

# Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

MAY 19, 2023

VOLUME 7, NO. 10

## 2024 Senate Ratings

### BATTLEGROUND

#### Democratic-Held (8)

MI Open (Stabenow, D)  
Baldwin (D-Wis.)  
Brown (D-Ohio)  
Casey (D-Penn.)  
Kaine (D-Va.)  
Manchin (D-W.V.)  
Rosen (D-Nev.)  
Tester (D-Mont.)

#### Republican-Held (1)

Cruz (R-Texas)#

#### Independent-Held (1)

Sinema (I-Ariz.)

#### Solid Democratic (14)

CA Open (Feinstein, D)  
MD Open (Cardin, D)  
Cantwell (D-Wa.)  
Carper (D-Del.)  
Gillibrand (D-N.Y.)  
Heinrich (D-N.M.)  
Hirono (D-Hawaii)  
King (I-Maine)  
Klobuchar (DFL-Minn.)  
Menendez (D-N.J.)  
Murphy (D-Ct.)  
Sanders (I-Vt.)  
Warren (D-Mass.)  
Whitehouse (D-R.I.)

#### Solid Republican (10)

IN Open (Braun, R)  
Barrasso (R-Wy.)  
Blackburn (R-Tenn.)  
Cramer (R-N.D.)  
Fischer (R-Neb.)  
Hawley (R-Mo.)  
Ricketts (R-Neb.)  
Romney (R-Utah)  
Scott (R-Fla.)  
Wicker (R-Miss.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans

## CALENDAR

<b>July 20</b>	FIFA Women's World Cup starts
<b>Aug. 8</b>	Mississippi Governor Primary
<b>Aug. 10</b>	Louisiana Governor Filing Deadline
<b>Aug. 29</b>	Mississippi Governor Primary Runoff (if necessary)

This issue brought  
to you by



## West Virginia Senate: Justice Served?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Senate Democrats are on defense all over the country. But in no place are they more vulnerable than in West Virginia, where Sen. Joe Manchin is the last remaining Democratic statewide office holder in the Republican bastion.

Manchin has clung to his seat even as the the Mountaineer State has rocketed rightward, eking out wins while many of his Democratic colleagues from less challenging states fell short.

But in 2024, he will face his toughest race yet — should he even choose to run. Republicans need a net gain of just one seat to flip control of the Senate if they also win back the White House, or a net gain of two seats to win the majority regardless of what happens in the presidential election.

If Manchin doesn't run, there isn't another Democrat who can hold the seat. Even if he does run, West Virginia is still Republicans' best chance at flipping a Senate seat next year.

But first, the GOP has to work out a potentially messy primary.

### The Lay of the Land

Once a Democratic stronghold, West Virginia is now one of the most Republican-leaning states in the country.

One of the whitest, poorest (by median income), and oldest (by median age) states, West Virginia was for decades dominated by Democrats, who controlled the state legislature from 1933 to 2015, and held a majority of the state's U.S. House delegation for all but four years from 1933 to 2011 and both U.S. Senate seats from 1958 to 2014.

Now, Democrats hold neither of the state's two House seats, no state-level elected offices, and just 10 percent of the seats in the state legislature. In 2020, President Donald Trump carried West Virginia by 39 points, 69-30 percent, (his second-largest victory in the country), and in 2016 by 43 points, 69-26 percent (his largest victory).

In 2018, when Manchin was last on the ballot, Democrats held a 42-32 percent edge in voter registration over Republicans. Today, Republicans hold a 40-32 percent edge over Democrats, a swing of 18 percent. (In 2012, Manchin's second election, registered Democrats were a majority of the state's electorate.)

Fossil fuels are still especially important in West Virginia, which produces the second-most coal of any state and employs the most coal miners. When coal was booming in the 1950s, the state's population peaked at over 2 million before declining. A resurgence in the 1970s brought the state back to that number in 1980, but since then the state has fallen back to 1.8 million, per the 2020 Census, making it the fastest-shrinking state.

*Continued on page 9*

# Texas Senate: Allred Is All In

By Erin Covey

Democrats' dreams of winning in the Lone Star State have failed to materialize for the past few decades. But with Sen. Ted Cruz up for re-election, they have a rare opportunity to seriously compete against an incumbent Republican senator in 2024.

The party landed a top recruit in Democratic Rep. Colin Allred, who announced his Senate campaign on May 3 and resurrected the perennial question of whether a Democrat could win a statewide race in Texas.

Now that Democrats' have a strong contender in the race, Cruz is the most vulnerable Republican senator up for re-election in 2024 — though he's still in a much stronger position than several Democratic senators in his class.

Democratic Rep. Beto O'Rourke came 2.5 points away from defeating Cruz in the 2018 "Blue Wave," and Donald Trump's 5.6-point victory in 2020 showed that Republicans' dominance in the state was eroding. But in 2022, Republicans held their ground with GOP Gov. Greg Abbott at the top of the ticket.

Allred's campaign launch sparked a burst of excitement among small-dollar Democratic donors, and his campaign announced raising \$2 million in the 36 hours following his announcement.

But he'll need to sustain that enthusiasm over the next 18 months — and he won't have the primary to himself. State Sen. Roland Gutierrez, who represents Uvalde in the state Legislature and has become a vocal proponent for stricter gun laws, is also gearing up for a Senate campaign, and could give Allred a run for his money.

## The Democratic Primary

In many ways, Allred has the ideal profile for a Texas Democrat running statewide — a former NFL linebacker with a working-class background, a law degree, and experience taking on a GOP incumbent in a competitive race. The congressman, who is Black, could have the ability to mobilize Black voter turnout, which Texas Democrats struggled with in 2022. Texas is home to the largest Black population in the country.

Allred defeated longtime GOP Rep. Pete Sessions in 2018, flipping a district in the Dallas suburbs. The district was ripe for a Democratic takeover, and Allred actually underperformed O'Rourke by 4 points. After the latest round of redistricting, his district is so Democratic that

Allred coasted to re-election in 2022 and would have again in 2024.

Over the past four years, Allred has developed a reputation as a low-key, moderate lawmaker and has earned endorsements and awards from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for supporting business-friendly policies.

