

US Election 96: Hot race for barometer vote - Jonathan Freedland reports from California's Basildon with sunshine

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CALIFORNIA'S 22nd congressional district is blessed with year-round sunshine, countless palm trees and 150 miles of blue ocean coastline. Other than that, it's just like Basildon.

Politically at least, the district, two-hours drive north of Los Angeles, is fast becoming the American counterpart of the Essex constituency: an electoral battleground whose final choice could mirror the trend across the country. Just as the Tories and Labour looked to Basildon in 1992 as a national barometer, so Republicans and Democrats see the central Californian district as one that could determine what now seems to be the most exciting contest of 1996 - the battle for control of the House of Representatives.

It is a classic marginal constituency, equally divided between Democrat and Republican voters. Picture-postcard Santa Barbara in the south is a liberal bastion, a city of artists and academics which describes itself as the birthplace of America's environmental movement.

Northwards towards San Luis Obispo and Santa Maria, where the district ends, is Republican country, dominated by ultra-conservative cattle ranchers and a good sprinkling of Christian evangelicals.

The result is a neck-and-neck race between the Republican incumbent Andrea Seastrand, an anti-abortion campaigner, and Walter Capps, a religious-studies professor with unfashionably liberal positions: in favour of gay rights, against the death penalty, for active government.

The two duelled in 1994, when Ms Seastrand rode that year's Republican wave to beat Mr Capps by less than 1 per cent. This time the parties are leaving nothing to chance, sending their heaviest hitters to the district. Last week Hillary Clinton was in town; last month Bob Dole and Jack Kemp spent nearly a week in the area, taking a nominal holiday.

But the contest matters not only as a must-win for the Democrats and a key test for the 73 Republicans first elected in 1994, it is also a textbook example of the new dynamics shaping congressional races throughout the country.

The biggest single factor in the 22nd district, as elsewhere, is the House Speaker, Newt Gingrich. As author of the Republicans' 1994 manifesto, Contract with America, Mr Gingrich transformed 435 local House races into a single national contest - a referendum on Bill Clinton. Now Democrats are playing the same trick on him.

Mr Capps's election leaflet does not even mention Ms Seastrand by name. Instead it attacks 'Newt Gingrich and his unfair, one-side agenda'. Others condemn the congresswoman, known for her close ties to the Speaker, as a 'Gingrich clone'.

At a Capps fundraising party in the Santa Barbara mountains, the warm-up speaker spelled out what was at stake: 'Let me remind you that so long as Newt Gingrich is Speaker, he's third in line to the presidency,' she said, to loud hisses.

With polls showing Mr Gingrich experiencing record unpopularity, television adverts throughout the US are tarring other Republicans with guilt-by-association. They show pictures of the Speaker, then attack the local Republican congressman for voting with him to cut cherished public programmes.

Ms Seastrand now noticeably avoids mention of Mr Gingrich or the Contract - just as Democrats in 1994 never breathed Bill Clinton's name. Nor is there much mileage in association with Bob Dole, whose presidential campaign is failing in California even more than elsewhere.

In contrast, Democrats like Mr Capps are now only too happy to tie themselves to Mr Clinton's coat-tails. 'I'm using Clinton policy pretty much as the substance of my stump speech,' Mr Capps said. 'There's been a big change in him.'

But Mr Capps has been helped most by outside pressure groups not officially affiliated to his campaign. Under 'independent expenditure' rules, separate organisations can run campaigns and pay for political adverts even when they blatantly favour one candidate over another. Mr Capps has benefited from television advertising without spending a cent.

The AFL-CIO trade union movement has spent the most, digging into the Dollars 35 million (around Pounds 23 million) it has dedicated to overturning Republican majorities in Congress. The environmentalist Sierra Club and abortion rights groups have also zeroed in on Andrea Seastrand - all of them boosting Walter Capps. Similar multiple campaigns are under way in marginal districts elsewhere.

Not that Ms Seastrand is without problems of her own. She is still paying the price for once suggesting that California's recent earthquakes, floods and fires were God's punishment for the state's immorality. Mr Capps cuts a more laid-back, even lackadaisical figure. But he can afford to be relaxed. It seems this year history is on his side.

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