2022 Senate Ratings

Toss-up

Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)	Warnock (D-Ga.)
Kelly (D-Ariz.)	

Tilt Democratic	**Tilt Republican**
Hassan (D-N.H.)	PA Open (Toomey, R)
	Johnson (R-Wisc.)

Lean Democratic	**Lean Republican**
	NC Open (Burr, R)

Likely Democratic	**Likely Republican**
	Rubio (R-Fl.)

Solid Democratic	**Solid Republican**
VT Open (Leahy, D)	AL Open (Shelby, R)
Bennet (D-Colo.)	MO Open (Blunt, R)
Blumenthal (D-Conn.)	OH Open (Portman, R)
Duckworth (D-Ill.)	OK Open (Inhofe, R)
Murray (D-Wash.)	Boozman (R-Ark.)
Padilla (D-Calif.)	Crapo (R-Idaho)
Schatz (D-Hawaii)	Grassley (R-Iowa)
Schumer (D-N.Y.)	Hoeven (R-N.D.)
Van Hollen (D-Md.)	Kennedy (R-La.)
Wyden (D-Ore.)	Lankford (R-Okla.)
	Lee (R-Utah)
	Moran (R-Kan.)
	Murkowski (R-Alaska)
	Paul (R-Ky.)
	Scott (R-S.C.)
	Thune (R-S.D.)
	Young (R-Ind.)

moved benefiting Democrats,   * moved benefiting Republicans   Takeovers in Italics

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Colorado Senate: Centennial Showdown

By Jacob Rubashkin

If you're looking for a place to measure the size of a GOP wave or a state where a Supreme Court decision on abortion could make an impact, look at Colorado.

The agreed-upon Senate battlefield consists of seven or eight states, half held by Democrats and half held by Republicans.

But President Joe Biden's continued woes, including persistent inflation, a middling approval rating, and an inability to pass major legislation through Congress, have Republicans looking to press their advantage beyond the consensus four pickup opportunities of Arizona, Georgia, Nevada and New Hampshire.

GOP eyes inevitability drift to Colorado, a state where not too long ago Republicans won regularly and in 2014 pulled off one of the biggest wins of that cycle. It is also the next-narrowest Biden victory of any Democratic-held seat up for election in 2022, after New Hampshire.

But everything has to go right for Republicans to put the Centennial State in play. The party still has a primary to work through that could produce a flawed nominee. And a bombshell Supreme Court decision on abortion later this year could also upend this race.

The Lay of the Land

Once a Republican-leaning swing state, Colorado has trended steadily toward Democrats over the past 15 years.

In 2020, Biden carried the state by 13 points, 55-42 percent, while former Gov. John Hickenlooper ousted GOP Sen. Cory Gardner by 10 points, 55-45 percent. Gardner, who was first elected in 2014 by 2 points, 48-46 percent, by defeating an incumbent, was the last Republican to hold statewide political office.

In 2018, Democratic Rep. Jared Polis led a clean sweep of the state's constitutional offices, winning his race 53-43 percent as Democrats held the governor's mansion and picked up three row offices.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton edged out President Donald Trump, 48-43 percent, a similar margin to President Barack Obama's 52-46 percent win over Mitt Romney in 2012. The last GOP presidential nominee to carry Colorado was George W. Bush in 2004.

The Centennial State is one of the fastest-growing in the nation, with a population that increased by nearly 15 percent from 2010 to 2020 according to the Census Bureau. The state is also increasingly diverse: just 65 percent of the state is non-Hispanic White, with 22 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Black, and 4 percent Asian and 4 percent Native American.

First Thoughts from Indiana, Ohio Primary Results

After a long break since the early races in Texas at the beginning of March, primary season is back with Indiana and Ohio. Here are a few results worth noting:

Ohio Senate. (Open; Rob Portman, R, not seeking re-election). Author J.D. Vance won the GOP nomination after a late surge following an endorsement from former President Donald Trump. Vance had 32 percent, with an estimated 91 percent of the vote counted, followed by former state treasurer Josh Mandel at 24 percent.

Pre-election, there was plenty of discussion about Cleveland Guardian co-owner Matt Dolan's performance because he was the only major GOP candidate *not* to actively court Trump's support. But Dolan also didn't run explicitly against Trump — he just focused on Trump's policy positions rather than relitigating the 2020 election — and the candidate still only received about 23 percent. That means approximately 75 percent of GOP primary voters in Ohio supported a vocal Trump advocate, and the party doesn't look particularly ready to move on from the former president.

Vance will face Rep. Tim Ryan, who won the Democratic nomination with 70 percent. The congressman will have a difficult time winning in a Republican state in a Republican-leaning cycle, but he'll have the financial resources to make his case. The general election is still rated Solid Republican.

Ohio.

