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Parties Ramp Up Appeals on Last Weekend of Campaigning

By JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — Republicans made their closing argument on Sunday for capturing control of Congress, assailing President Obama as a champion of wasteful and excessive government, as Democrats countered that returning power to Republicans would embolden corporations and the wealthy with disastrous results for middle-class Americans.

Mr. Obama and Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. converged on Ohio in hopes of rekindling the passion Democrats displayed two years ago in sending the pair to the White House.

“In two days, you have a chance to once again say, ‘Yes, we can,’ ” Mr. Obama said at a rally in Cleveland, reprising the theme of his 2008 campaign. “There is no doubt that this is a difficult election.”

But Representative John A. Boehner, who is poised to become speaker if Republicans win the House, offered a rebuttal as he crisscrossed the state, warning voters not to be taken in by familiar promises of changing Washington.

“Washington hasn’t been listening to the American people; I think it’s been disrespecting the American people,” Mr. Boehner said, firing up Republicans in Columbus. He flashed a sign of confidence, saying: “We’re going to have a big night on Tuesday night — a really big night.”

Republicans are positioned to reach or surpass the number of House seats that they picked up in 1994, according to strategists and independent analysts, when the party gained 54 and ended four decades of Democratic dominance in the House.

The ranks of vulnerable Democrats deepened, with House seats in Connecticut, Maine and Rhode Island becoming susceptible to a potential Republican wave that could exceed the 39 seats needed to win control. Democrats clung to hope that they could hold on to the Senate by at least a seat or two.
As the White House prepared for widespread losses on Tuesday, it sought to minimize the political damage to the party and to Mr. Obama’s re-election chances in two years by urging its supporters to work even harder to help narrow the gap in tight races.

Former President Bill Clinton began a nine-state sweep to help preserve the Democratic majority, rallying voters along the Eastern Seaboard from Maine to Florida. The focus on Democratic-leaning states, including Congressional races in New York and Connecticut and races for governor in Maine and New Hampshire, underscored the degree to which Democrats are almost entirely on defense against Republicans at a time when the unemployment rate remains stubbornly high and the nation is deeply divided over issues like health care.

The most expensive Congressional contest in the country’s history, with spending of nearly $4 billion, drew to a close with a presidential-style deployment of campaign volunteers from Alaska to Florida intended to get out the vote, even though more than half of Americans participating in the election have already cast early ballots.

Few states were spared a last barrage of television advertisements, many of which featured Republicans trying to capitalize on the suggestion of change.

In California, the Republican candidate for the Senate, Carly Fiorina, said, “We can change Washington, but not unless we change the people we send there.” In Nevada, the Republican nominee for the Senate, Sharron Angle, said, “They promised change, now it’s our turn.”

In New Jersey, John Runyan, a Republican candidate for the House, declared: “If you’re tired of the way this country is run, then let’s change the people who run it.”

Democrats were bracing for substantial losses across the ballot, from state legislative races to governorships to Congress, with incumbents imploring voters to give them more time to create jobs, improve the economy and control state and federal spending. It remained an open question whether the party’s extensive get-out-the-vote operation could diminish what party leaders fear could be widespread defeats.

“This is not a year to sit on your hands,” said Diane Denish, the lieutenant governor of New Mexico, a Democrat who is in an uphill fight to win the governor’s race. “It’s more important than ever to get off your behind and get out of the shade and get into the heat, as we say in the oil fields.”

In the House, 29 Democratic-held seats are either leaning Republican or are all but lost to Republican candidates, according to the latest analysis of Congressional races by The New
York Times, while 42 seats held by Democrats are seen as tossups. Even if Republicans win only half of the tossup seats, they will have passed the threshold of 39 they need to win control.

Democrats were also fighting to preserve their majority in the Senate. The five Senate contests considered tossups will help determine if the party holds control, according to the analysis by The Times, with Republicans trying to capture Democratic-held seats in Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Washington.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader, is in one of the closest races in the country against Ms. Angle. After a year of combative and piercing television ads, Mr. Reid’s closing message to voters was not an argument on issues, but rather a plea to voters to reject his opponent.

“Harry Reid, fighting for us,” an announcer says, with images of Mr. Reid appearing with workers across Nevada. “Sharron Angle: pathological.”

Republicans were looking for new patches of opportunity, scouring districts that only weeks ago would have been unthinkable. The First Congressional District of Rhode Island, which for 16 years has been represented by Patrick J. Kennedy, was suddenly seen as winnable terrain for Republicans. Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts and an aspiring Republican presidential candidate, was scheduled to visit the district on Monday.

Republicans sent party leaders across the country on Sunday on behalf of their candidates. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, campaigned in northern Wisconsin for Sean Duffy, a former reality television star who is running for the seat held by David R. Obey, a Democrat who is retiring after 41 years in Congress. Gov. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota traveled to Iowa to build support for legislative candidates.

The most heavily-traveled state on Sunday, though, was Ohio, where Republicans are trying to win up to six Congressional districts, one Senate contest and the governor’s race. After the president and vice president appeared together in Cleveland, Mr. Biden stopped in Toledo for an evening rally for Gov. Ted Strickland, who is in a race that is too close to call with John Kasich, a former Republican congressman.

For weeks, the White House has put more emphasis on Ohio than nearly any other state, but over the weekend, signs of a Republican revival were underscored by Mr. Boehner’s rare public appearances in his own state. He zipped from district to district as he worked to expand the Republican advantages in the House and deliver a counterargument to the president.
“They have been coming here for months? Why? You might think it’s to help Ted Strickland. What he is really coming for is to help himself,” Mr. Boehner said on Sunday evening at his final stop, in Chillicothe. “He knows that in 2012 if he doesn’t have Ted Strickland in office, his re-election chances are seriously damaged.

“So if you want to send President Obama a message about spending and about takeovers and bailouts and all the nonsense,” Mr. Boehner added, “go out there on Tuesday and vote for John Kasich.”

*Reporting was contributed by David M. Herszenhorn in Chillicothe, Ohio; Dan Frosch in Española, N.M.; and Ashley Parker in Washington.*