

To be or not to be: voters undecided

WASHINGTON (AP) — Less than a week before Election Day, polls in several major contests show a remarkably high number of voters are undecided, some repulsed by the nasty campaigns, some unsure they will vote at all.

"You have these intensely negative campaigns on both sides," said Democratic media adviser Mandy Grunwald. "People are not knowing what to believe and are looking for a referee."

Whatever the reason, these undecided voters have made several races that loom large in the fight for Senate control extraordinarily volatile heading into the campaign's final weekend.

"It is going to be close but I believe Democrats will retain control of the Senate," Majority Leader George Mitchell said Thursday. But he said, "I recognize the conventional wisdom now appears to be otherwise."

Indeed, Republicans are increasingly confident of capturing

the majority, because computer turnout models designed to weed undecided voters from polling show a major GOP edge.

"If a voter is undecided at this point, he or she has made a conscious step away from the incumbent if there is one in the race," said GOP pollster Ed Goas. "The question now is whether to vote against the incumbent or stay home."

The consensus among a dozen pollsters interviewed in recent days is that a good chunk of those who say they are undecided will not vote Tuesday — likely bad news for Democrats.

A recent national Times Mirror survey, for example, found a relatively modest percentage of voters — 10 percent — were undecided when asked which party's candidate they intended to support in House races.

"But they are mostly Democrats who are either going to vote Republican and not ready to ad-

mit it or Democrats who are staying home," said Times Mirror survey director Andy Kohut.

Republicans need to gain seven seats to capture the Senate majority, and are comfortably ahead in races for Democratic-held seats in Maine, Ohio, Arizona and Tennessee.

The GOP is ahead or highly competitive for Democratic seats in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Oklahoma, Virginia and a second in Tennessee. And Republicans have more distant chances at Democratic seats in New Jersey, New Mexico and California. Democrats, on the other hand, are competitive for a GOP-held seat in Minnesota and perhaps one or two others, but the trend has been against them. It is in many of these contests that polling shows a high ratio of undecided voters.

For example:
—In Virginia, a new Virginia Commonwealth University poll

showed 11 percent undecided in the dead-heat race between Sen. Charles S. Robb and Republican Oliver North. But 60 percent of those backing independent Marshall Coleman, running a distant third, said they might look elsewhere if they are convinced Coleman can't win — adding them to the potential undecided pool.

In most cases, GOP pollster Bill McInturff said "those who say that they are still undecided are not undecided. They are not voters."

Still, if they say they plan to vote, and are from a group that tends to vote — such as the elderly, or the college-educated, pollsters cannot discount them in close races.

Instead, they are factored into a computerized turnout models that take into account age and other demographic data, level of education, intensity of support for one candidate or the other and other factors.

Islamic militants chide Arafat at funeral

Palestinian leader mocked at political memorial service

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Islamic militants knocked off Yasser Arafat's head-dress, called him a traitor and threw him out of a mosque funeral Thursday in his worst political embarrassment as head of the Palestinian government.

Enraged mourners fired guns wildly into the air as a phalanx of police guards whisked Arafat away from the chaotic service for Hani Abed, a militant leader killed by a car bomb the fundamentalists blamed on Israel.

"Arafat is a collaborator!" shouted members of the extremist Islamic Jihad movement as Arafat was shoved out a back door of the Omari mosque and into the pouring down rain.

The scene underscored the growing extremist opposition Arafat has faced in the Gaza Strip since Palestinian self-rule began in May.

The PLO leader is wedged between Israeli demands to crack down on Muslim fundamentalists responsible for deadly attacks on Israeli civilians, and the need to win their

support for self-rule.

Arafat, who had just returned from a regional economic conference in Morocco, came straight from the border to pay his respects at the funeral of Abed, 35.

Abed died Wednesday after a bomb exploded when he opened the trunk of his car. He had been detained by Palestinian police for 18 days in June on suspicion of helping plan an attack at the Erez border crossing into Israel in which two soldiers were killed. It was the first attack on Israeli soldiers after autonomy began.

Islamic Jihad leader Sheikh Abdullah Shami said only Israel could do such an expert job of rigging the car bomb that killed Abed. He demanded that Palestinian police protect Islamic leaders and threatened swift retaliation.

"Our bullets will find a way to hit settlers and soldiers everywhere," Shami told reporters at a wake in Gaza City's Sheik Radwan neighborhood.

At the mosque service, militants blocked Arafat from reaching Abed's body, wrapped

in a blanket on a large wooden board. His trademark black-and-white headdress was pulled off, and bodyguards then rushed Arafat out a back door.

Outside the mosque, Islamic Jihad supporters fired their weapons into the air and shouted, "Get out of here, Arafat, get out!" and "You are not our leader! We are the people and we reject you!"

Islamic militant leaders met with Arafat later Thursday and apologized for the behavior of the crowd, saying they were outsiders and did not represent their movements' sentiments.

Arafat aides said the PLO chief was deeply shaken by the hostility.

Sufian Abu Zaydeh, an Arafat spokesman, said the car bombing could push the Palestinians to the brink of civil war. "This is very grave. We are moving toward a Lebanonization of the Gaza Strip," he said.

Abu Zaydeh said Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had eroded Arafat's standing by striking in PLO-ruled territory.

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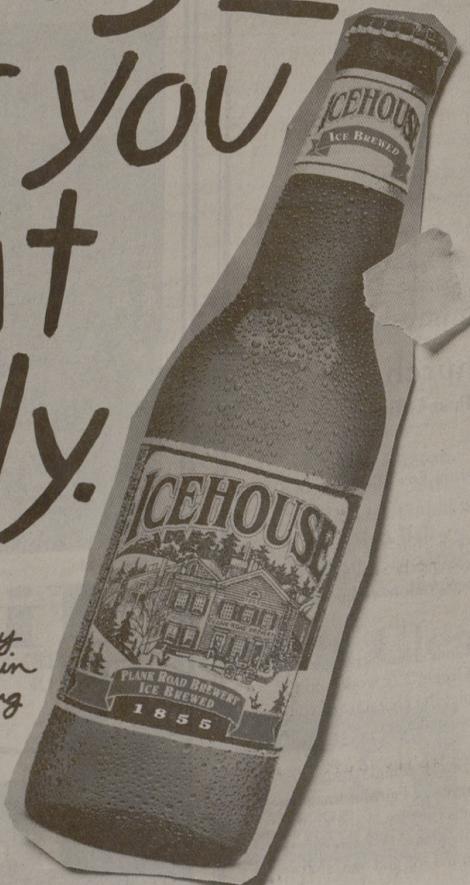
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