

STUDY GUIDE - HOUSEQUAKE

Program Description

In 2006, the Democratic Party in the U.S. faces a moment of truth. Republicans control all three branches of government and possess more concentrated power than in nearly a century. The daily reality of war, fear, and economic unrest is taking its toll on the American psyche.

Beneath the clouds of this atmosphere, and facing the prospect of becoming a permanent minority party, Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi makes a controversial choice. To spearhead the party's effort to take back Congress, she appoints Rahm Emanuel – a colorful, iconoclastic congressman famous for sending a dead fish to a political enemy.

Emanuel recruits political novices who happen to be fighters – a disabled Iraq war veteran, an NFL quarterback, a small-town sheriff – to take on entrenched incumbents in seats previously thought unwinnable. Emanuel assumes an activist role in training and organizing these candidates to be professional "start-up organizations," as he deems them. They must be on-message, media-savvy and – perhaps most important – relentless when it comes to fundraising. Each will sing parts from the same chorus as established by the national party: the failings of the Bush administration, the need for change. **However, Emanuel also declares that ideology is irrelevant -- winning is what matters.** This means that many of these citizen candidates will take pro-life, pro-gun, and other stances traditionally associated with Republicans.

The strategy is a bold and risky one that is born both of a desperation to win and, increasingly, a sense that a breakthrough might be possible. If it works, it will be groundbreaking; if it doesn't, the Democrats will reach a new low in power and Emanuel will join the growing list of Democrats who have "stolen defeat from the jaws of victory." Republicans prepare to play defense.

As the race unfolds, *HouseQuake* gets inside seven key contests across the country and follows national players on both sides of the aisle. It shows how campaigns are plotted and the intense effort that goes into a game-changing election. It offers rare access to the biggest personalities in U.S. politics and rare verite footage of candidates' adventures and tribulations as they dive into politics, many for the first time. It captures the emotional drama, high stakes, intense competition, and historical implications of the race with **an intimate view of the American political process that is rarely revealed in the media.**

As the campaign season swells toward the finish line, each one of our races becomes an unpredictable toss-up. On election night we're at 15 separate locations with the candidates and in Washington with party leaders. The results of our races mirror national trends with cliffhanger wins, poignant losses, and some surprises.

In the end, Democrats gain an astonishing 31 seats. Dozens of seasoned politicians are defeated by political newcomers swept in by a national tide, forcing a reconsideration of the maxim "all politics is local" by politicians and pundits alike.

The election changes the dynamics of power in Washington. Nancy Pelosi becomes the first female Speaker of the House. Rahm Emanuel and his allies became instrumental in Barack Obama's

presidential campaign, and Obama's first appointment to his administration is Emanuel as Chief of Staff.

HouseQuake is the only film to document an extraordinary time in U.S. political history, the election that ended the Republican Revolution. The film brings to life the strategy behind the Democrats' dramatic rise to power and the counter-strategy by Republicans. The men and women featured in *HouseQuake* are now running the country (or plotting to run it anew). The outcome of this election invites intriguing questions. The Democrats made room for candidates, now congressmen, with right-of-center views, especially on social issues. Is this the beginning of a post-partisan era? Can a party holding such a wide range of views discipline itself and prevent infighting and self-destruction? Will the Republicans follow suit with a "big tent" strategy of their own?

The Democrats' takeover of Congress was more than just a "good year." This historic campaign for change paved the way for Barack Obama's presidential victory and **transformed the way political races are run in the United States.**

SPECIAL FEATURES

Extended, exclusive interviews with:

- Rahm Emanuel (pre- and post- election) / Chief of Staff to President Barack Obama, was Congressman and Chairman of Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC)
- Nancy Pelosi (pre- and post- election) / Speaker of the House of Representatives, was Democratic Minority Leader
- Newt Gingrich / Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, 1995 - 1999
- James Carville / Democratic Strategist
- Frank Luntz / Republican Political Consultant and Pollster
- Steny Hoyer / House Majority Leader, was Democratic Minority Whip
- Charlie Cook / Publisher, *The Cook Political Report*
- Chris Van Hollen / Congressman and Chairman, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), was DCCC Recruitment Chair
- Wayne Pacelle / Executive Vice President, Humane Society Legislative Fund and Founder, Humane USA Political Action Committee