1st District (Steve Chabot, R). Cincinnati Councilman Greg Landsman was unopposed for the Democratic nomination and will face the congressman in November. Republicans put a lot of pressure on their own member by drawing the Cincinnati-area 1st District from a seat Trump carried by 3 points to a district Biden would have carried by 9 points. That's surmountable for the congressman, particularly in this political environment, but it won't be easy. Chabot had a modest cash advantage — $594,000 to $436,000 — on April 13. The general election race is currently rated Toss-up.

9th District (Marcy Kaptur, D). A top GOP pickup opportunity may have gotten more challenging for the GOP after the primary. Military veteran J.R. Majewski won 36 percent of the vote, defeating state Rep. Craig Reidel (31 percent) and state Sen. Theresa Gavarone (29 percent).

Majewski, who gained some national attention for painting a large mural of Trump on his lawn and who was at the Capitol on Jan. 6 (though says he

2022 Governor Ratings

Toss-up (2D, 1R)

AZ Open (Ducey, R)	Evers (D-Wisc.)
Kelly (D-Kan.)	

Tilt Democratic (3D)	Tilt Republican (1R)
PA Open (Wolf, D)	Kemp (R-Ga.)
Whitmer (D-Mich.)	
Sisolak (D-Nev.)	

Lean Democratic (1D, 2R)	Lean Republican
MA Open (Baker, R)	
MD Open (Hogan, R)	
Mills (D-Maine)	

Likely Democratic (2D)	Likely Republican (2R)
OR Open (Brown, D)	DeSantis (R-Fl.)
Lujan Grisham (D-N.M.)	Sununu (R-N.H.)

Solid Democratic (8D)	Solid Republican (14R)
HI Open (Ige, D)	AR Open (Hutchinson, R)
Newsom (D-Calif.)	NE Open (Ricketts, R)
Polis (D-Colo.)	Ivey (R-Ala.)
Lamont (D-Conn.)	Dunleavy (R-Alaska)
Pritzker (D-Ill.)	Little (R-Idaho)
Walz (D-Minn.)	Reynolds (R-Iowa)
Hochul (D-N.Y.)	Noem (R-S.D.)
McKee (D-R.I.)	DeWine (R-Ohio)
	Stitt (R-Okla.)
	McMaster (R-S.C.)
	Lee (R-Tenn.)
	Abbott (R-Texas)
	Scott (R-Vt.)
	Gordon (R-Wyo.)

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

left before the violence started), had just $57,000 in his campaign account on April 13, compared to Kaptur's $1.4 million. There will be some talk that Republicans tossed away their chance to win in the general election after Majewski's upset victory and Kaptur's perceived strength. But Democrats shouldn't get overconfident considering Trump would have won the newly drawn district by 3 points. The initial race rating is Toss-up.

11th District (Shontel Brown, D). Rep. Shontel Brown won the Democratic primary over Nina Turner 66.5 percent to 33.5 percent, according to CNN. That's a sharp contrast from the 2021 special primary election, when Brown squeaked out a 50-45 percent victory. No problems expected for Brown in the general election, so the rating is Solid Democratic.

13th District (Open; Tim Ryan, D, running for U.S. Senate).
Conservative commentator/former Miss Ohio USA Madison Gesiotto Gilbert won the GOP nomination and will face Democratic former state House Minority Leader Emilia Sykes in November. Biden would have won the district by 3 points, but Sykes' early fundraising was modest and she's going to be running against the national political environment. The race is rated Tilt Republican.

Madison Gesiotto Gilbert

Courtesy Gesiotto Gilbert Campaign

Ohio Governor. The general election is set between former Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley, a Democrat, and Republican Gov. Mike DeWine. Former Rep. Jim Renacci tried to hold DeWine accountable for the governor's strict early measures to combat Covid-19 and tied himself to Trump, but the former president never directly got involved.

On Tuesday, DeWine won with 48 percent over Renacci (28 percent) and farmer Joe Blystone (22 percent). DeWine will need to consolidate GOP support, but he has a significant early advantage (rating: Solid Republican) in the general election in this anti-Democratic Party political environment and in a Republican-leaning state.

Indiana.

1st District (Frank Mrvan, D). As a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who also happens to be Black, Jennifer-Ruth Green has the resume to become a GOP star. She's on her way after winning the GOP primary with 47 percent. But her fundraising has been modest, and she had $98,000 in the bank on April 13. However, Mrvan had just $422,000 at the same point and Biden won the district by just 8 points. So even though the race is rated Solid Democratic for now, it could get more competitive as the general election develops and the cycle progresses.

9th District (Open; Trey Hollingsworth, R, not seeking re-election).
Former state Sen. Erin Houchin finished first with 37 percent, ahead of former Rep. Mike Sodrel (26 percent) and others in the Republican primary. Trump would have won the newly-drawn district by 28 points, so Houchin is likely to be a member of Congress next year. It's a particularly special moment for her considering she lost to Hollingsworth 34-25 percent in the 2016 GOP primary. She already cleared that most important hurdle this time as the general election race is rated Solid Republican.