He's received early plaudits from his peers in D.C., including Texas Reps. Veronica Escobar, Lizzie Fletcher, and Marc Veasey. And Sen. Tina Smith, the vice chair of the DSCC, Senate Democrats' campaign arm, singled out Allred as a strong potential challenger before he announced his Senate campaign.

Some Democratic strategists told *Inside Elections* in March that they expected Allred would clear the primary field, which would have allowed him to consolidate Democratic support and stockpile money

ahead of an incredibly expensive general election. But Allred is likely to have a formidable opponent in Gutierrez, who intends to announce a Senate campaign this summer.

The 52-year-old state senator represents a



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Colin Allred

district that stretches from San Antonio to Uvalde, and he's become a staunch advocate for stricter gun laws after the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School last May.

He has an early ally in former Rep. Filemon Vela, who held a seat in the Rio Grande Valley for 11 years before resigning in 2022.

Texas-based strategists warned that Democrats in D.C. might underestimate the state senator, whose profile has risen significantly over the past year.

Previous election cycles in Texas have shown that having a Hispanic surname is enough to win a significant portion of the Democratic primary electorate. Sema Hernandez, a political unknown who raised less than \$10,000, garnered 24 percent of the vote in 2018 and ran ahead

*Continued on page 3*

# Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

810 7th Street NE, Washington, DC, 20002  
202-546-2822



**Nathan L. Gonzales**  
Editor & Publisher  
nathan@insideelections.com  
@nathanlgonzales



**Jacob Rubashkin**  
Reporter & Analyst  
jacob@insideelections.com  
@jacobrubashkin



**Erin Covey**  
Reporter & Analyst  
erin@insideelections.com  
@ercovey

**Bradley Wascher**  
Contributing Analyst  
bradley@insideelections.com

**Will Taylor**  
Production Artist  
will@insideelections.com

**Stuart Rothenberg**  
Senior Editor  
stu@insideelections.com

@InsideElections facebook.com/InsideElections

Copyright 2023, Inside Elections LLC. All rights reserved.

Continued from page 2

of O'Rourke in dozens of counties, many of which were along the U.S.-Mexico border.

But Allred is still the clear favorite in the primary. Former San Antonio Mayor and 2020 presidential candidate Julian Castro has made it clear that he doesn't plan to run, and rumors that Sen. Mark Kelly's twin brother Scott Kelly might run were quickly quelled.

As Allred continues to fundraise, Gutierrez is hampered by a state law that doesn't allow him to start accepting federal campaign contributions until June 19, after the state legislative session has ended.

Republicans are excited about the prospect of a contentious Democratic primary, as it has the potential to drain Allred's coffers and force him to run to the left. In 2020, a closer-than-expected Democratic primary hampered eventual nominee MJ Hegar's ability to compete in the general election against Sen. John Cornyn.

In a preview of the likely general election match-up, Cruz's allies are attempting to paint Allred as out of step with Texas' voters on guns, boosting a clip of the congressman saying that it "would have been better if [the Second Amendment] had not been written" and comparing it to O'Rourke's infamous comment about taking away assault rifles.

## The Republican Incumbent

In 2018, Cruz was coming off of a brutal presidential campaign in which he was steamrolled by Trump, and the senator's approval rating with Texas voters had dropped to the mid-30s.

He's in a stronger position now, according to polling from the University of Texas that showed his approval rating in the low to mid-40s. But he's remained a polarizing figure, and is less popular than Gov. Abbott, who defeated O'Rourke by 11 points last November in his re-election bid.



Ted Cruz

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Two years ago, Cruz faced widespread criticism for traveling to Cancun with his family while the state experienced a massive power outage crisis following a winter storm. And Cruz was one of the 10 senators who voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election results after the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

But the senator is making a concerted effort to moderate his image ahead of 2024, using his perch as the top Republican on the Commerce Science and Transportation Committee to advocate for policies that strengthen Texas' economy.

Cruz had a less than stellar fundraising quarter at the beginning of the year, raising \$1.3 million in the first three months and reporting \$3.3 million in his campaign account as of March 31. But now that he has an opponent, the senator is ramping up fundraising efforts.

## The Lay of the Land

It's difficult to gauge the political ramifications of the state's rapid population growth, particularly since Texas doesn't register voters by party.

The population increased by nearly half a million between July of

2021 and December of 2022, making it the fastest growing state in the country during that time period. That growth has been concentrated in the suburbs in recent years — Texas was home to six out of 10 of the fastest growing counties in the country between 2021 and 2022 (Harris County, Collin County, Denton County, Fort Bend County, Bexar County, and Montgomery County).

Presidential results across the past three cycles have shown gradual movement toward Democrats. Mitt Romney won the state by 16 points in 2012, Trump won it by 9 points in 2016, and the former president won it by just 5.6 points in 2020.

For Allred, who isn't known outside the metroplex, his initial challenge will be introducing himself to a wide swath of voters, an enormous task that requires spending millions of dollars in TV advertising. Since Cruz was last on the ballot, Texas' population has grown from 28.7 million to 30 million.

O'Rourke set a high bar for fundraising in his 2018 campaign, raising more than twice as much as Cruz and ultimately raking in \$80 million. Strategists anticipate both Cruz and Allred will need to raise at least as much to compete in 2024.

"I don't question [Allred's] ability to communicate," one Democratic strategist told *Inside Elections*. "I worry about him having enough money to do it broadly enough."

## The Bottom Line

Texas remains on the edge of the presidential battleground, and the high cost of airing ads in the state makes it unlikely that either party would seriously compete here at the presidential level.

That could benefit Democrats' Senate nominee, who will need to separate himself enough from the national party to run ahead of Biden.

Democratic sources who spoke with *Inside Elections* were cautiously optimistic about Biden's prospects in the Lone Star State, estimating that he might perform a point or two better than he did in 2020, when Trump won the state by 5 and half points.

The 2018 Senate race showed that with the right candidate, in the right political environment, Democrats could compete in the Lone Star State.

It's unclear what the 2024 political environment will look like, but Democrats have found a solid contender in an emerging competitive state. *Inside Elections* is moving this race from Solid Republican to Battleground. We'll shift to our more traditional rating categories this summer.

IE

# 2024 Gubernatorial Ratings

## BATTLEGROUND

### Democratic-Held (1)

NC Open (Cooper, D)

### Republican-Held (1)

Sununu (R-N.H.)