Deleted Scenes:

- Steny Hoyer campaigns for Baron Hill
- Negron versus Mahoney in FL-16
- Frank Luntz at home

Theatrical Trailer

Recommended grades: 11-12, Undergraduate, Graduate

Subject Areas: Political Science, American Democracy, Parties and Elections, Government, Public Policy, American Studies, History, Communications, Journalism, Current Affairs, Civics, Ethics, Social Psychology, Sociology

Before-Viewing Discussion Questions (may be revisited after viewing):

Suggested questions to initiate discussion with your students before they watch *HouseQuake*:

1. What is distinctive about American democracy and the way congressional elections are run?
2. What issues tend to dominate congressional campaigns? How do these issues differ from year to year? From district to district?
3. In 2006, toward the end of the Bush presidency, what issues and strategies do you think could have been most effectively used by Democrats? By Republicans?
4. To what extent do you think the national party organizations are involved in congressional elections? What has been the trend in recent history?
5. Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill famously said, “All politics is local.” Do you agree? Disagree? Under what conditions is this more likely to be true? How does a 24-hour, national news media influence this maxim?
6. How much do you think party affiliation matters in congressional elections? What else plays into voting decisions?
7. How would you define “retail politics”? Under what circumstances is this style of campaigning effective?
8. What role does money play in congressional elections?
9. What role does advertising play in congressional elections?
10. What role does the free media play in congressional elections?
11. What kinds of individuals do you think would be considered “good recruits” for Democrats? Republicans? How does this change according to specific district conditions and overall national conditions? What personal and professional qualities are needed to run successfully for Congress?
12. What does it take for a party to have a “wave election”?
13. Do you think voters prefer divided government (i.e. one party not having complete control of the Executive and Legislative branches)? Why?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions:

Suggested questions to initiate discussion with your students after they watch *HouseQuake*:

1. How would you describe the overall Democratic strategy in 2006? The Republican strategy? Which elements of these strategies did you find effective? Why?
2. What issues were most important to voters in 2006? How did each party capitalize on these concerns?
3. How would you describe Rahm Emanuel's approach to campaign strategy? What seemed to be successful about his approach? What, if anything, might people find controversial or risky about his approach?
4. How would you describe the strategy employed by Republicans to "play defense"? What worked and what didn't work?
5. Overall, where does the 2006 experience leave Tip O'Neill's "All politics is local" maxim? In what ways did Democrats adhere to the maxim and how did they deviate? Compare the Republican approach.
6. Political scientists have stressed the importance of good candidate recruiting, without which the party cannot take full advantage of whatever electoral wave develops. Did this election bear that out?
7. Which, if either, party did a more effective job of message consistency? How would you describe each party's message? How did they convey these messages?
8. Were there specific campaigns and candidates that you found particularly compelling? Which ones and why?

Specific race-by-race questions:

- Tammy Duckworth vs. Peter Roskam (IL - 16)
 1. Why was Tammy Duckworth recruited for this race? Did the situation in Iraq help or hurt her effort? How did Roskam use the issue of the war in his campaign? Was it effective?
 2. What struck you about the scene during which the Veterans of Foreign Wars endorsed Roskam, the candidate who was not a veteran. Did this endorsement surprise you? Do you think it helped Roskam?
 3. Why do you think Duckworth lost?
 4. How would you describe the differences in personal style between Duckworth and Roskam? Which was more effective?
 5. Duckworth became a national figure when she entered the race, associated with the Democratic Party and other Illinois Democrats like Rahm Emanuel and Barack Obama. Do you think this helped or hurt her?
 6. How did the press play into this race?

