

BUDGET

**Loyalty** *continued from page 1*

an overwhelming 63 percent of their vote last year, the exit poll found. Moreover, seniors constituted an unusually large share of the vote, nearly one-fourth.

Boosted by that advantage, Republicans made major gains in older districts around the country. After 2010, Republicans now control 99 of the 150 House districts with the highest proportion of elderly residents, according to a *National Journal* analysis of data from the Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey. (District-level data on seniors from the 2010 Census is not yet available.) Republicans captured 33 of those 99 seats—while losing two others—last fall.

In all, 144 of the 241 House Republicans, or about three-fifths, represent districts where the share of seniors exceeds the 12.9 percent national average. By contrast, only a little more than two-fifths of House Democrats represent districts as heavily weighted toward the elderly.

Redistricting might alter the boundaries of many of these seats. But the extent of the Republican 2010 gains into older, blue-collar, and rural districts ensures that they will be defending a significant amount of this gray-terrain in 2012.

That will increase the party's risk if it can't defend Ryan's plan to literally end the existing Medicare program for Americans under 55 and replace it with a voucher, or premium support system, that would instead provide seniors a government stipend to purchase private insurance. Almost without exception, Democrats believe Ryan's plan has provided them an enormous opening to recapture older voters—and perhaps the House itself.

"I think this is a game-changer in terms of 2012," insists Democratic pollster John Anzalone, who works in many rural districts. "It may give us an opportunity to take back the House when nobody ever thought that was a chance. I think the issue is that cutting, that passionate."

Rep. **Tom Cole**, R-Okla., a former National Republican Congressional Committee chairman, expressed confidence that Republicans can rebut Democrat arguments against the Ryan approach, which is expected to reach the floor for a vote next week. "I think we will be able to make the point that if you are on Medicare or anywhere close to it, you will be able to keep the system you have," he said. "We will also be able to make the point that this is the only way your program can be saved over time."

Moreover, Cole notes, the current generation of seniors have displayed more con-

servative tendencies throughout their life than the previous generation of elderly, who came of age during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. "A lot of these [seniors] are Reaganite," he argues.

Privately, though, many GOP consultants and strategists acknowledge that the Ryan blueprint represents a huge political gamble, partly because Republicans have virtually no chance of passing the program through the Senate. "We have taken a big political risk; there's no doubt about it," says one House Republican insider.

The Republicans facing the greatest risk are those in the districts most heavily weighted toward seniors. Of the 71 districts with the largest proportion of seniors, 50 are represented by Republicans. Twenty-one of those 50 Republicans are freshmen, including eight representing districts that supported President Obama in 2008. Those include some of the first-term members near the top of the Democrats' target lists for 2012, including Reps. **Allen West** of Florida, **Sean Duffy** in Wisconsin, **Lou Barletta** in Pennsylvania, and **Jon Runyan** in New Jersey.

Cole says he expects virtually all of the House Republicans from senior-heavy districts to support the Ryan plan when it reaches the floor. The only internal opposition the plan is likely to face, he predicts, will be from conservatives who believe it does not go far enough. "I sense very little fear about this," he says. "This is the fight they want to have."

That may be the one point on which both parties agree, because Democrats are also spoiling for a fight over the Ryan Medicare proposal.

Echoing arguments from the 2005 fight over President George W. Bush's plan to introduce private accounts into Social Security, Democrats are already arguing that Ryan's plan would expose seniors to unacceptable financial risks; the Congressional Budget Office provided them a powerful talking point this week when it concluded "Under the proposal, most elderly people... would pay more for their health care than they would pay under the current Medicare system."

"I think it's huge and its impact on the 2012 election cannot be overestimated," said Democratic consultant John Lapp, a former executive director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "There are some races in some places where doing a big opposition research book is needed. But after this, you don't need a big opposition researcher to know what a big chunk of the ads will be about in 2012." ■

**The Grayest GOP Districts**

Republicans hold 50 of the 71 most senior-heavy congressional districts. Members from those areas may be wary of supporting House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's proposal to convert Medicare to a voucher-based program.

☑ Obama won in 2008

Member	District	Percent of residents age 65+
Buchanan	FL-13	26.8%
Mack	FL-14	26.0
Nugent*	FL-5	23.9
Rooney	FL-16	23.3
Young	FL-10	☑ 21.4
Posey	FL-15	19.5
West*	FL-22	☑ 19.5
Benishek*	MI-1	☑ 19.1
Mica	FL-7	17.5
Runyan*	NJ-3	☑ 17.5
Stearns	FL-6	17.5
Smith	NE-3	17.4
Marino*	PA-10	17.3
Bilirakis	FL-9	17.3
Murphy	PA-18	17.1
Franks	AZ-2	17.0
Shuster	PA-9	16.8
King	IA-5	16.8
Ros-Lehtinen	FL-18	☑ 16.8
Cravaack*	MN-8	☑ 16.7
Barletta*	PA-11	☑ 16.5
Roe	TN-1	16.5
Walden	OR-2	16.4
Schilling*	IL-17	☑ 16.4
Hurt*	VA-5	16.4
Emerson	MO-8	16.4
Thompson	PA-5	16.3
Ross*	FL-12	16.3
Duffy*	WI-7	☑ 16.2
McKinley*	WV-1	16.2
Huelskamp*	KS-1	16.1
Kelly*	PA-3	16.1
Shimkus	IL-19	16.1
DesJarlais*	TN-4	16.0
King	NY-3	16.0
Goodlatte	VA-6	15.9
Latham	IA-4	☑ 15.9
Griffith*	VA-9	15.9
Crawford*	AR-1	15.9
Gosar*	AZ-1	15.8
Johnson*	OH-6	15.8
Aderholt	AL-4	15.8
Diaz-Balart	FL-21	15.8
Whitfield	KY-1	15.7
Schock	IL-18	15.7
Gibbs*	OH-18	15.6
Smith	NJ-4	15.5
Hanna*	NY-24	☑ 15.5
Foxx	NC-5	15.4
Camp	MI-4	☑ 15.4

\*Freshman. Source: Census Bureau