IE

2022 House Ratings

Due to delays in the redistricting process, ratings are incomplete. New ratings and states will be added on a rolling basis as final maps are approved in each state.

Toss-Up (10D, 8R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)	NM 2 (Herrell, R)
CA 27 (Garcia, R)	NY 11 (Malliotakis, R)
CA 45 (Steel, R)	OH 1 (Chabot, R)
CO 8 (Open, New)	OH 9 (Kaptur, D)
IA 3 (Axne, D)	PA 7 (Wild, D)
KS 3 (Davids, D)	PA 8 (Cartwright, D)
ME 2 (Golden, D)	TX 34 Special (Open; Vela, D)
MI 3 (Meijer, R)	VA 2 (Luria, D)
NC13 (Open, R)	WA 8 (Schrier, D)
NJ7 (Malinowski, D)	

Tilt Democratic (6D) / Tilt Republican (4D)

Tilt Democratic (6D)	Tilt Republican (4D)
IL17 (Open; Bustos, D)	*AZ 6 (Open; Kirkpatrick, D)*
MI 7 (Slotkin, D)	*MI 10 (Open; Levin, D)*
MI 8 (Kildee, D)	*OH 13 (Open; Ryan, D)*
MN 2 (Craig, DFL)	*TX 15 (Open; V. Gonzalez, D)*
PA 17 (Open; Lamb, D)	
VA 7 (Spanberger, D)	

Lean Democratic (3D, 2R) / Lean Republican (2D, 2R)

Lean Democratic (3D, 2R)	Lean Republican (2D, 2R)
IL13 (Open; Davis, R)	AZ 1 (Schweikert, R)
IL14 (Underwood, D)	*AZ 2 (O'Halleran, D)*
NC 1 (Open; Butterfield, D)	NE 2 (Bacon, R)
NV 3 (S. Lee, D)	*WI 3 (Open; Kind, D)*
NY 1 (Open; Zeldin, R)	

Likely Democratic (18D, 1R) / Likely Republican (8R, 2D)

Likely Democratic (18D, 1R)	Likely Republican (8R, 2D)
AZ 4 (Stanton, D)	AK AL Special (Vacant, R)
CA 13 (Open; Harder, D)	CA 3 (Open; McClintock, R)
CA 47 (Porter, D)	CA 40 (Kim, R)
CA 49 (Levin, D)	CA 41 (Calvert, R)
CO 7 (Open; Perlmutter, D)	CO 3 (Boebert, R)
CT 5 (Hayes, D)	*GA6 (Open; McBath, D)*
IL6 (Newman, D/Casten, D)	IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R)
MD 6 (Trone, D)	IA 2 (Hinson, R)
NC 6 (Manning, D)	MT 1 (Open, New)
NC 14 (Open, New)	PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
NM 3 (Leger Fernandez, D)	*TN 5 (Open; Cooper, D)*
NV 1 (Titus, D)	
NV 4 (Horsford, D)	
NY 4 (Open; Rice, D)	
NY 18 (S. P. Maloney, D)	
NY 19 (Open; Delgado, D)	
NY 22 (Open; Katko, R)	
OR 4 (Open; DeFazio, D)	
OR 5 (Schrader, D)	
OR 6 (Open, New)	
TX 28 (Cuellar, D)	

	GOP	DEM
Solid	166	163
Likely/Lean/Tilt	18	32
Total	184	195
Toss-up		18
Not yet finalized		*38*
Needed for majority		218

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

Texas 34 Special: (Rio) Grande Opportunity

By Jacob Rubashkin

With all the focus on the November midterm elections, Republicans are hoping their march to the majority starts a few months earlier, in Texas.

In 2020, Republicans were surprised and energized by significant gains among Latino voters across the country. Nowhere was that more obvious than in South Texas, where President Donald Trump did 16 points better than he did in 2016 despite winning the state as a whole by a more narrow margin.

Following the passage of Texas' new congressional lines, Democrats expected a tough fight to retain one of those South Texas districts (the McAllen-based 15th) and were frustrated that neighboring 15th District Rep. Vicente Gonzalez jumped districts to the 34th and left the GOP-leaning 15th without an incumbent.

But despite 34th District Rep. Filemon Vela's retirement, that seat was expected to remain in Democratic hands.

That all changed when Vela decided to exit Congress early, taking a job at lobbying powerhouse Akin Gump at the end of March rather than finishing his term, and triggering a June 14 special election to elect a Member that will only serve the remainder of the year.

That means Democrats, already with just a 5-seat majority in Congress, are now facing a highly competitive contest just to hold onto Vela's seat.

