2018 Senate Overview: Opportunity vs. Responsibility

By Nathan L. Gonzales

It's early. The dust has barely settled on the 2016 elections and seven new senators have been in office for less than a couple of weeks, but the 2018 midterm elections have already begun. Some potential candidates are already posturing for statewide bids and at least a dozen vulnerable incumbents have re-election on their minds when casting votes in this 115th Congress.

There is plenty of time between now and November 8, 2018. Retirements, primaries and, maybe most importantly, President Donald Trump's performance in office will go a long way in determining the final map of competitive races and the electoral environment in which those contests will take place. But that doesn't change the fact that the initial map is very favorable for Republicans.

Democrats are defending 25 of the 33 seats up for re-election in the Senate this cycle, including two independents who caucus with Democrats. Ten of those Democratic incumbents are running for re-election in states where Trump defeated Hillary Clinton. And five are running in states (West Virginia, North Dakota, Indiana, Missouri, and Montana) that Trump and Mitt Romney carried in the two most recent presidential races.

On the other side of the ledger, Republicans are defending just eight states, including just one (Nevada) where Clinton defeated Trump. Arizona might be the only other Democratic takeover opportunity, depending on the electoral environment. GOP Sen. Jeff Sessions' confirmation as attorney general would induce a special election and add Alabama to the slate of races, but Democrats aren't going to challenge that seat.

The bottom line is that Republicans are likely to gain Senate seats in 2018, it's just far from clear how many. But the precise number of gains is important.

After Democrats gained just two seats in 2016, Republicans started this Congress with a 52-48 majority and put them within striking distance of a filibuster-proof 60 seats because of the nature of the 2018 map. Two years of President Trump with 60 Republican senators is a significant scenario (assuming Trump lasts that long), particularly if there are more Supreme Court vacancies.

One of the most significant narratives of the cycle is the tension between the opportunity for Republicans to gain Senate seats and the responsibility of being in the majority and controlling the White House.

History is complicated and often discouraging for Republicans looking for big Senate gains, as Stu pointed out in a December column for The Washington Post.
A New Chapter: From Rothenberg to Inside Elections

By Nathan L. Gonzales

According to branding experts, you’re supposed to change the name of your company every two years. It builds loyalty and boosts profits. Wait… that’s not what they’re saying? You’re probably thinking, that sounds like the same experts who said Hillary Clinton would be the next president.

Two years ago, I took over The Rothenberg Political Report – a respected nonpartisan brand that Stu spent over 25 years cultivating – and renamed it The Rothenberg & Gonzales Political Report. But that was always a bridge to another chapter.

I’m excited to introduce you to Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales (because having a short name would apparently be too easy).

Inside Elections is actually English for “inside elections.” It both describes what the Report has been for nearly 30 years and reflects what the company will continue to be and do.

Inside Elections provides nonpartisan analysis of campaigns for Senate, House, governor and president. We’ll continue to dive deep into the most important races that will shape our government and introduce readers to the candidates who will become lawmakers. And, most importantly, we’ll continue to be nonpartisan and dispassionate.

We’ll continue to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and rely on sources in Washington, D.C. and around the country for comprehensive coverage. And we’ll focus on deepening our analysis while making it easier to access and digest.

I’m continuously grateful to Stu for hiring me over 15 years ago and spending countless hours imparting his electoral wisdom. And I’m excited for his ongoing help and support as a Senior Editor.

The initial changes will be small, but we’ll be adding to our team and improving the ways we deliver our analysis in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

Thank you for being a loyal reader and I’m confident that you’ll enjoy the next chapter of the Report with Inside Elections. Always feel free to contact me if you have questions.

Inside Elections
with
Nathan L. Gonzales
Nonpartisan Analysis
Senate: Arizona - California

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The sitting president’s party has gained Senate seats in only four of the past 17 midterms, and each time the gain has been minuscule — one seat in 1970, 1982 and 2002, and two seats in 1962.

A net change of eight seats (which would be required in order to get to 60) would be large by historical standards but not unprecedented. Swings of at least eight Senate seats have occurred in four of the last 17 midterm elections — 1958, 1986, 1994 and 2014 — and in six of the last 34 elections (going back to 1950).

The problem for Republicans is that these big Senate swings have always happened against the sitting president’s party. The sole exception, since the direct election of senators, occurred in 1934, when President Franklin Roosevelt’s party gained 10 Senate seats.

Most Democrats agree with history and believe the GOP-led Congress will be held responsible for President Trump’s first years in office. But if 2016 is a guide, elections with Trump can be atypical. Last year, moderate voters didn’t hold GOP candidates responsible for candidate Trump’s sins, so there is no guarantee that the link between Trump and congressional Republicans will automatically appear now.

Democrats also have to hope that voters are more open to splitting their tickets. Last year was the first cycle in 100 years, since the direct election of senators, that the Senate result matched the presidential outcome in every state.

But even with a favorable map, Republicans have work to do. Similar to 2016, when Democrats enjoyed far more takeover opportunities than the GOP and had only minimal gains, Republicans have to get good candidates against Democratic incumbents who have proven they can win in Republican states. One GOP strategist equated this part of the cycle to dating in high school, when the campaign committees will experience a lot of rejection during candidate recruitment.

The candidates being mentioned at this stage are often elected officials and, as another GOP source pointed out, most of the fields are ripe for a political outsider. But it could take months for those candidates to emerge.

