

October 28, 2008

### *Into the Home Stretch, and Beyond*

With the elections just days away, some pundits have already called the results. The fact is the race for the White House is not over—nor is it in the hands of the candidates. If the presidential race turns around in the next few days, it will be because of some event over which neither candidate has any control.

The story is quite different for congressional races, where the combination of a huge financial advantage, high voter registration and the economic crisis means Democrats in Congress are likely to see their ranks swell. In the House, where Democrats now have an 18-seat advantage, that margin could grow to as high as 20 – 25 seats. In the Senate, where Republicans hold nearly twice as many of the seats up for grab this election cycle, Democrats are daring to believe that they could wake up November 5 with a filibuster-proof 60 seats.

The prize for election day victors, however, is questionable. An election race that began as a referendum on the country's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been complicated by equally thorny problems associated with a sagging economy and volatile financial markets.

The latest economic news only makes the situation worse. According to Labor Department statistics released last week, the unemployment rate is at a five-year high of 6.1 percent; the number of people who have stopped looking for work or whose jobs have been cut to part-time is now 11 percent—the highest in 15 years.

Recently, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden asserted that Barak Obama would be tested with an international crisis within six months if he were to be elected president. Practically speaking, whoever wins the White House can expect to be tested, only much sooner. Either Obama or McCain will have to try to influence economic policy while it is still the province of President Bush, because whatever is decided now could have lasting effects on the incoming administration. The first big challenge will be determining what, if anything, can be done immediately to jump-start the economy.

#### *Second stimulus revisited*

In late September, the Senate failed to pass a \$56.2 billion economic recovery package over the objections of some Republicans. The House managed to pass a slightly larger package, but given the Senate defeat, the measure went no further.

With economic anxiety still running high, Democratic leaders in Congress say they are considering a second run at an economic stimulus package, this time in the \$150 billion range, perhaps during a post-election lame-duck session. Proponents received a boost

when Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke pronounced that an economic stimulus package would be appropriate at this time because the economy is expected to remain weak for several more quarters. White House staff also said President Bush is open to the idea.

The timing and contents of a stimulus package have yet to be pinned down, but preliminary discussions focus on aid to states for Medicaid, food stamps and unemployment insurance. Public health and patient advocates are using the occasion to call for a \$1.9 billion boost in funding for the National Institutes of Health, arguing that in addition to improving health and quality of life, federally-supported research strengthens local economies.

### ***Push for stem cell research, human research protections***

While it may not be a front-burner issue in this economic climate, some congressional lawmakers plan to push for quick action on other medical research issues.

In April 2007, both presidential candidates voted for a bill that would have negated President Bush's executive order limiting federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. That bill was vetoed, but stem cell research proponents in Congress, including Reps. Diana DeGette (D-CO) and Michael Castle (R-DE), have been pressuring both presidential candidates to act swiftly to loosen federal restrictions on research.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has already promised that a bill expanding support for embryonic stem cell research will be among the first orders of House business next year.

On a related front, just prior to congressional adjournment, Rep. DeGette introduced H.R. 7140, a bill to increase protections for human subjects in research. This legislation would expand and standardize protections for human subjects in research. The bill would require that research on all human subjects be in accordance with the Common Rule, which calls for a review of proposed research by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), the informed consent of research subjects, and institutional assurances of compliance with existing regulations. H.R. 7140 also would require the Secretary of HHS to review the extent to which various human subject research provisions throughout the department can be harmonized.

### ***NIH changes at the top***

Earlier this month, NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni announced his departure, effective October 31. Dr. Raynard S. Kington will take over as Acting NIH Director. Kington has served as Zerhouni's principal deputy since 2003. He previously served in other positions at NIH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In other changes, Norka Ruiz Bravo, Ph.D. has announced that she will step down as NIH deputy director for extramural research. She will be replaced by Sally J. Rockey, Ph.D.