The special election to replace Vela will take place under the old 34th District lines, which are significantly less favorable to Democrats than the new lines that will take effect in November. Factor in a poor national environment for Democrats, and the momentum for Republicans in South Texas, and you have the ingredients for a Toss-Up race**.**

The Lay of the Land

One of the so-called "tortilla strip" districts in South Texas, the 34th begins in the rural counties east of San Antonio and runs due south, curving around Corpus Christi, to the Mexico border, where it includes all of Cameron County (including the city of Brownsville). In 2020, 55 percent of votes came from Cameron County, another 15 percent came from the district's portion of Hidalgo County (McAllen) and the rest were scattered among the more rural counties, which range in size from Jim Wells (pop. 38,891) to Kenedy (pop. 350).

Roughly 73 percent of the citizen voting-age population is Hispanic, with 22 percent non-Hispanic White voters. It is one of the most Hispanic districts in the country.

In 2020, Biden narrowly carried the district, 52-48 percent. That's a steep drop from previous Democratic wins. Hillary Clinton won it, 59-38 percent, in 2016, and President Barack Obama carried it, 61-38 percent, in 2012.

In 2018, Democratic Senate nominee Beto O'Rourke won it, 58-42 percent. Even Democratic gubernatorial nominees Lupe Valdez and Wendy Davis, who lost in statewide landslides in 2018 and 2014, respectively, each carried the district, by 2 and 7 points.

The 34th is a relatively new district, only coming into existence following the 2010 Census and reapportionment process. Vela, who has represented it since its inception, most recently won re-election in 2020, 55-42 percent.

The Democrat(s)

Vela's retirement — and Vicente Gonzalez's decision to switch into his district — had already ruffled the feathers of Democrats in DC, who face steep odds to hold Gonzalez's old 15th District.

But Vela's decision to leave Congress early, sparking the special election, truly left Democrats in the lurch. Gonzalez had already won the primary for the new district's November general election and had no interest in running in the special as he is already a member of Congress.

Courtesy Sanchez Campaign

Daniel Sanchez

Instead, the party has coalesced around Daniel Sanchez, a trial attorney and former Cameron County commissioner (2011 to 2016). Sanchez was born in Harlingen, Texas, graduated St. Mary's Univ. in San Antonio in 1995 and received his law degree from University of Texas, Austin in 1998. He was an assistant district attorney and also served as a Justice of the Peace from 2003 to 2010.

In 2016, Sanchez ran for Cameron County Judge (the county executive-equivalent in Texas) and lost the Democratic primary, 53-47 percent.

In this race, Sanchez is running as a placeholder for the final months of Vela's term, and has the support of both Vela and Gonzalez, the current 15th District member who is favored to win this seat in November.

Sanchez's campaign team includes media consultant Isaac Baker of AKPD, and direct mail consultant Alex Zwerdling of Bergmann Zwerdling Direct, both of whom also work with Gonzalez.

Also running is Rene Coronado, a captain in the Army Reserve and a director of the Brownsville Firemen's and Policemen's Civil Service Commission. Coronado previously served as a coordinator of veterans' outreach for GOP Rep. Blake Fahrenthold in Corpus Christi.

The Republican(s)

Mayra Flores, a 35-year-old respiratory care practitioner, had already won the GOP primary for the new seat in the fall when Vela's resignation triggered the special election. While she was a longshot candidate in that race, the national and state GOP — including House leadership-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund and Gov. Greg Abbott — has rallied to her cause in the special election, under the more favorable lines.

Flores was born in Tamaulipas, Mexico, and immigrated to America at the age of 6. If elected, she would be the first Mexican-born Republican to serve in Congress, and the first Republican to ever represent the Rio Grande Valley.

This is Flores' first time on the ballot, and she is one of several Latinas recruited to build on the GOP success in South Texas in 2020. Young, telegenic, conservative, and fluent in social media, Flores quickly

developed a following online, with 60,000 followers on Facebook and another 46,000 on Instagram.

In particular, Flores has highlighted her family's own immigration story and the work her husband does as a Border Patrol officer to argue for more heavy-handed action on the border, even at one point calling for Biden to send troops to the Mexican, rather than the Ukrainian, border.

Flores' campaign team includes general consultant Paul Smith of Rival Strategy Group, which is also handling direct mail, pollster Chris Perkins of Ragnar Research,

Mayra Flores

Courtesy Flores Campaign

media consultants Mike Shields and Rob Simms of Convergence, and Targeted Victory for digital.

Since Flores has been in the race since last year, she has filed a recent campaign finance report, showing $120,000 in her bank account on March 31.

Also running is Juana Cantu-Cabrera, a nurse practitioner and former Palmhurst city councilwoman. Flores and Cantu-Cabrera most recently faced off in the GOP primary for the new 34th District on March 1. Flores won that race with 60 percent, while Cantu-Cabrera placed fourth with 7 percent.

The Special Primary

Under Texas law, special elections usually take place on statutorily determined "uniform election dates." Given the timing of Vela's resignation, that would have meant a special election concurrent with the regular race in November.

