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Shore incumbents run hard

Republican U.S. Reps. Frank A. LoBiondo and Chris Smith aren't taking anything for granted in this election.

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Despite their long tenure and comfortable early leads, incumbent Republican U.S. Reps. Frank A. LoBiondo and Chris Smith aren't taking anything for granted this election.

> "If you're not taking this race seriously and think you'll coast in, then you should paint a big sign with the word *fool* and pin it on your back," said LoBiondo, 62, who has represented New Jersey's Second District since 1995. "People have never been as angry or as mistrustful of the Congress as they are right now, and Congress' approval rating has never been lower."

> LoBiondo and Smith, 55, of the Fourth District, are running against unknown Democrats who appear to have emerged under the same change-agent mantra propelling Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois.

> That, along with the Wall Street meltdown, has Republican congressional lions in some parts of the country fighting for their political lives, according to Stuart Rothenberg, a nonpartisan analyst and founder of the Rothenberg Political Report.

> Democrats could gain as many as 30 seats in the House, Rothenberg said, but whether any of those seats could be garnered by political novices like those running against LoBiondo and Smith remains to be seen.

> LoBiondo's opponent, David Kurkowski, 60, a Cape May City councilman since 2006 who is the owner of a market research firm, has never before run for a major political office. And Smith's challenger, Zeitz, a 34-year-old college history professor and textbook author, has never held public office.

> "By any normal measure, these are not competitive races," Rothenberg said. "But this could be 2006 all over again, and lots of candidates who wouldn't even normally be taken seriously and haven't even raised enough money to be taken seriously could be contenders."

> Smith's own polling, conducted within the last two weeks, says he is ahead by as much as 40 points over his opponent.

> "I think I'm in very good shape, but I don't take it for granted," said Smith, a congressman since 1980. "Every two years I believe I have earned this job."

> But Zeitz said New Jersey's Fourth District, which includes parts of Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties, had been added to the Democratic National Campaign Committee's watch list among hotly contested challenges in New York, Michigan and Nevada.

> "That means my candidacy is being taken seriously on a larger scale," Zeitz said. "And that is saying something in a district where the incumbent has been in office for 28 years."

> New Jersey is a state where voters traditionally love their congressional incumbents, especially when the politicians have been staunch advocates of special interests such as veterans and the environment as LoBiondo and Smith have, according to Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Pomona.

> In Stockton's early polling of 400 likely voters in the Second District, which includes all of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Salem counties and small sections of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties, LoBiondo was running almost 3:1 ahead of Kurkowski. With a margin of error of 4.9 percent, the poll found 12 percent of the voters still undecided, Schulman said.

> However, that was Sept. 18, before the largest triple digit stock market decline since 1929 and the financial bailout from Washington.

> Much of LoBiondo's district is populated by working class registered Democrats - roughly 66,000 - as opposed to about 34,000 registered Republicans. About 75,000 voters are listed as unaffiliated on election rolls.

> With roots in Cumberland and Salem County's farming community that go back at least three generations, the incumbent has long been able to move across party lines to attract voters from both sides of the fence. LoBiondo's family business is "truck farming," which transports much of the produce grown in the region to national markets.

> "People of this district know I'm always going to put their interests before party interests," said LoBiondo, who cited his two recent votes against the bank bailout as examples of how he doesn't always vote along party lines.

> On the Democratic ticket, Kurkowski said he hopes to pull back some members of his own party who have supported LoBiondo in the past.

> "As the challenger, you always face an uphill battle," Kurkowski said. "You have no record to run on. But people out there are very worried about their jobs, their home values, their health care, and they realize that in the hands of the people currently in power, very little has been done to protect their interests."

> One of Kurkowski's priorities is protecting the Jersey Shore and its lucrative tourism economy. He accuses LoBiondo of bowing to GOP pressure when he "flip-flopped" and voted in favor of offshore oil drilling when he had previously stated his opposition.

> "It could ruin our state's economy very quickly if the ocean were to become polluted," Kurkowski said.

> LoBiondo, who is routinely endorsed by the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, surprised many last month with his vote to allow offshore drilling as close as 50 miles off U.S. coastlines.

> The vote was a double-edged sword, he said.

> "People are hurting; the problem is real," LoBiondo said. "I don't agree with drilling off New Jersey, but I do not oppose it for states that want it."

> Smith said that in his district, which includes a large military population surrounding Fort Dix, he concentrates on military and family issues, such as autism funding and the Veterans Cost of Living Compensation Act.

> "I do reach across the aisle; it's not just words but deeds, vote after vote," Smith said.

> That may not be enough for anyone in this topsy-turvy election season, Kurkowski said.

> "There is a strong desire out there for change among traditional voters and among people who have never had an interest in the political process," Kurkowski said.

> Zeitz is counting on that desire in the Fourth District.

> "It's not surprising that everything comes down to the economy, no matter what the issue is," Zeitz said.


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