

The Boston Globe

THURSDAY, AUGUST 23, 2012

Uproar over abortion could hurt GOP's efforts to recapture Senate

By Bobby Caina Calvan
GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — Keeping control of the Senate seemed a Herculean task for Democrats just a few months ago. Now, the gaffe made this week by Todd Akin, the GOP Senate candidate in Missouri who initially asserted that women had biological defenses to prevent pregnancy from a “legitimate rape,” has given Democrats a burst of energy heading into the final months of the cam-

paign.

“This is the Republicans’ worst nightmare. They were hoping to define the campaign as a discussion about jobs and

► **Brown, Warren look to gain from Akin’s comment. B1.**

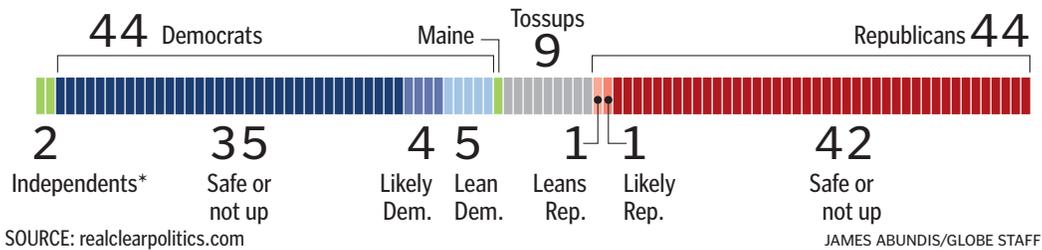
the economy, and now it’s turned into a debate over abortion rights,” said Ken Warren, a political scientist at St. Louis University. “It hurts severely the Republicans’ chance of win-

ning back the Senate.”

Republicans need a net gain of four seats in November to win control and the numbers, at least, are on their side. Of the 32 seats up for election in the Senate, Democrats must defend 23 of them, including two seats held by independents who caucus with the party.

Of the nine states widely considered tossups, five have races headlined by Democratic women – Missouri, Massachu-

SENATE, Page A8



Abortion uproar may hurt GOP bid for Senate control

►SENATE

Continued from Page A1

setts, Nevada, North Dakota, and Wisconsin — and abortion and other women's issues could also play significant roles in Virginia and Florida. Those issues are not expected to affect the races in the more conservative states of Indiana and Montana.

Democrats wasted little time attempting to tie GOP opponents to Akin's comments specifically — and the Republicans' position on abortion generally.

Representative Tammy Baldwin, who wants to be Wisconsin's first female senator and the Senate's first openly gay member, reminded voters of the role of her opponent, ex-governor Tommy Thompson, in drafting the GOP platform in 2000. That platform, like the one recently adopted by Republicans for next week's convention, called for a ban on abortions. No exemptions were made for rape and incest.

In Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren is attempting to tie Senator Scott Brown to his party's antiabortion platform, while highlighting his votes opposing pay equity for women.

"You can bet I'm going to

keep talking about that so the people of Massachusetts know Scott Brown's record and where he stands — with his Republican Party against the interests of women and families in the Commonwealth," she said.

Brown, however, was among the first Republicans to call on Akin to drop out of the Senate race, and Brown has distanced himself from his party's platform against abortion.

In the center of the storm, Missouri, it is still unclear whether Senator Claire McCaskill will be able to defend her seat. McCaskill, with Senator Jon Tester of Montana, had been considered among the most endangered Democratic incumbents as her state has largely turned against the presidency of Barack Obama.

Social conservatives are influential in broad swaths of the state and Akin still has strength in this base. In addition, his decision to defy calls by Republican leaders to quit the race could play well with the strong Tea Party movement there.

The imbroglio over Akin's comments is the latest in a swirl of forces that could influence

the outcomes in tossup states. Those factors include Tea Party fervor, deep-pocketed super PACs, voter frustration, and the polarization of the presidential race, especially with the introduction of Representative Paul Ryan, a budget slasher from Wisconsin, as Mitt Romney's pick for vice president.

"What you have at play here are national forces that some candidates have very little control over," and are forced to take positions on, said Marty Linsky, a public policy professor at the Harvard Kennedy School. "For example, do they hug the presidential candidate from their own party, or do they distance themselves?"