- Mike Sodrel vs. Baron Hill (IN - 9)
 1. Why do you think these candidates repeatedly run against each other?
 2. What about the national climate made Hill competitive in this conservative district? What else made Hill competitive?
 3. Why do you think several voters refused to shake Baron Hill's hand? Did he handle the situation effectively?
 4. How did Baron Hill deal with the challenges of running in a conservative district as a Democrat?
 5. What personal qualities did Hill exhibit that made him an effective candidate? Compare the approach of Jerry McNerney, or Diane Farrell.
 6. Did you learn anything from hearing from Hill's family? What?

- Brad Ellsworth vs. John Hostettler (IN - 8)
 1. How would you describe the differences between the two candidates? The similarities?
 2. How did religion and social issues figure into this race?
 3. How was a Democrat able to win in this conservative district?
 4. What did you observe about John Hostettler's campaign and message? How do you think these things affected the outcome?
 5. Why do you think Brad Ellsworth was able to defeat John Hostettler after many Democrats had tried and failed in previous elections?

- Christopher Shays vs. Diane Farrell (CT - 4)
 1. After the 2006 election, Christopher Shays was the only Republican congressman left in New England. To what do you attribute his ability to hold the seat?
 2. Christopher Shays was able to win for many years as a Republican in a fairly liberal district. How do you think he accomplished this?
 3. Democrats targeted this seat because Shays was seen as vulnerable. What effect do you think targeting moderate Republicans has had on Congress as a whole?
 4. Shays was defeated in 2008. Do you think the close race with Farrell could have contributed to that defeat? Why or why not?
 5. How did each candidate use the issue of the Iraq War in his or her campaign strategy? Did the "evolution" of Shays' approach strike you as effective or as transparently opportunistic? What worked? What didn't?

- Heath Shuler vs. Charles Taylor (NC - 11)
 1. What was the Democrats' strategy in recruiting Heath Shuler to run against Charles Taylor?
 2. Do you think a less conservative Democrat could have won this race?
 3. Heath Shuler became a "Blue Dog" Democrat when he got to Washington. How does this group of conservative Democrats affect party unity and the

- ability for party leaders to push through legislation?
4. Do you think professional athletes have an advantage as challengers? Why or why not?
 5. How important do you think Shuler's religious convictions were in this race? Why did he make his religious beliefs part of his campaign?
 6. Was Shuler well-advised to make countless cold calls of the sort you saw for campaign donations? How does this constant need to raise money affect campaigning positively or negatively?
- Richard Pombo vs. Jerry McNerney (CA - 11)
 1. This was a seat that Democrats were not supposed to win. How do you explain McNerney's victory?
 2. Do you think McNerney would have won had there not been a Democratic wave?
 3. McNerney is a liberal Democrat who had the help of MoveOn.org and other liberal groups. Yet his district traditionally votes quite conservatively. How do you explain this discrepancy?
 4. Environmental groups worked hard in this race, campaigning for McNerney. Might environmental issues have given a reason for otherwise Republican-inclined voters to vote for McNerney?
 5. Do you think environmental issues could have had a comparable effect on the Hill or Ellsworth race?
 - Tim Mahoney vs. Mark Foley/Joe Negron (FL - 16)
 1. This may have been the most unusual race in the country in 2006. How do extraordinary circumstances such as a sex scandal affect races?
 2. The Democrats recruited a viable candidate (Mahoney) in this conservative district even when the race looked hopeless. Why? Did it pay off? How did national circumstances affect the dynamics and outcome of this race?
 3. Mahoney had a great deal of personal wealth. How do you think this played in to Democrats' decision to recruit him?
 4. Joe Negron came very close to defeating Mahoney despite having very little time to campaign and achieve voter recognition. Why did he almost win?
 5. Tim Mahoney often mentioned that he was a former Republican. Why? Do you think this was an effective tactic?