### Solid Democratic (2)

DE Open (Carney, D)

WA Open (Inslee, D)

### Solid Republican (7)

IN Open (Holcomb, R)

MO Open (Parson, R)

WV Open (Justice, R)

Burgum (R-N.D.)

Cox (R-Utah)

Gianforte (R-Mont.)

Scott (R-Vt.)

Takeovers in italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans

# Kentucky Governor: Cameron Wins, Quarles Places, Craft Shows

By Jacob Rubashkin

Not every race ends in a photo finish.

On Tuesday, Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron easily won the GOP nomination for governor. He captured 48 percent of the vote, well ahead of state Agriculture Commissioner Ryan Quarles, who came in second with 22 percent.

Back in third was Kelly Craft, the former ambassador to the United Nations and GOP mega-donor who spent \$11 million of her own money on the race but only won 17 percent.

Craft had spent a small fortune on TV beginning in late December, and by the end of March polling showed the first-time candidate moving past Quarles and creeping up toward Cameron, who led in polling the entire time.

But in April, Cameron and his allies began advertising on TV, airing negative ads on Craft and trumpeting the attorney general's endorsement from former President Donald Trump. Craft's super PAC went off the air, Quarles began advertising, and Cameron stabilized as the undisputed frontrunner.

Now, the McConnell protégé will face Gov. Andy Beshear, the lone statewide Democrat in the Bluegrass State. Beshear himself served as the state's attorney general for one term before defeating an incumbent governor, Republican Matt Bevin, in 2019, by a narrow 49.2-48.3 percent margin. Cameron and Beshear also worked at the same Louisville law firm a decade ago.

The Beshear-Cameron clash will be the biggest gubernatorial fight of 2023, with national Democrats more focused on re-electing Beshear than holding onto the open seat in Louisiana (where Democrat John Bel Edwards is term-limited) or scoring an upset in Mississippi.



Daniel Cameron

Courtesy Commonwealth of Kentucky

Beshear begins the general election with some clear advantages. He reported \$6.1 million in the bank on May 1, while Cameron had just \$340,000 — and likely spent most of that in the final two weeks of the race.

The governor also has a golden last name (his father was governor for eight years). And perhaps most importantly, he has a high approval rating; a January poll from Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy pegged it at 61 percent approve / 29 percent disapprove.

But Kentucky is a deeply Republican state, voting for Trump by 26 points in 2020. Its *Inside Elections* Baseline score is R+19.8, indicating that a typical Republican would win an election by about 20 points. In 2019, in a pro-Democratic political environment, against the most unpopular governor in the country, Beshear eked out just a 5,000-vote victory.

And the state has gotten less Democratic since then. What was a 6-point Democratic voter registration edge in 2019 (49-43 percent) has become a 2-point GOP advantage (46-44 percent). While voter registration does not equal partisan performance, it's not a sign of health for Kentucky Democrats.

Beshear will run on his response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the natural disasters that have hit the state hard in recent years, including



Andy Beshear

Courtesy Commonwealth of Kentucky

the tornadoes that hit Western Kentucky and the flooding in Eastern Kentucky. He'll also highlight job growth in the state, and funding for the Brent Spence Bridge between Kentucky and Ohio.

His allies at the Democratic Governors Association have

telegraphed that they will attack Cameron by tying him to the unpopular McConnell (as Craft did) and Bevin (especially on the question of Bevin's controversial late-term pardons). Democrats also won't shy away from Cameron's handling of the investigation into the high-profile death of Breonna Taylor in 2020.

Cameron and his allies will work to leverage the state's partisan lean by linking Beshear to Biden and the national Democratic Party. They will also focus on Beshear's Covid-19 response, particularly his move to prevent in-person religious services in 2020, as well as abortion and transgender issues.

Gubernatorial races don't always follow the same rules as federal politics, and voters across the country have shown a willingness to cross the aisle in those races when they would not for federal contests. That a Democrat is even remotely competitive in Kentucky, let alone the incumbent governor, is a testament to that. But Beshear has his work cut out for him, and Democrats can't take this race for granted.



## 2023 Gubernatorial Ratings

### Toss-up (1D)

Beshear (D-Ky.)

**Lean Democratic**

**Lean Republican (1R)**

*LA Open (Edwards, D)*

**Likely Democratic**

**Likely Republican (1R)**

*Reeves (R-Miss.)*

**Solid Democratic**

**Solid Republican**

*Takeovers in italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans*

# Maryland 6: Cultivating a Candidate

By Jacob Rubashkin

David Trone’s entrance into the Democratic primary for Maryland’s open Senate seat last week sets up a battle royale between the wealthy wine store magnate, Prince George’s County Executive Angela Alsobrooks, and potentially liberal hero Rep. Jamie Raskin. It also creates an open seat race in Maryland’s most competitive House district.

Democrats need a net gain of five seats nationwide to win the House majority, and keeping all of their current seats is an important step down that path. The party is favored to hold Maryland’s 6th District, but Republicans could compete here in the right political environment and with the right candidate.

## The Lay of the Land

The 6th is Maryland’s westernmost district, and includes all of Garrett, Washington, Allegany and Frederick counties, as well as a third of Montgomery County.

The district’s population is split relatively evenly between three areas: the D.C. suburb of Montgomery County (33 percent), Frederick County (35 percent), and the rural Garrett, Washington, and Allegany counties (32 percent) in Western Maryland.

Politically, the district gets more Republican as it extends away from the D.C. area. The westernmost counties are the most Republican, while Frederick is a bellwether and Montgomery is solidly Democratic.

The 6th used to be a Republican district, and was held by eccentric Rep. Roscoe Bartlett for 20 years. But in 2011, the state legislature significantly altered the district’s lines, extending it into Montgomery County to make it more Democratic, and Bartlett lost in a landslide to John Delaney.

In 2022, a court-ordered redraw made the district less Democratic again (dropping it from a seat Biden would have carried by 23 points to just 10 points). That year, Trone defeated state Del. Neil Parrott, 55-45 percent. Parrott won Garrett, Washington, and Allegany by a combined 63-37 percent. Trone won Frederick, 55-45 percent, and Montgomery, 75-25 percent.