However, the law also allows the governor to declare an emergency special election *not* on a "uniform election date," which Abbott did instead, citing Covid-19, a rise in border crossings, and the approaching hurricane season as justification.

All four candidates will appear together on the same ballot on June 14. If no candidate receives a majority of the vote outright, then the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, advance to a runoff election (which won't be scheduled until necessary).

Early voting will begin May 31, and the election will take place under Texas' new voting law, which led to a large number of mail-in ballots — 12 percent, according to an AP analysis — being rejected during the state's March 1 primary. Less than 1 percent of mail-in ballots were rejected in Texas in 2020, prior to the law's passage.

With two Democrats and two Republicans in the race, and none of them well-known, it's unlikely any candidate wins an outright majority, especially in a relatively evenly divided district. That's the case even though both Flores and Sanchez have the support of their party's establishment.

Democratic struggles with Hispanic voters, particularly those who live in rural Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, have Republicans seeing real opportunity for the first time in this district and in the neighboring 15th and 28th districts. In all three, the GOP has lined up behind a Latina candidate: part of a larger GOP strategy to win back the majority with minority candidates and women.

Flores is running as a conservative despite the Democratic lean of the district, banking on shifts among Hispanic voters and the deep frustration with the Biden administration's handling of inflation and the border to obviate the need for any moderation.

Flores' website includes boilerplate conservative positions: pro-God, pro-life, pro-Second Amendment, pro-oil and gas (a major industry in the district).

Sanchez intends to highlight his strong Catholic faith and upbringing on his family farm to neutralize Flores' attempts to tie him to an increasingly unpopular national Democratic party, and his allies even believe that they can make issue of Flores' ties to Gov. Abbott. His website doesn't include policy planks but on the campaign trail he has focused on veterans' issues, specifically citing his role in creating a veterans' court while on the county commission.

The only public poll of the 34th District race thus far comes from the Flores campaign and the NRCC. Fielded April 19-21 by Ragnar Research, the survey of 400 likely voters found Flores leading the pack with 24 percent, followed by Sanchez (19 percent), Coronado (9 percent), and Cantu-Cabrera (7 percent). More than 40 percent were undecided.

The poll pegged Biden's job rating in the district at 41 percent approve/55 percent disapprove, and had a GOP lead on the generic ballot, 45-42 percent. The survey release did not include a head-to-head matchup of Flores and Sanchez.

Statewide polling in Texas paints a tenuous picture for Democrats as well. Biden's approval came in at just 39 percent in two February polls, from Emerson College and UT Tyler, and at 40 percent in a Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation poll in late March. The TXHPF poll also found that Republicans had a generic U.S. House ballot lead of 7 points, 49-42 percent, and that Hispanics approved of Biden by just 6 points, 50-44 percent (after voting for him by 17 points, 58-41 percent, according to exit polling).

How It Plays Out

There is a lot that makes this race difficult to handicap: the unusual timing in the year, the imminent shift in the district lines, ongoing shifts in voter behavior, and the jungle primary format.

And turnout is almost sure to be abysmal in a district that doesn't sport high levels of participation even in presidential years. The 34th cast just 201,000 votes in the 2020 presidential election, the third-fewest total votes of any congressional district in the country, with a voter turnout rate of just 52 percent of registered voters (the lowest rate in Texas).

In last year's special election in Texas' 6th District, voter turnout was just 16 percent of registered voters (compared to 68 percent in 2020). And unlike the 34th, that race featured several high-profile candidates running well-funded campaigns that included field organizing and television advertising. Turnout in the 34th District could be as low as mid-single digits.

National Democrats appear to be approaching this race akin to how they dealt with the Texas 6th contest: that is, not at all. Both districts were on paper highly competitive (Trump won the 6th by just 3 points) but set to change radically in redistricting (the new 6th would have voted for Trump by 24 points). Democrats, focused on defending the majority in 2023, saw it as a pointless fight and spent no resources there; as a result, the party was locked out entirely, with two Republicans advancing to the runoff.

TEXAS, continued from page 5

In the case of the 34th, Democrats see the district as a sure win in the fall under the new lines, and have signaled their focus remains elsewhere, even if Republicans make a play in the special election.

State Democratic Party chairman Gilberto Hinojosa told the *Texas Tribune* "Why would we want to spend a boatload of money for an election that is meaningless?...There's not a doubt anywhere that Vicente Gonzalez is going to be sworn in in January of 2023." And a DCCC spokeswoman told *Texas Monthly*, "If the Republican Party wants to light their money on fire for a seat that is completely out of their reach come November, we warmly invite them to do so."

Gonzalez appears to be the rare Democrat to express confidence in the outcome, telling the *Texas Tribune* that they "will take the wind out of the sail of most of the Republicans in South Texas, after we win that special."

