

Cracking the congressional code

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Louisiana voters will send six representatives to Congress during the November general elections and, if needed, the December runoffs. Those contests, for two-year terms, are sort of a big deal.

Nonetheless, many voters are unplugged from the issues and personalities. They think there isn't much going on with our upcoming congressional elections. Well, they're wrong.

Those unplugged voters may not be aware that the aftereffects of an election are not confined to its district lines, and that the lessons gleaned can be applied to everything from policy forecasts to political tea leaves.

Moreover, this is a fascinating time in the history of Louisiana's U.S. House delegation. Congressman Steve Scalise of Jefferson Parish, for example, is the majority whip, which is the third-highest rank in the nation's lower chamber. Congressman Cedric Richmond of Orleans Parish is also the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, which brings with it considerable clout.

Then there's our other four delegation members. All of them are either in their first or second terms, including:

Scalise, with national name recognition and a place at the White House dinner table, resides at the top of this Beltway pecking order. He was viewed as a likely successor to Speaker Paul Ryan, who announced last week he would step down at the end of the year. But that speculation was muted when Scalise, like Ryan, endorsed House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy.

That doesn't mean Scalise is out of the running for a leadership win. He could still move from the House's number three job to number two, which McCarthy occupies now. Or he could still end up making a run for speaker, should McCarthy have trouble gathering the 218 votes needed.

Either way, Scalise still has to first get re-elected back home this fall. To that end, his campaign team recently announced it had raised \$3 million during the past three months—reportedly the largest such haul on record by a sitting whip. (If you don't have a frame of reference, that's a rather large number.)

At the same time, Scalise is carefully watching all of the congressional races being waged in other states. Republicans are cautiously optimistic about this cycle, but many admit there's a possibility that Democrats seize control of the House. That would in turn downgrade Scalise's role to the minority leadership team, which means it represents a more serious threat than the whip's re-election, which will probably be a snooze-fest.

As for the congressional district soaking up the most re-election attention from Louisiana politicians, it belongs to Higgins, with his unorthodox style and attention-grabbing headlines. Higgins already has two challengers ready to go: Republican Joshua Guillory, a constitutional and family law attorney, and Democrat Mimi Methvin, a former judge.

Guillory and Methvin were likely inspired to join the fray—in some small part—by Higgins' perceived lack of fundraising prowess. But Higgins has turned up the heat over the past few months. His campaign now has more than \$211,000 in the bank after 2018's first quarter, during which \$217,000 in donations were collected, said general consultant Chris Comeaux.

Not only are his opponents nowhere close to that threshold, but the cash provides Higgins with more of a traditional incumbent's advantage. The congressman, with fundraising consultant Sally Nungesser, put the dough together by creating something called "Higgins' Posse"—known in other campaigns as a finance committee. The group includes a few folks who weren't solidly in Higgins' corner two years ago, and many others who were. (Riding in the 63-member posse are names like Boysie Bollinger, Bill Fenstermaker, Shane Guidry and Richard Zuschlag.)

Abraham, a veterinarian turned physician, so far doesn't have any serious opposition. But his handlers probably don't like the sound of that. A race, even against a paper tiger, would allow Abraham to run for re-election in earnest while also blanketing the state with his branding (commercials, radio spots, direct mail and more) ahead of being a candidate for governor, should he pursue the grand prize in 2019.

There have been rumblings about minor opposition for Graves, Johnson and Richmond, but the qualifying period will reveal who's really serious. The most interesting news from this trio comes from Richmond's race. Roger Villere, who recently stepped down as state GOP chair and opened a consulting shop called CRV, said a black Republican

has been gearing up to run against Richmond. Villere, however, was mum on further details.

Yes, our November-December congressional elections might seem quiet right now. And, yes, the actual races might come and go later this year with barely a whimper. But that doesn't mean those electoral showings can't crown eventual kings, elevate regional candidates to statewide recognition and shake up the fall game plans of D.C. bigwigs.

The drama and the intrigue are there—enough to capture and hold your attention. Sometimes you just need to know where to look to crack the same congressional code way too many voters otherwise ignore.

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