At the statewide level, the district is Maryland’s most competitive. Joe Biden would have carried it by 10 points, 54-44 percent, in 2020, though Hillary Clinton would have won it by just 1 point, 47-46 percent, in 2016.

The shift between 2016 and 2020 was largely driven by changes in Frederick County; Biden was the first Democratic presidential nominee to win Frederick since 1964. While Clinton lost the county, 47-45 percent, Biden carried it handily, 53-44 percent.

Republicans have won the 6th in at least one recent state-level race. Gov. Larry Hogan won it, 65-34 percent, in his 2018 re-election campaign.

But in the 2022 gubernatorial race, Democrat Wes Moore carried the 6th, 52-44 percent, over Republican Dan Cox. Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen won it, 54-46 percent. In the attorney general contest, Democratic Rep. Anthony Brown won the district, 53-47 percent. And in the state comptroller race (Maryland’s most competitive statewide contest), Democrat Brooke Lierman carried the 6th narrowly, 50.3-49.7 percent.

## The Democrats

In conversations with a half-dozen Maryland Democratic strategists about the field of potential candidates, the first name mentioned is former Frederick County Executive Jan Gardner.

Gardner recently finished eight years as executive of the rapidly

growing county, where she previously served as a county commissioner from 1998 to 2014. She was the top-performing Democrat in the county in 2014, when she won 54-46 percent while the three statewide Democratic candidates won just 35, 48 and 41 percent, respectively, and she was the second-best Democratic performer in 2018, winning 52-43 percent.

But as one Democratic strategist says, “the uncertainty around Jan Gardner isn’t her potential strength in the primary; it’s does she want to run?” with another top operative saying that Gardner “probably has to be recruited” into the race.

At the moment, Gardner is the only major potential Democratic

*Continued on page 6*

## 2024 House Ratings

### Toss-Up (4D, 8R)

CA 13 (Duarte, R)	NY 3 (Santos, R)
CA 27 (Garcia, R)	NY 4 (D’Esposito, R)
CO 8 (Caraveo, D)	NY 17 (Lawler, R)
MI 7 (Open; Slotkin, D)	NY 22 (Williams, R)
NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)	OR 5 (DeRemer, R)
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)	WA 3 (Perez, D)

### Tilt Democratic (3D)

CA 47 (Open; Porter, D)
PA 7 (Wild, D)
PA 8 (Cartwright, D)

### Tilt Republican (7R)

AZ 1 (Schweikert, R)
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R)
CA 22 (Valadao, R)
IA 3 (Nunn, R)
MI 10 (James, R)
NY 19 (Molinaro, R)
VA 2 (Kiggans, R)

### Lean Democratic (14D)

AK AL (Peltola, D)
CT 5 (Hayes, D)
IL 17 (Sorensen, D)
ME 2 (Golden, D)
MI 3 (Scholten, D)
MN 2 (Craig, DFL)
NV 1 (Titus, D)
NV 3 (Lee, D)
NH 1 (Pappas, D)
NY 18 (Ryan, D)
OR 6 (Salinas, D)
PA 17 (Deluzio, D)
VA 7 (Spanberger, D)
WA 8 (Schrier, D)

### Lean Republican (6R)

CA 41 (Calvert, R)
CA 45 (Steel, R)
CO 3 (Boebert, R)
NE 2 (Bacon, R)
NY 1 (LaLota, R)
TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)

	GOP	DEM
Solid	172	168
Likely/Lean/Tilt	25	29
Total	197	197
Toss-up		12
Ohio/North Carolina		29
Needed for majority		218

### Likely Democratic (12D)

CA 49 (Levin, D)	MI 8 (Kildee, D)
FL 9 (Soto, D)	NV 4 (Horsford, D)
FL 23 (Moskowitz, D)	NH 2 (Kuster, D)
IN 1 (Mrvan, D)	TX 28 (Cuellar, D)
KS 3 (Davids, D)	TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)
MD 6 (Open; Trone, D)	VA 10 (Wexton, D)

### Likely Republican (12R)

CA 3 (Kiley, R)	MT 1 (Zinke, R)
CA 40 (Kim, R)	PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
FL 13 (Luna, R)	PA 10 (Perry, R)
FL 27 (Salazar, R)	SC 1 (Mace, R)
IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R)	WI 1 (Steil, R)
IA 2 (Hinson, R)	WI 3 (Van Orden, R)

Continued from page 5

candidate from outside of Montgomery County, though one Maryland Democrat mentioned Washington County's Hagerstown Mayor Tekesha Martinez as a potential candidate.

There are several potential contenders from Montgomery County. And because Maryland elects all its state legislators in midterm years, no sitting lawmaker would be risking their current office by seeking a promotion.

State Del. Joe Vogel is already in the race. The 26-year-old has only been in office a few months but has an attractive profile as a young, gay, Uruguayan-American immigrant. He has assembled a credible campaign team that includes media consultants Cayce McCabe and Jenna Kruse, formerly of Putnam Partners, and pollsters Margie Omero and Michelle Mayorgas of GBAO. But local Democratic sources don't initially consider him a top-tier candidate.

State Del. Lesley Lopez told *Inside Elections* she is considering a run. Lopez has represented a racially diverse Montgomery County district since 2019 and has been visible on gun safety legislation and women's issues in the state legislature. And a Maryland source says Lopez is "putting things together" for a campaign.

State Sen. Brian Feldman also told *Inside Elections* he is considering a bid. But local sources say Feldman, who first won election to the state legislature in 2002, might be less likely to run because he just secured a powerful committee chairmanship in Annapolis.

Other potential candidates include Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce April McClain-Delaney, whose husband John held this seat from 2013-2019; Krish Vignarajah, the president of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and a former staffer to First Lady Michelle Obama who placed fourth in the Democratic primary for governor in 2018; Regina LaBelle, the former acting director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy under Biden; and Ben Smilowitz, a disaster-preparedness advocate who won 16 percent in a 2022 primary challenge to Trone.

Raskin's upcoming decision on whether to run for the Senate could impact this race as well. If he does run (he says he'll make a decision soon), he'll open up his neighboring 8th District seat. That safely Democratic district would be an attractive target for many of the same Montgomery County Democrats who are currently eying Trone's seat. Trone himself ran in the 8th District in 2016 (losing to Raskin) before winning the 6th in 2018. And before him, John Delaney lived in the 8th District even as he represented the 6th.