Many of those themes are playing out in Virginia, where two of the state's political titans are competing for the seat of retiring Democrat Jim Webb.

Republican George Allen, a former governor, wants his Senate seat back. Tim Kaine, also a former governor and former head of the Democratic National Committee, stands in his way. For two years, polls have showed it's a dead heat.

Three debates, TV spots,

stump speeches, and a \$5 million infusion of outside money have done little to budge voters.

"I just don't think that either one will break out, unless there is a big gaffe," said Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia.

Allen, who lost the seat in 2006, knows well how costly a gaffe can be. His reelection was doomed after a rally when he used the slur "macaca" to describe an Indian American working for his opponent.

Most have forgiven, if not forgotten, said Cathie France, a Republican and the state's deputy director of energy policy, who says there are bigger things on voters' minds.

The stakes in Virginia are high. In addition to helping decide who controls the Senate, the state is expected to play a key role in the presidential race.

At times, the Senate race here has become a referendum on the men vying for president.

Allen has pummeled Kaine with ads tying him to Obama's health care law. Virginia was a leader in the effort to repeal the law. Kaine has sought to tie Allen to Romney and Ryan, a

strategy that could resonate among voters such as Truman Parmele, 67, a retired Air Force colonel who runs a coffee shop in Ashland. He says Medicare is among his top concerns.

“Ryan’s a bit scary,” Parmele said, though adding later that he and Ryan agree on gun ownership rights. He said he has yet to make up his mind.

Suzanne Wolstenholme hosted Romney and Allen at her catering shop in Ashland on Aug. 11, when Romney announced Ryan as his running mate. She had already made up her mind to vote for Romney.

She was less firm about the Senate race but is leaning toward Allen.

To sway minds, outside money has poured into the contest, with more than \$4.6 million spent by such groups as Majority PAC (a backer of Democratic candidates), the US Chamber of Commerce, and Crossroads GPS, which supports conservative candidates. That doesn’t include millions of dollars more that can’t be easily tracked because they fall outside of federal elections rules.

Allen is the clear benefactor, reaping \$3 million in independent spending to support his campaign, according to OpenSecrets.org, an independent group that tallies political fund-raising and expenditures

from federal records.

In all, more than \$26 million has been spent by independent super PACs and other outside groups for the nine tossup races, according to OpenSecrets.

As in Missouri, the Tea Party movement played an outsized role in the Indiana primaries. For 36 years, Republican Richard Lugar’s seat has been secure. He was popular among independents and some Democrats for his foreign policy acumen and moderate social positions. Now, Democrats sense an opportunity with his loss in the GOP primary to state Treasurer Richard Mourdock.

But the Democrat, Representative Joe Donnelly, a moderate, would need to win voters willing to split their tickets in the red state, where Romney is expected to prevail.

“Donnelly is certainly the kind of Democrat that has a good chance in Indiana, but it may be overly optimistic,” said Marjorie Hershey, a political science professor at Indiana University. “It will depend on the presidential race, and whether the Obama campaign can help him mobilize Latinos, women, blacks, and young people.”

Ryan could also become a polarizing figure in other tossup states, such as Florida, where Democrats are attempt-

ing to brand Republicans as unfriendly to seniors.

Representative Connie Mack, who is trying to unseat Senator Bill Nelson, has tried to distance himself from the Ryan budget plan, which includes a Medicare proposal that would shift it toward annual vouchers. Mack voted in favor of the Ryan budget in March.

Ryan’s presence, however, is expected to be a boost in his home state. The Wisconsin seat has been Democratic since Republican Joseph McCarthy, the anticommunist ideologue, died in 1957. But Ryan’s ascension and Republican Governor Scott Walker’s success in a recall vote strengthen the GOP’s hand.

During the primary, Thompson withstood attacks from his challengers that he was not conservative enough. But his centrist appeals could now work in his favor in a politically muddled state.

Thompson joined the chorus calling for Akin to drop out of the Missouri race, saying “we all have a moral responsibility to come together in opposition to crimes against women and support an exception for abortion in the abhorrent situations where rape is involved.”

Bobby Caina Calvin can be reached at bobby.calvan@globe.com.