What this race may boil down to is momentum versus numbers. Democrats still outnumber Republicans here, particularly among regular primary voters more likely to turn out for an unusual special election. But the GOP has real energy in South Texas that is now being directed at this race.

A win by Republicans here — even if the seat flips back in a few months — would be thunderclap across the United States: the first South Texas district to flip hands to Republicans and a sure sign that the gains Republicans made among Hispanic voters in 2020 are more durable and less Trump-specific than Democrats had hoped.

And even if she is only in Congress for a short time, Flores is primed to be a breakout GOP star at a time when the party is working to move past its white and male image.

It may not matter to the cold math of majority-making, but Democrats need to reset the increasingly dire narrative heading into the fall. A Flores win would have the opposite effect.

The Bottom Line

Democrats are fuming that this is a race at all. Vela's retirement doesn't change the math of the House majority because of changes to the district for the regular election. But it does create headaches and the possibility of serious embarrassment.

And while too late in the cycle to serve as a recruitment tool for Republicans, a win will likely be a fundraising boon for the party.

For now, this contest is flying well under the radar. But it has the potential to be the first flip in a special election this cycle, and kickstart a brutal fall for Democrats as they attempt to buck history and cling to their majority. **IE**

COLORADO, continued from page 1

The Democratic Incumbent

Michael Bennet, 57, has held his Senate seat since 2009, when he was appointed by Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter to the remainder of then-Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's term. Born in New Delhi, India to a diplomat father who was a Mayflower descendent and a mother who was a Holocaust survivor, Bennet was raised in rarified DC society, attending Wesleyan (1987) and Yale Law School (1993) — his brother, James, was editor of *The Atlantic* and the *New York Times* opinion section.

After working as an attorney and investment adviser, Bennet got his start in politics as chief of staff to the man he now serves with in the Senate: John Hickenlooper, at that time mayor of Denver. In 2005, Bennet was appointed superintendent of Denver Public Schools, and in 2009, after Obama won the presidency and appointed Salazar to his cabinet, Ritter chose to elevate Bennet to the Senate.

Just a year into his tenure, Bennet faced two highly competitive elections in a terrible national environment for Democrats. First, he was challenged in the primary by former state House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, who sharply criticized his time as a school chief but was unable to overcome Bennet's significant spending advantage; Bennet won 54-46 percent. Then, in the general election, Bennet faced Weld County District Attorney Ken Buck, who had upset former Lt. Gov. Jan Norton in the GOP primary. Buck was widely seen as a weaker candidate than Norton but still held Bennet to a 48-46 percent win.

In 2016, Bennet faced another unheralded GOP opponent, El Paso County Commissioner Darryl Glenn, who beat out several better-known and better-funded candidates for the Republican nomination. Bennet won, 50-44 percent.

In 2019, the normally reserved Bennet had a rare viral moment after castigating GOP Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas in a speech on the Senate floor, and soon thereafter launched a quixotic run for president. He focused his bid on New Hampshire, but dropped out after placing a disappointing 11th place.

In the Senate, Bennet is a member of the Intelligence, Finance, and Agriculture committees.

Bennet's campaign team includes general consultant Craig Hughes of Hilltop Solutions, media consultant Saul Shorr of Magnus Pearson, pollster Anna Greenberg of GQR, direct mail consultants Ed Peavy and Leticia Martinez of Mission Control, and digital by Wavelength Strategy's Dan McNally and Emily Bengston.

On March 31, Bennet reported $6.1 million in the bank after raising $2.5 million in the first three months of the year.

The Republican Challengers

Joe O'Dea, 60, is a first-time candidate who owns a municipal construction company and event spaces in Denver.

Born and raised in Denver by his adopted parents, O'Dea left Colorado State University without a degree in the 1980s to work as a carpenter, eventually founding his own business. Today, O'Dea's company contracts with municipalities to build roads and bridges and employs several hundred people.

Courtesy O'Dea Campaign

Joe O'Dea

O'Dea is the rare Republican candidate for Senate that acknowledges Biden's legitimate victory in 2020. In most other states, even ones Biden carried handily such as Washington state, GOP contenders have either shied away from acknowledging Biden's victory or outright endorsed Trump's unsubstantiated claims of fraud.

O'Dea's campaign team includes general consultant/former Colorado state Senate minority leader Josh Penry of 76 Group, media consultant

Liesl Hickey of Ascent Media, and pollster Nicole McCleskey of Public Opinion Strategies.

Ron Hanks, 56, is in his first term as a state legislator from Fremont County, south of Denver. An Air Force veteran who retired in 2017, Hanks was elected to the State House in a special election.

He previously ran for Congress in California's 10th District (coastal Northern California) in 2010 as the GOP nominee against Democratic Rep. Mike Thompson, losing 63-31 percent.