Several Democrats have ruled themselves out. Montgomery County Councilmember Marilyn Balcombe and Frederick Mayor Michael O'Connor both told *Inside Elections* they would not be candidates. Former Montgomery County Councilmember Craig Rice, Gaithersburg Mayor Jud Ashman, and former Hagerstown Mayor Emily Keller all told local nonprofit media site *Maryland Matters* they are not running.

Lt. Gov. Aruna Miller, who was the runner-up to Trone in the 2018 Democratic primary, also seems unlikely to run, as does current Frederick County Executive Jessica Fitzwater.

## The Democratic Primary

Should she run, Gardner would be well-positioned in a Democratic primary given the lack of other candidates from Western Maryland and a potential glut of candidates from Montgomery County.

One Democratic strategist said that "if you talk to your run of the mill Western Maryland Democrat, there's an assumed deference to Jan" in the primary. In 2022, 62 percent of the Democratic primary vote came from

outside Montgomery County, so if no other serious candidates emerge there, Gardner could have a clear path to many of those voters. And even voters in Montgomery County will be factoring in ideas about which candidates can compete in Western Maryland when making their decision, noted another senior Maryland Democratic operative, because Democratic voters in this district are committed to appealing to the rural parts of the state.

Gardner is also more moderate than many of the potential contenders from Montgomery County, which strategists say puts her in line with the district's previous representatives, Trone and Delaney (both of whom were from Montgomery County but emphasized their business-friendly



Courtesy Frederick County

Jan Gardner

credentials). "If you're another moderate looking at the race, and you saw Jan Gardner get in the race, it might give you pause," said another senior strategist.

With Vogel and potentially Lopez and Vignarajah dividing up the more progressive

Montgomery County electorate, no one candidate may be able to rise to the top of the field.

One wildcard is the potential candidacy of McClain-Delaney. While Democratic strategists are skeptical that there's much residual name recognition from her husband's six low-profile years in Congress, she would bring serious financial resources to bear — John Delaney spent \$30 million of his own money on his campaigns for Congress and president. But one strategist said the conversation surrounding her is mostly "among the Annapolis lobbyist crowd."

There's also the possibility that a Trone or Delaney-type candidate — a wealthy self-funding businessman with little political background — could enter the race, but no specific names are being mentioned.

And several Democratic operatives still believe there is the possibility that Trone ultimately drops his bid for Senate if he fails to gain traction statewide — especially if Raskin joins the race — and returns to the district to run for re-election.

## The Republican Primary

The conversation on the Republican side of the aisle surrounds four potential candidates: former state Del. Neil Parrott, who lost to Trone in 2020 and 2022; former state Del. Dan Cox, who lost the 2022 gubernatorial election to Wes Moore; state House Minority Leader Jason Buckel; and former state Sen. David Brinkley.

Two other Republicans who might have run formidable campaigns look unlikely to run. Former state Sen. Michael Hough lost the 2022 race for Frederick County executive by just 989 votes, and was the best-performing Republican in that pivotal county. He ruled himself out to *Maryland Matters*. And Kelly Schulz, the former state secretary of commerce who was the more moderate candidate in the 2022 GOP gubernatorial primary, just began a new job as head of the Maryland Tech Council and is not likely to run.

Parrott, who represented Washington County, has blamed his 2022 loss on Trone's massive spending advantage — the Democrat spent \$10 million of his own money on the race, 10 times as much as Parrott spent — and told *Maryland Matters* he will "have an event in the next month

Continued on page 7

*Continued from page 6*

where [he'll] be making an announcement."

Trone attacked the former state lawmaker over his position on abortion, and over a 2005 letter to the editor Parrott wrote recommending government-mandated tattoos for HIV-positive people (Parrott later said he recanted that position).

In 2022, Parrott easily won a primary against conservative journalist Matthew Foldi, 63-15 percent. But with two losses in two cycles, he won't get a free pass.

Buckel, who has represented Allegany County since 2015, seriously considered running last cycle, and a GOP group even publicized a poll showing him competitive with Trone in April of 2022. He says he won't make a decision until late summer.

In the GOP gubernatorial primary last year, Cox, who represented Frederick in the state House, carried the 6th District with 56 percent over Schultz. But he lost the 6th handily in the general election. Now he says he is praying about whether to run for Congress. Cox, whose 2022 bid was endorsed by former President Donald Trump, helped organize buses to the Jan. 6 rally that precipitated the insurrection at the Capitol, and issued a tweet that day calling Vice President Mike Pence a traitor.

Brinkley served in the state legislature from 1995 to 2015, and for eight years as Hogan's secretary of budget and management. He ran unsuccessfully in the GOP primary for Congress against Bartlett in 2012, losing 44-20 percent.

## How It Plays Out

Even though the district has some competitive DNA, the race is not a top priority for either party. The National Republican Congressional Committee did not list it among its 37 initial targets, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee did not include Trone on its list of most vulnerable incumbents prior to his Senate announcement.

But Democratic strategists expressed some concern that the race could become a problem spot if Democrats nominate a more progressive candidate from Montgomery County and Republicans nominate a less objectionable candidate than they have in previous cycles. If the GOP re-nominates Parrott, or chooses a candidate in the mold of Cox or 2014 6th District nominee-turned conservative media personality Dan Bongino, Democrats are less concerned.

But Buckel, the state House minority leader who was a Marco Rubio delegate in 2016 and backed Schulz for governor over Cox in 2022, might be a more credible general election nominee.

"Buckel is a thoughtful speaker, he can raise some money, and can be competitive in a general election," cautioned one Democrat, who said that "Democrats would behoove themselves by nominating someone like a Trone or Delaney. I don't really think the district is progressive Montgomery County."

Another Democrat channeled the late NBC host Tim Russert, saying of the general election "It's Frederick, Frederick, Frederick," referring to the bellwether nature of that county. In both the congressional race and all four statewide contests in 2022, the margin in Frederick was within 2 points of the margin across the entire district.

Ultimately, Republicans will need not only a strong candidate, but also a strong national political environment to get over the finish line in this district.

