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In Ads, Candidates Make Their Final Pitches to Voters

By ASHLEY PARKER

WASHINGTON - Sharron Angle, the Republican candidate for Senate in Nevada, wants the state's voters to know that Harry Reid had his chance, but it's her turn now.

This is the final pitch Ms. Angle makes in a political ad released Thursday and titled "Our Turn," which argues that two years ago, Democrats "promised change—but they delivered unprecedented spending, overwhelming debt, heartbreaking job loss," and a laundry list of other economic woes.

"They promised change," the ad concludes. "Now, it's our turn."

With Election Day on Tuesday, candidates across the nation are turning to political ads to make their closing arguments — often a last-ditch plea to win over voters by either reintroducing themselves, tearing down their opponent one last time, or something in between. And this year, both Democrats and Republicans are trying to harness the anti-Washington sentiment to push different versions of the same theme: That the nation's capital must change, and with their independent voice and close ties to their home state, the candidate currently approving this ad is just the person for the job.

"At a very base level, once again, and ironically, we are in a 'change' environment," said Mark McKinnon, a Republican strategist who made ads for President George W. Bush and Senator John McCain of Arizona. "Which means challengers and incumbents, Republicans and Democrats, are all arguing that they are fighting the system and that Washington is the problem."

Republicans especially are running as outsiders and pushing a message of bringing change to Washington. Carly Fiorina, the Republican Senate candidate in California, has a closing ad that talks ominously about "the legacy of Barbara Boxer," the incumbent senator and Ms. Fiorina's Democratic opponent, before a narrator says, "We can change Washington, but not unless we change the people we send there." And many Republicans are making a similar pitch, from Jon Runyan, who is running for Congress in New Jersey's Third Congressional District ("If you're tired of the way this country is run, then let's change the people who run it," Mr. Runyan says) to Kristi Noem, who is running for Congress against incumbent Democrat Stephanie Herseth Sandlin in South Dakota ("Stephanie Herseth Sandlin — Washington really changed her," a narrator warns.)

"Republicans have a tailor-made message, which is that we're not Democrats, basically," said Michael Franz, an associate professor of government at Bowdoin College and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. "You always see something like that from challengers who are outsiders trying to enter the system. You have a lot of newcomers on the Republican side who have a chance of winning so they can make that case quite clearly, that Obama and the Democrats have had control for two years and their policies aren't working, so we need change, we need to change that leadership."

Democrats, too, are doing a final anti-Washington dance, promising to “shake up Washington” if elected, in the case of West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, and talking about their ties to their home states. Earl Pomeroy, an incumbent Democratic congressman from North Dakota, for instance, acknowledges that “I know you’re angry with Washington,” but says that he travels “home to North Dakota every weekend” and adds, “my values are formed right here in Valley City where I grew up.” Mr. Manchin opens his ad by saying, “I’m as mad as you are with what’s going on in Washington,” and distances himself from both parties.

“Every Democrat is running their own race, and hopes to be judged on their connection to their state and district,” said John Del Cecato, a partner at AKPD, a Democratic media firm.

Running against Washington, however, is trickier for Democrats. “The fact is, the Democrats own the current situation,” said Ken Goldstein, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin.

“Democrats are really trying to disqualify Republicans, and in some ways throwing anything against the wall,” Mr. Goldstein said. (Case in point? The ad by Charlie Melancon, the Democratic congressman from Louisiana who is running for Senate against Senator David Vitter, which opens by stating, “Our tax dollars pay David Vitter’s salary, and he used it for prostitutes. You’re welcome, senator.”)

But after such a bitterly divisive and negative campaign season, an increasing number of candidates are sounding a positive note in the final stretch. Cue the spouses, the kids, and the fuzzy biographical spots.

Marco Rubio, the Republican candidate for Senate in Florida, is airing a special two-minute ad that talks about his personal story — he is the son of a bartender and a maid — and what he believes the election is about. Alexi Giannoulias, who has called his opponent a liar and whose opponent has called him a mob banker, ends his bid for President Obama’s former Illinois Senate seat with a positive ad that features both the president and Michelle Obama, the first lady.

“Campaigns almost always close positive,” Mr. McKinnon said. “They want their final image to be contrary to the one painted by their opponents. And anyone who has children can’t possibly be guilty of the heinous crimes of which they’ve been accused.”

And then, of course, there is the meta-ad, which features a candidate dismissing the negative ads his opponent has thrown at him all season, before saying something positive about himself.

“Obviously you want to wait to do something like that until there’s been a lot of negative ads out there,” said Travis Ridout, an associate professor of political science at

Washington State University. “It’s a way of saying something kind of negative about your opponent, without seeming to say something negative.”