Hanks is a prominent election results denier who believes Trump won the 2020 election and has promoted a conspiracy theory-laden film called "The Deep Rig" that alleges CIA involvement in Biden's victory. On Jan. 6, 2021, he traveled to Washington, DC for then-President Trump's speech, and afterward marched on the Capitol, where he acknowledges that he crossed police lines as the building was being overrun by Trump supporters. He later claimed that Antifa was responsible.

Ron Hanks

Courtesy Office of Ron Hanks

Aside from election conspiracies, Hanks has had a controversial tenure in the state legislature marked by jokes about lynching, minimizing the three-fifths compromise, and even allegations that he threatened violence against a fellow Republican legislator.

In the state House, Hanks has amassed one of the most conservative voting records in his caucus, earning a 92 percent rating from the NRA, an 83 percent from the Republican Liberty Caucus of Colorado, and an 82 percent from the Colorado Union of Taxpayers.

Hanks' campaign team includes general consultant Jon Hotaling of Liberty Services Corp.

The Republican Assembly

The GOP field was whittled down to two following a state party nominating assembly on April 9.

Hanks won the assembly vote, garnering 39 percent support from the crowd of 3,772 delegates and securing a spot on the ballot. He was the only hopeful to clear the 30 percent threshold needed to get a ballot line.

Several other GOP hopefuls were unable to make it out of the assembly stage. Most notably, Olympian/former El Paso County GOP chairman Eli Bremer, former Ft. Collins councilman Gino Campana, and talk radio host Deborah Flora all failed to reach the 30 percent threshold.

O'Dea chose to bypass the assembly process, and collected enough signatures to appear on the ballot independently.

The Republican Primary

On paper, O'Dea has clear advantages heading into the June 28 primary.

Financially, he laps Hanks by an order of magnitude. Politically, as a first-time candidate he lacks a voting record to nitpick. Personally, he carries none of the baggage Hanks does, and has a compelling bio as a self-made millionaire who built a business from the ground up.

O'Dea begins with a massive financial edge. He reported $609,000 in

the bank on March 31. He is also personally wealthy and already gave his campaign $632,000 through the first three months of the year.

Hanks, by comparison, reported just $16,000 in the bank on March 31 after raising just $11,000 in the first three months of the year. The gap between them is far greater than the 3-to-1 advantage Norton had over Buck in the 2010 GOP primary that led to an upset.

Unless Hanks rapidly scales up, that level of fundraising will make it impossible to run a traditional statewide campaign, precluding any broadcast TV or cable advertising and all but the most minimal digital advertising.

Meanwhile, O'Dea has already run several ads statewide, totalling nearly $300,000, including a Spanish-language radio ad narrated by his wife, who is of Mexican descent. O'Dea is also advertising on Facebook.

But GOP sources say Hanks should not be counted out, because of the political leanings of the GOP electorate and the intense and continued focus of Republican activists on the 2020 election.

While the GOP assembly where Hanks and other election deniers dominated is not representative of the broader electorate, Colorado Republicans say, it can reflect the attitudes of the party's most fervent supporters, and indicates a level of grassroots strength on Hanks' part relative to other, better funded candidates.

Both Buck in 2010 and Glenn in 2016 show that GOP primary voters are willing to go with a more conservative, firebrand candidate over the potentially safer establishment option. O'Dea will try to leverage that history in his own way, appealing to voters' desire to win elections, something a Colorado Republican hasn't done since 2014.

How well O'Dea can steer clear of discussing the 2020 election, and instead focus his resources on issues such as inflation, could determine how well he can do in June.

One thing that may help O'Dea is how Colorado's election system deals with unaffiliated voters. The election itself will be entirely vote-by-mail. Voters who are not registered with a political party will receive both a Democratic and a Republican ballot in the mail, and can choose which to fill out and send back (they cannot vote in both). With no competitive statewide Democratic primaries, and only a handful of competitive congressional primaries, a greater number of unaffiliated voters may choose to vote in the GOP contest, and O'Dea's campaign sees those voters as far more likely to go for him than Hanks. O'Dea will also have the resources to target those voters specifically, while Hanks likely will not.

How It Plays Out

Republicans like to argue that Colorado is less an anti-Republican state than it is an anti-Trump state, pointing to Gardner's overperformance compared to Trump in 2020. And Glenn Youngkin's recent victory in Virginia, another former swing state, adds to their excitement. But they still acknowledge the state's leftward trend began before Trump came to political prominence.

The state's Democratic bent puts it in a different category than other states such as Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada. And as incumbents have in other states, Bennet has kept his image numbers higher than Biden's.

But a bad enough national environment could make this race more competitive. And Republicans are encouraged by Bennet's lower-than-average name ID compared to other statewide officeholders such as Polis and Hickenlooper, and relative to other senators in their respective states.

Currently, Republicans and Democrats agree that Colorado is fifth

on the list of most vulnerable Democratic-held seats. But there's an understanding that the outcome of the GOP primary will determine just how close this race gets to the battleground.