That's not to say this district won't play host to a close election. Underfunded perennial candidates such as 2022 Senate nominee Chris Chaffee, and flawed candidates such as Cox and Mike Peroutka, the 2022 Christian nationalist attorney general nominee who was a former member of a white supremacist organization, all came within single digits of carrying the 6th.

But close elections are not necessarily competitive elections, and outside of Hogan, Republicans have struggled to win here. And because the district sits in the expensive D.C. media market, it's unlikely that outside GOP groups will spend here, especially with many vulnerable incumbents to defend and cheaper, more promising targets in less Democratic-leaning districts around the country.

## The Bottom Line

Trone's decision to run for Senate isn't ringing alarm bells for Maryland Democrats yet, and the makeup of the district, plus the potential candidates on either side, doesn't suggest this race will be at the center of the battlefield next year.

But open seat races can develop in unexpected ways. And they always produce a new member of Congress. Even if that new member is from the same party, they could have different priorities and different attitudes than their predecessor, and in an evenly divided Congress, that could make all the difference. **IE**

# Texas 32: All Blue in Allred's Seat

By Erin Covey

There aren't a lot of opportunities for ambitious Democrats in Dallas to go to Congress. But Democratic Rep. Colin Allred's decision to take on GOP Sen. Ted Cruz has created a rare open congressional seat.

Dallas is a longtime blue bastion in the Lone Star State, and the metroplex's growing suburbs have become increasingly more Democratic. After the latest round of redistricting, the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and the surrounding suburbs are represented by three bright blue districts. Texas' 30th District, based in central Dallas, is held by Rep. Jasmine Crockett (who succeeded longtime Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson), and Texas' 33rd District, based in Fort Worth, is held by Rep. Marc Veasey. Allred's Senate run opens up the third solidly Democratic district, which wraps around Dallas County and stretches north into Plano.

At this point in the cycle, the list of serious candidates vying for the open seat is relatively short, and Democratic strategists who spoke with *Inside Elections* said they were surprised the field wasn't more crowded, given the deep bench of Democrats in this part of the state.

Brian Williams, a trauma surgeon and a retired Air Force veteran, was the first serious contender to announce a campaign. State Reps. Julie Johnson and Rhetta Andrews Bowers are also mulling bids, but won't announce their 2024 plans until Texas' legislative session adjourns on Memorial Day.

Whoever becomes the Democratic nominee should sail to victory in the general election — Allred won re-election by 31 points in 2022 and Joe Biden would have won this seat by 33 points in 2020.

*Continued on page 8*

Continued from page 7

## The Democratic Field

Williams announced his campaign Tuesday, telling the *Dallas Morning News* he believes that “it’s time for me to take my experience and expertise to Congress.”

Williams, 53, served in the Air Force for six years after graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1991 with a degree in aeronautical engineering. He then transitioned to the medical field, graduating from the University of South Florida’s medical school in 2001, and he moved to Dallas in 2010 to work as a trauma surgeon at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

In July of 2016, Williams treated seven Dallas police officers who were shot by a sniper at a Black Lives Matter protest. At a press conference following the shooting, Williams spoke about his complex relationship with law enforcement as a Black man, and his comments received national media attention.

Though this is Williams’ first time running for office, he has experience on the Hill as a health policy fellow for Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy and then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2022.

Drawing on his experiences as a trauma surgeon, Williams is making gun violence the focal point of his campaign — an issue that’s freshly in the minds of Texans after the mass shooting in Allen earlier this month (right outside of the 32nd District).

“There’s never been a trauma surgeon in Congress,” Williams told *Inside Elections*. “And right now, during this time in our country with repeated mass shootings, we need someone who understands what it’s like in the hospital helping craft the laws that are going to keep us safe.”

Because Williams is a first-time candidate, he’ll be starting from scratch and needs to introduce himself to voters. “He really is going to have to put together a professional team, but he’s a serious person with a great story,” one Democratic strategist from Texas told *Inside Elections*.

Williams’ campaign team includes Deliver Strategies for direct mail, DK Strategies for paid media, Run the World for digital, and Global Strategy Group for polling.

Williams won’t have the primary to himself — two members of the state House, Johnson and Bowers, are also seriously weighing bids.

Johnson, who represents the northern suburbs of Dallas in the state House, is preparing to run but won’t announce her 2024 plans until later this summer. “I won’t be making any decisions until the legislative session ends, but I am strongly considering a run for Congress,” she said in a statement after Allred announced his Senate campaign.

Bowers, whose district stretches down the eastern suburbs of Dallas, told *Inside Elections* that she’s “strongly considering” running for the 32nd as well.

Both state legislators have experience running competitive campaigns and were part of a class of Democratic candidates who flipped Republican-held districts in 2018 — Johnson unseated Republican state Rep. Matt Rinaldi, and Bowers won an open seat that had been held by Republican state Rep. Cindy Burkett.

Johnson, 57, is a trial attorney and served on the Human Rights

Campaign board for a decade. She was active in Democratic politics long before running for office, and is one of her caucus’s strongest fundraisers. A co-founder of the legislature’s LGBTQ caucus, Johnson was also the first married openly gay lawmaker elected to the Texas Legislature. Her district is in the northern suburbs of Dallas, anchored by the city of Farmers Branch.

Bowers, 55, is a former broadcast journalist and educator and became the first Black lawmaker to represent her district in 2019. Her suburban Dallas district, which overlaps slightly with the 32nd, includes Garland and Mesquite. Democratic sources describe Bowers as well-liked within the party, but she lacks the fundraising prowess of Johnson.

Several other state lawmakers in the Dallas area could run but probably won’t make the jump to Congress. State Sen. Nathan Johnson has ruled out a campaign. Other state legislators, including Reps. Victoria Neave Criado and Ana-Maria Ramos aren’t likely to run, according to Democratic sources. Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson has also been floated as a potential candidate but hasn’t publicly expressed interest in running.

A few other candidates have announced campaigns as well — Sandeep Srivastava, who ran against Keith Self in the neighboring 3rd District last cycle, announced he’s running for the 32nd. Srivastava, a real estate agent from Plano, lost to Self by 23 points, 60-37 percent, in a district President Donald Trump would have won by 14 points in 2020. Two perennial candidates in North Texas, Jan McDowell and Zachariah Manning, are also running.

