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3 of Arizona's U.S. House races tight

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The Republic | azcentral.com
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Three words sum up Arizona's nine congressional races, which end Tuesday when voters go to the polls: expensive, ruthless and long.

Political-interest groups have spent staggering sums of money in the quest for control of Arizona's delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives. Candidates have taken every opportunity to elbow opponents, stretching the truth in sometimes unrecognizable ways. And the time spent on the campaign trail has been grueling, in some cases starting as long as two years ago.

Six candidates in Arizona have little to worry about on Election Day, given their safe partisan districts. Those include incumbent Republican Reps. Trent Franks in the West Valley, Paul Gosar in northwest Arizona and David Schweikert in Fountain Hills, as well as Democratic Reps. Ed Pastor in Phoenix and Raúl Grijalva in southern Arizona. Republican Matt Salmon endured a battle in his East Valley primary but the former Mesa congressman is nearly guaranteed a return to Washington due to the conservative bent of his district.

Candidates in the state's three competitive districts, however, are fighting for every last vote.

The races remain tight between Democrat Ann Kirkpatrick and Republican Jonathan Paton in northern Arizona's 1st District; Democrat Ron Barber and Republican Martha McSally in southern Arizona's 2nd District; and Democrat Kyrsten Sinema and Republican Vernon Parker in the Valley's 9th District.

After a favorable redistricting process, Democrats in Arizona were hoping for a comeback. They took a trouncing two years ago during the "Tea Party"-fueled wave of 2010, but national Democrats boasted this year the state could help the party seize control of the House from the GOP.

That doesn't seem likely. Political prognosticators believe the GOP even could increase its margin in the House.

"It's possible that Democrats may pick up a seat here in Arizona. Of course, a lot of those races are too close to really call," said Brian Dille, a political-science professor at Mesa Community College. "(But) all that will do is decrease the margin of victory for Republicans. It's hard to picture a scenario where control of the House flips."

A new wrinkle in this year's congressional races is the unprecedented influx of money. At least \$43million has been spent in Arizona by candidates, national parties and interest groups, according to the Federal Election Commission.

Though candidates spent less this election than two years ago, outside political-action committees, often known as super PACs, made up for it, unshackled by the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 overturning of campaign-spending limits. Outside groups have spent \$19million in Arizona, twice the total of two years ago.

"Private groups can now make crazy ads and not disclose who they are with," Dille said. "There are no limits, so there's tons of ads and tons of money that's flowed in."

The onslaught of negative advertising may sway a few voters, he said, but a majority of people, especially independents, hate them. That's part of the strategy, Dille said. If swing voters disgusted with the political

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process stay home and don't vote, parties can focus on turning out their bases to win.

1st District

The closeness of Arizona's congressional campaigns has drawn national attention.

In northern Arizona, Kirkpatrick, a White Mountains Democrat, is fighting to regain her seat after losing it in 2010. The former state lawmaker served one term in Washington before being bulldozed by constituents' anger over President Barack Obama's health-care overhaul.

Paton, her opponent, is an Iraq War veteran and fellow former state lawmaker who lives near Tucson. He lost a congressional primary in a competitive district two years ago but is banking on convincing the 2nd District's independents and conservative Democrats that Kirkpatrick offers only what they've rejected already.

Kirkpatrick's ads go after Paton's lobbying career. A bearded cowboy around a campfire says, "Lobbyist Paton will settle in D.C. like dirt in a ditch."

2nd District

The resignation of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in January set in motion a struggle to replace her. Giffords stepped down to continue her recovery from a nearly fatal assassination attempt in 2011 that injured 13 and killed six near Tucson. Her miraculous survival and continuing rehabilitation have kept the national media spotlight on her former district.

A hasty and heated June special election ended in victory for Barber, a former Giffords aide who was injured in the same shooting.

Barber is seeking re-election in the Tucson-based district against McSally, a retired Air Force colonel.

In the final weeks of the campaign, the two candidates have clashed over invoking Giffords' name and legacy.

McSally, who was a trailblazer for women in the military and says she'll cross the aisle when needed, has compared herself to Giffords. "This is the land of Mo Udall, Jim Kolbe and Gabby Giffords. Martha McSally leads in their footsteps," says one McSally ad released days before Election Day. "When things are wrong, McSally makes them right."

But astronaut Mark Kelly, Giffords' husband, blasted McSally's claims in a robocall, as did Udall's son, U.S. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo.

"Martha McSally would take us in the wrong direction," Udall said. "Any claim that she's part of my father's legacy is simply wrong."

9th District

The newly created 9th District, which covers parts of Phoenix, Scottsdale, Paradise Valley, Tempe, Mesa, Chandler and Ahwatukee Foothills, has made headlines as one of the most hotly contested races in the country.

A slew of congressional leaders, including House Speaker John Boehner and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, have flown into town to boost the campaigns of Parker and Sinema.

Sinema has blasted Parker for putting out a "sexist" ad that featured handbags and a red high heel. Parker has accused Sinema of tacitly endorsing a Democratic mailer he called "racist," claiming a black-and-white photo of him was darkened and distorted to make him look like a minstrel.

Meanwhile, the two have lambasted each other's positions for being too "extreme."

Republican ads have portrayed Sinema as a Martian and a hippie, saying she is "far out" and citing far-left positions she took as a political newcomer on the military, stay-at-home moms and the Green Party. Sinema promises she has moderated since then.

Sinema's ads have featured a distressed woman putting her hand to her forehead as the narrator says Parker would make "abortion illegal even in cases of rape and incest." Parker's campaign vehemently denies it.

Guessing game

Predicting the winner of Arizona's competitive races amounts to guesswork even now. The campaigns, perhaps trying to avoid tipping their hands, have released few reliable polls. Most have the opponents nearly tied in each race, with one candidate slightly ahead but within the margin of error.

One Barber poll had him up double-digits over McSally, which she disputed. Analysts attribute much of that possibility to the unique Giffords-related nature of the race.

If voters remain so closely divided on Election Day, it may be far into the night or later that Arizona's tight races are decided.

Even then, it's possible the fights could go on. Campaign attorneys say they're on standby to demand recounts should the margins be narrow.

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