If Hanks is the nominee, national and Colorado Republican sources are skeptical that this will be an interesting race, given Hanks' myriad controversies and lack of money.

That worry is so persistent that there is an undercurrent of fear among Colorado Republicans that Democrats may surreptitiously look to boost Hanks in the GOP primary in the hopes of securing an easier general election opponent, like Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill did successfully in 2012 with Todd Akin and Democratic leader Chuck Schumer-aligned Senate Majority PAC did unsuccessfully with Kris Kobach in Kansas in 2020.

Thus far there's no evidence to suggest Democrats are doing so, but there's still time.

If O'Dea is the party's standard-bearer, Republicans like the contrast between the self-made college dropout and the blue-blooded Bennet: "Main Street vs. Wall Street" gets repeated a lot around O'Dea.

Provided, of course, that Biden remains as unpopular nationally as he is now — a necessary condition for a state such as Colorado to be in play.

As a first time candidate, O'Dea will run in the general election as an

Michael Bennet

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

outsider businessman, and wants to focus on economic issues including inflation and government spending and bureaucracy. But he'll have to navigate the primary without taking too many stances on issues that could alienate the left-leaning general electorate. And he'll have to run a disciplined enough campaign not to get drawn into fights over issues that are unfavorable to Republicans in Colorado, and know how to put enough distance between himself and some of the party's more controversial figures.

And he'll have to do so at a likely financial disadvantage — a reversal from the primary. Bennet has never been a fundraising giant but he'll start out with a hefty head start, he has the benefits of incumbency, and Democratic candidates still tend to outraise their opponents. And O'Dea, while wealthy, doesn't appear to have the liquid assets to fully self-fund a general election campaign, according to financial disclosures that indicate much of his money is tied up in his business and property.

One place O'Dea will be looking to make inroads is in the state's Hispanic community, which was roughly 12 percent of the electorate in 2016 and 2020. According to exit polling, Trump improved his margin among Hispanic voters in Colorado by 17 points between 2016 and 2020, and O'Dea's allies believe he's well-situated to capitalize on that movement given his wife's ties to the Mexican-American community.

The imminent Supreme Court decision on abortion rights looms large over the race. Democrats are poised to make it a top issue if — as a bombshell *Politico* report suggests — the court overturns *Roe v. Wade* later this year.

Colorado is a pro-choice state. According to Pew Research, in 2014, 59 percent of Coloradoans believed abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances, compared to 36 percent who said illegal in all or most circumstances.

More recent Democratic polling indicates an even larger pro-choice majority. A Global Strategies Group poll from Feb. 2022 found that 67 percent of voters agreed "All women in Colorado should have access to abortion care" while just 29 percent disagreed. And a March GSG survey found voters trusted Democrats more than Republicans on abortion by a greater margin than any issue except climate change.

In the wake of the Politico report, Bennet has already begun running digital ads on the protecting abortion rights. And Democrats see O'Dea's opposition to the state's new abortion rights law as an opportunity for attack.

And Democrats feel vindicated after 2014, when Sen. Mark Udall was dinged for focusing too much on abortion in his race against Gardner, now that the three justices Gardner voted to confirm are at the heart of *Roe*'s demise.

Depending on who emerges from the GOP primary, the events of January 6 and the 2020 election could also take center stage. If the nominee is Hanks, who crossed police lines at the Capitol on Jan. 6 and has made election fraud a main theme of his campaign — in his intro video Hanks blows up a photocopier machine labeled "Dominion" — it could be the defining issue of the race.

But Democratic sources say they won't shy away even if O'Dea, who says Biden was legitimately elected, is the nominee, especially if Republicans also nominate Tina Peters for Secretary of State. Peters, the Mesa County Clerk, is a key promoter of election conspiracy theories and is currently under felony indictment for election tampering and other crimes. If Peters doesn't win her primary, then the role of Democratic boogeyman will fall to 3rd District Rep. Lauren Boebert.

More broadly, though, Democrats say events like Jan. 6 tarnish the GOP brand in the state writ large, regardless of the candidate.

The Bottom Line

This race isn't a top concern for Democrats — yet. But if the national environment doesn't get any better for the party over the coming months, and Biden enters the fall with an approval rating in the low 40s, it could become a headache.

If the national Democratic party starts spending money to defend Colorado, it's a sign that the majority is likely already on its way out. But Republicans need to make sure they have a credible nominee in place to take advantage of a potential wave opportunity.   IE

CALENDAR

May 10	Nebraska, West Virginia Primaries
May 13	Kendrick Lamar Album Release Date
May 16	French Open Begins
May 17	Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Oregon Primaries
May 24	Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas Primaries
June 2	NBA Finals begin
June 7	California, Iowa, New Jersey Primaries
June 14	Nevada, Maine, South Carolina Primaries
June 21	Virginia Primary