## How It Plays Out

Since this seat is solidly Democratic, Allred’s successor will be decided in the Democratic primary, which is shaping up to be a competitive race and could attract spending from liberal outside groups.

At this point, the three most credible candidates are Johnson, Williams, and Bowers. Johnson and Bowers aren’t able to start fundraising for a federal campaign until June, giving Williams a bit of a head start.

With several serious candidates expected to run in the primary, it’s unlikely that anyone will be able to win the majority of votes needed to avoid a runoff, which is scheduled for May 28, 12 weeks after the March 5 primary.

Williams will have the support of 314 Action, an organization that supports Democratic candidates with backgrounds in STEM fields, and could receive attention from Democratic groups that back veterans running for Congress.

One Texas strategist surmised that Bowers could consolidate support from local Black leaders in Dallas. But Allred himself isn’t likely to get involved in the primary as he focuses on his own campaign.

The voting-age population of the district is diverse — 36 percent Anglo, 33 percent Hispanic, 20 percent Black, and 10 percent Asian American. White voters make up a slight majority of the Democratic electorate.

## The Bottom Line

So far, just eight Democratic members of Congress have decided to retire or run for higher office in 2024. Those open seats that are solidly blue, like Texas’ 32nd, could draw significant attention from local and national organizations as the primary field grows.

The contours of the Democratic primary might not take shape until later this summer, as potential candidates serving in the Texas Legislature wait till the session wraps up to announce their campaigns.

But early machinations point to a competitive primary battle, and the eventual nominee could have a long congressional career ahead of them in the safe seat.



Brian Williams

Courtesy Williams Campaign



Continued from page 1

## The Republicans

The race features two high-profile candidates: Gov. Jim Justice and Rep. Alex Mooney.

Justice, 72, has at times been the state's wealthiest resident, and owns an array of businesses in the agriculture and coal mining industries, along with the luxury Greenbrier Resort. Justice's business interests have been a constant source of negative stories regarding his financial health, unpaid taxes and debts. In 2016, he ran for governor as a Democrat (he had previously been a registered Republican), beating Republican state Senate President Bill Cole, 49-42 percent. But just a few months later he rejoined the GOP at a rally with Trump.

In 2020, Justice faced a well-funded primary challenge from

his former state Secretary of Commerce, Woody Thrasher, but won 63-18 percent. In the general election, he defeated Kanawha County Commissioner Ben Salango, 63-30 percent, in a race that was never competitive.

This cycle, Justice was heavily recruited to run for the Senate by Republican leadership in Washington, D.C., as party leaders see him as the strongest candidate against Manchin. Some GOP operatives even hope that coaxing Justice into the race will persuade Manchin to forgo a run entirely.

Justice's campaign team includes general consultants and admakers Terry Nelson and Rich Dunn of FP1 Strategies, pollster Tony Fabrizio of Fabrizio Lee, and campaign manager Roman Stauffer.

Mooney, 51, is in his fifth term in Congress, and represents the northern half of the state (his previous district included the Eastern Panhandle and Charleston). A Maryland native, Mooney previously served as a Maryland state senator from 1999 to 2011, and was chairman of the Maryland state GOP. In 2014, he moved to West Virginia to run to succeed Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, who was running for Senate. Despite facing accusations of carpetbagging, Mooney won a crowded GOP primary and then a narrow general election, 47-44 percent, over Democrat Nick Casey.

He won easy re-elections in 2016, 2018, and 2020. In 2022, West Virginia lost a congressional seat and Mooney was drawn into a district with fellow GOP Rep. David McKinley. In a heated member-vs.-member primary, Mooney seized on McKinley's vote for the bipartisan infrastructure bill as evidence that his opponent was insufficiently conservative. Boosted by an endorsement from Trump, Mooney defeated McKinley, 54-37 percent.

In Congress, Mooney is a member of the House Freedom Caucus, and sits on the Financial Services Committee. In 2022, an Office of Congressional Ethics report found Mooney "likely violated House rules and federal law" regarding use of official resources.

The Mooney campaign team includes general consultant Mark Harris of Cold Spark, ad maker Ben Yoho of the Strategy Group, pollster Gene Ulm of Public Opinion Strategies, and direct mail consultant Dan Hazelwood of Targeted Creative.



Jim Justice

Courtesy Jim Justice

## The GOP Primary

Justice begins with a significant name ID advantage over Mooney, and public and private polling of the race shows Justice ahead of Mooney by between 20 and 30 points, at least partially because Justice is known statewide, while Mooney is only well-known in the Eastern Panhandle, where his political base is.

One of Mooney's primary goals then will be to introduce himself to voters in the southern half of the state, where — aside from a moderate ad buy in the Charleston media market in 2018 — he has not been a presence.

Mooney's allies acknowledge that he is the underdog in the race, but believe that he can carve out an ideological lane in the primary to the right of Justice, and position himself as "the ideological conservative vs. the establishment guy," according to one pro-Mooney strategist.

Another pro-Mooney Republican operative pointed to the "low-hanging fruit" of voters who say in polling that they will support "the most conservative candidate in the race" but don't know who Mooney is at all.

Justice's allies anticipate a "scorched earth campaign" from Mooney, and especially from the anti-tax Club for Growth, specifically on Justice's history of unpaid taxes and debts and other financial issues.

And while one pro-Justice strategist conceded that "those attacks will shave some numbers off [Justice's lead in polls], using these recycled campaign ads that have been run against Justice before is not enough to get it done." For the moment, Justice will use his force of personality and familiarity with the state's voters to insulate himself, rather than respond directly to attacks in paid media.

One pro-Mooney operative agreed that much of the opposition research on Justice is public knowledge, but argued that with enough advertising weight it would still be effective. "It's taking these things that people don't like and putting 1000 [gross ratings points of advertisements] behind it every week," the operative said.

That will be expensive, which is why Mooney's most important ally in this fight is the Club for Growth, which publicly committed to spending \$10 million to support Mooney's bid. While some GOP strategists in Washington, D.C. are skeptical that the Club will actually spend that much in a primary, Mooney's allies believe they will. The Club made a small ad buy when Justice entered the race, calling the governor a "deadbeat billionaire."

