-Carol Kent races are in districts that are experiencing a different kind of shift, as long-established suburbs pass into middle age and renters replace homeowners. Vaught beat Keffer in the Democratic sweep of Dallas County in 2006; the rematch should be equally close, but Obama will help.

THE BURBS

State representative Allen Vaught (D) vs. Bill Keffer (R)
 State representative Tony Goolsby (R) vs. Carol Kent (D)
 Donnie Dippel (D) vs. Tim Kleinschmidt (R) to succeed retiring state representative Robby Cook (D)
 State representative Bill Zedler (R) vs. Chris Turner (D)
 Bryan Daniel (R) vs. Diana Maldonado (D) to succeed retiring state representative Mike Krusee (R)

THE METROPLEX

State senator Kim Brimer (R) vs. Wendy Davis (D)
 State representative Dan Barrett (D) vs. Mark Shelton (R)

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 10

U.S. representative Michael McCaul (R) vs. Larry Joe Doherty (D)

THE HISPANICS

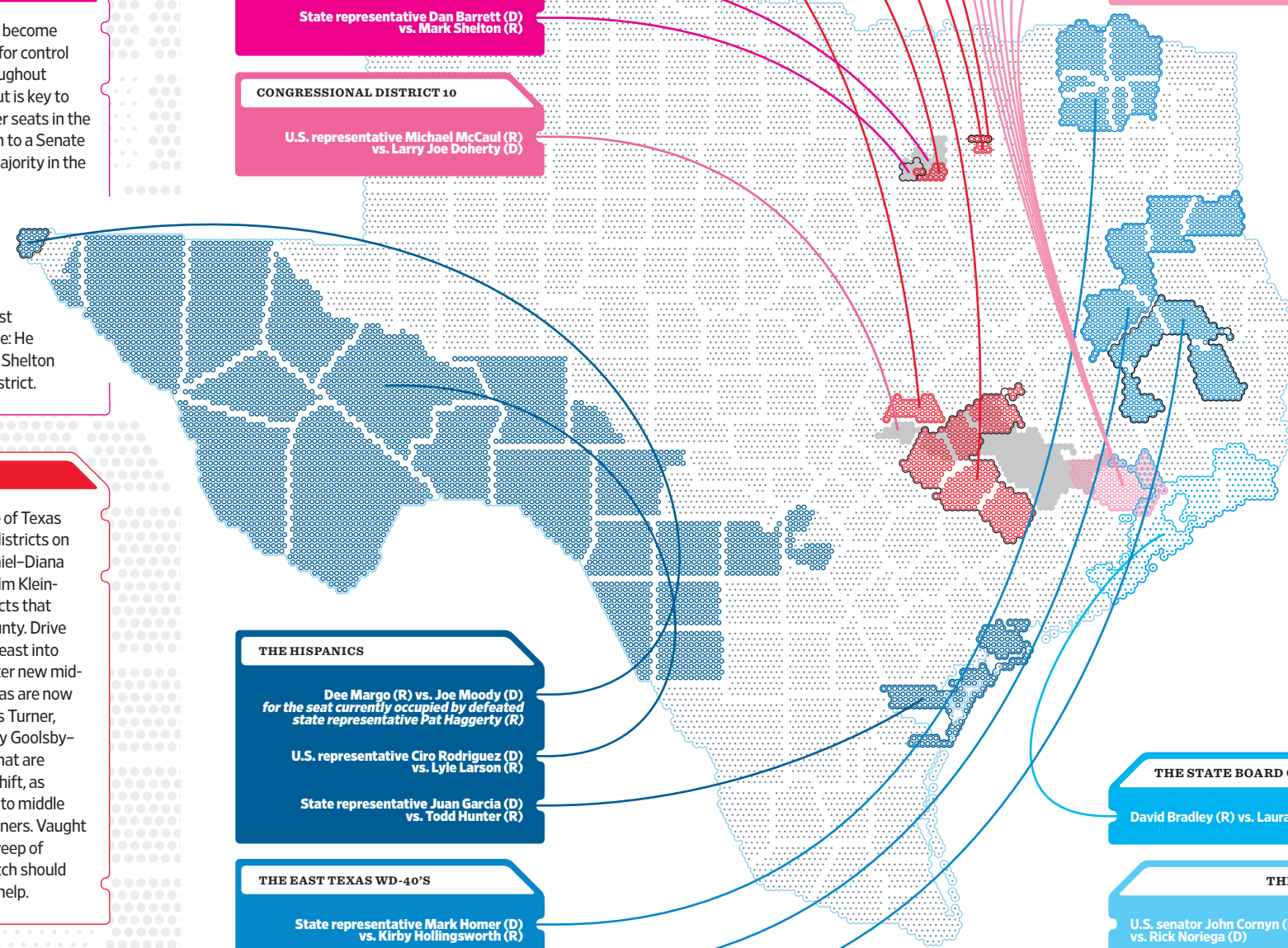
Dee Margo (R) vs. Joe Moody (D) for the seat currently occupied by defeated state representative Pat Haggerty (R)
 U.S. representative Ciro Rodriguez (D) vs. Lyle Larson (R)
 State representative Juan Garcia (D) vs. Todd Hunter (R)

THE EAST TEXAS WD-40'S

State representative Mark Homer (D) vs. Kirby Hollingsworth (R)
 State representative Chuck Hopson (D) vs. Brian Walker (R)
 State representative Jim McReynolds (D) vs. Van Brookshire (R)

THE BATTLE FOR HARRIS COUNTY

U.S. representative Nick Lampson (D) vs. Pete Olson (R)
 U.S. representative John Culberson (R) vs. Michael Skelly (D)
 State senator Mike Jackson (R) vs. Joe Jaworski (D)
 Special election to fill the seat of retiring state senator Kyle Janek (R)
 Ken Legler (R) vs. Joel Redmond (D) to succeed retiring state representative Robert Talton (R)
 State representative Hubert Vo (D) vs. Greg Meyers (R)
 County judge Ed Emmett (R) vs. David Minberg (D)
 District attorney, sheriff, and many judicial races



THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

David Bradley (R) vs. Laura Ewing (D)

THE STATEWIDES

U.S. senator John Cornyn (R) vs. Rick Noriega (D)
 Supreme Court justice Phil Johnson (R) vs. Sam Houston (D)
 Supreme Court justice Dale Wainwright (R) vs. Linda Yañez (D)