"The theory of the case rests here upon entirely an eight figure expenditure on the outside by the Club for Growth, as well as Mooney running a well-funded, good campaign of his own," said one pro-Mooney operative. But even that, the operative conceded, is probably only enough to get the race to a jump ball heading into Election Day.

Mooney reported \$1.4 million in the bank on March 31 after raising \$505,000 in his first three months as a Senate candidate. Justice entered the race on April 27, so his first FEC report will be due by July 15.

There's also a split within some pro-Justice operatives about when and how to approach Mooney, with some wanting the governor to be aggressive with litigating Mooney's own ethics and personal baggage in paid media early on, while others would prefer to "not acknowledge his existence until asked."

Eventually, though, Justice or supportive outside groups — more likely the latter, because outside groups often focus primarily on negative advertising — will turn their sights on Mooney, and target him in the southern half of the state where he is undefined. "We're gonna make

Continued on page 10

*Continued from page 9*

sure people know who Alex Mooney is,” said one pro-Justice strategist, referring to the ethics investigations that have dogged the congressman. National strategists aligned with Justice also point to Mooney’s Maryland roots as a serious liability, but local West Virginia strategists aren’t as bullish on that line of attack.

Though wealthy, Justice has signaled that he does not intend to self-fund his Senate bid (he chipped in roughly \$2.6 million in each of his gubernatorial bids). But Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has indicated his support for Justice, saying “we’re going to go all out to win,” and the McConnell-aligned Senate Leadership Fund could spend significantly to boost Justice and attack Mooney.

Justice’s supporters are less concerned about the coming attacks from Mooney on the governor’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, or his acceptance of federal infrastructure funding from the Biden administration. The response, according to one Justice ally, will be along the lines of “damn right, we did get the infrastructure money. If Joe Biden or anyone else is going to write us a billion dollar check, we’ll take it.”

And indeed, much of this primary may turn on just how much the politics of West Virginia have changed since the days of Sen. Robert Byrd bringing home the bacon. Mooney’s allies are confident that the “ideological polarization within the GOP coalition against Biden” is big enough to make any kind of association with the present administration, even one lucrative for the state, a political liability. “Biden is toxic, Justice embraces Biden, there’s the race,” said one pro-Mooney strategist.

Mooney’s allies point to the congressman’s success in wielding McKinley’s vote for the infrastructure bill against him in the 2022 primary as proof that strategy works. Justice backed McKinley in that race, as did Manchin and much of the state’s establishment.

But Mooney’s detractors say that win was all about Trump supporting Mooney, and that this time, Justice stands a much better chance of getting an endorsement from Trump than Mooney does. Trump persuaded Justice to switch parties back in 2017, and, as a boisterous billionaire hotel owner with a penchant for norm-breaking, has much in common with the governor. One national GOP strategist said Mooney’s goal is not even to secure an endorsement for himself, but just “to stop Trump from endorsing Justice.”

## The Democratic Incumbent

Manchin, 75, is the last remaining statewide Democratic elected official in West Virginia. He grew up in a political family and has served in office for 35 of the last 40 years, most recently as governor from 2005 to 2010 and senator since then.

In 2010, the then-governor won a special election to replace the late Democrat Byrd, beating Republican John Raese, 54-43 percent. Two years later, he won a blowout rematch over Raese, 61-37 percent, as Democrats won five of the state’s six statewide offices.

But in 2018, when Manchin faced state Attorney General Patrick Morrissey, he eked out a narrow 49.6-46.3 percent victory in a race that saw significant outside spending from both parties.

In the Senate, Manchin is the chairman of the Energy Committee, and a constant thorn in the side of Democratic leadership, often breaking with the rest of his party to vote with Republicans. He votes in line with Biden’s position less often than any other senator, and has derailed the prospective nominations of several high-profile Biden appointees.

But he also provided the crucial vote to pass a pared-down Build Back Better bill (the Inflation Reduction Act) in 2022 after previously and

publicly breaking with the White House on its prospects. And he has resisted numerous entreaties to join the GOP.

Manchin is publicly undecided about running for re-election, and has also flirted with running for president — either as a Democrat or as an independent. He has said he will wait until December to make a decision. Last time Manchin was up for re-election, he waited until mid-January to tell his colleagues what he was going to do.



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Joe Manchin

In the past, Manchin has worked with veteran media consultant Karl Struble of KMM Media, and pollster Jef Pollock of Global Strategy Group.

Manchin reported \$9.7 million in campaign funds on March 31.

## How It Plays Out

The competitiveness of the general election is almost entirely dependent on Manchin’s decision on whether to run again. If he bows out, Democrats will likely forfeit this seat. If Manchin runs, Democrats could still lose the seat.

Republicans are hopeful Manchin will step aside, while Democrats know he is their only hope. But neither party is waiting for Manchin to make up his mind to get involved. Affiliates of both the McConnell-aligned Senate Leadership Fund and Chuck Schumer-aligned Senate Majority PAC have already aired a combined \$4.3 million in TV advertising since April.

The Republican ads attack Manchin on his vote for Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act and its effect on coal jobs. The Democratic ads praise Manchin for securing infrastructure funds and lowering prescription drug costs. Democrats are also exploring lanes of attack regarding Justice’s work schedule as governor to paint him as a lazy worker.

While public polling is sparse, early data suggests that Manchin would begin with an edge over Mooney but trailing Justice. However, all of the publicly released polling has been done by pro-Justice organizations, and most Republicans, whether they back Justice or Mooney, believe Manchin is highly vulnerable.

## The Bottom Line

For Republicans, the easiest path back to the majority runs right through West Virginia.

But while party leadership successfully recruited their desired candidate, they have not been able to avoid a potentially messy primary, and Manchin’s indecision means that the GOP cannot afford to look away from this race over the next seven months.

Ultimately, the increasingly Republican bent of the state may be too great for even Democrats’ most conservative senator to overcome, and Manchin could go the way of many of his colleagues from small rural states over the past 15 years. He could even emulate his former seatmate, Jay Rockefeller, who retired in 2014 rather than face a bruising re-election.

Until he makes a decision, though, this seat will stay at the top of both parties’ priority lists and remain a crucial part of the battlefield. **IE**