Democrats will have a balancing act of their own. The party’s instincts will be to vehemently oppose President Trump at every possible opportunity. But some incumbents, such as Joe Manchin of West Virginia or Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, must measure declaring their independence from Trump and a home-state electorate that supported him by a wide margin.

Trump is the ultimate wild card. Not only will he overshadow the general elections, it’s unclear how much he will meddle in primaries, specifically against political foes such as Arizona’s Jeff Flake.

It would take an epic collapse for Republicans to lose the Senate majority but, with a President Trump, there is a wide spectrum of possibility. For Republicans to suffer, the party would have to splinter and not turn out to vote, independents would have to shift away from Trump’s party in large numbers, and Trump would need to energize Democrats who don’t normally vote in midterm elections. That’s possible, but not probable at this stage.

Even though Trump got elected in the face of long odds, that doesn’t mean that the entire election system has been toppled. Historical results and polling data continue to be valuable guides. But 2016 taught everyone to be at least a little more open-minded about fringe outcomes.

ARIZONA - Jeff Flake (R) elected 2012 (49%). Compared to fellow Grand Canyon State Sen. John McCain, whom grassroots Republicans regard as insufficiently conservative, Flake has generally toed the conservative line, except on immigration. But because of his private clashes with Trump during the 2016 race, including his refusal to endorse his party’s presidential nominee, Flake could draw a serious primary challenge from a pro-Trump Republican.

State Sen. Kelli Ward, who lost to McCain 52-39 percent in the 2016 primary, is running again. But all eyes are on state Treasurer Jeff DeWit, Trump’s Arizona campaign chairman. If DeWit runs, Flake could have a real fight on his hands. The most recent fight for state party chairman of Ohio (in which Trump personally called state central committee members to oust the chairman he didn’t like) could be an example of the extent to which Trump is willing to get involved in primaries.

Democrats will take a serious look at challenging Flake in the general election. Initial attention will likely go to Rep. Kyrsten Sinema, who is regarded as a rising star within the party. But she might wait until McCain retires instead of risking her seat. Trump carried Arizona narrowly, 49-45 percent, after plenty of talk that Hillary Clinton was within striking distance. But depending on how Trump performs in office, this race could become a headache for Republicans. Likely R.

CALIFORNIA - Dianne Feinstein (D) elected 1992 Special (54%), 1994 (47%), 2000 (56%), 2006 (59%), 2012 (63%). Feinstein, who will turn 85 years old in 2018, is not in danger of losing re-election, but she will remain on the retirement watch list, probably up until the filing deadline early next year. An open seat would attract a multitude of Democrats (considering it’s practically a lifetime appointment), dampened only by the fact that the governorship is open next year and Gov. Jerry Brown is term limited. Republicans don’t have a chance unless they can take advantage of the top-two primary system. If a flock of Democrats divide up a majority of the vote, it could allow two Republicans to divide up a minority of the vote and finish in the top two to move on to the general election. However, that is unlikely. Solid D.

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Connecticut - Maine

CONNECTICUT - Chris Murphy (D) elected 2012 (55%). Murphy’s initial race against Republican/former wrestling executive Small Business Administrator Nominee Linda McMahon got a little too close for comfort at times, but he shouldn’t have any problems winning re-election. Murphy, who turns 45 next year, is one of the chamber’s youngest members and can likely have this seat as long as he wants it.

Solid D.

DELWARE - Tom Carper (D) elected 2000 (56%), 2006 (70%), 2012 (66%). Carper is a Democrat in a Democratic state that Clinton won by 11 points against Trump. Republicans won’t seriously challenge here. Solid D.

FLORIDA - Bill Nelson (D) elected 2000 (51%), 2006 (60%), 2012 (55%). Two big questions hang over the race. Will Nelson, 74, run for a fourth term? And will term-limited GOP Gov. Rick Scott run for the Senate? For now, Nelson says he is running, but GOP strategists believe the threat of the two-term governor (who could invest at least $20 million of his own money into the race) might be enough to convince the senator to consider retirement. Scott has never been overwhelmingly popular but has the ability to outspend almost all other contenders. Since fundraising won’t be an issue, the governor also has the luxury of waiting until the middle of next year before deciding whether to run. And until Scott makes a decision, it will be difficult for other potential GOP candidates to get much traction.

Of course, other GOPers are already being mentioned as interested in the Senate race. Freshman Rep. Francis Rooney, a former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, has considerable personal wealth and can continue to raise money for his House seat (and ultimately transfer those funds to a Senate account, if necessary.) As one GOP source observed, “Rooney didn’t come to Washington to serve in the House.”

Rep. Ron DeSantis, who was running a credible campaign last cycle before he dropped out when Sen. Marco Rubio dropped back in, can also raise money for re-election and shift to another Senate race later in the cycle, if he chooses. It can be more prudent for Members to stay in their Safe races for as long as possible, because once they announce a challenge to a Senator or enter into a competitive primary, PAC fundraising will dry up.

There are a lot of pieces that need to fall into place in this race, and the biggest ones may not be known until well over a year from now, but the state starts as a potential headache for Democrats this cycle. Tilt D.

HAWAII - Mazie Hirono (D) elected 2012 (63%). This might be the least exciting “race” of the cycle. No primary or general election fireworks are expected. As long as Hirono runs, she wins. Solid D.

INDIANA - Joe Donnelly (D) elected 2012 (50%). The senator was first elected against Republican Richard Mourdock, who ended up being a flawed nominee, while Obama received 44 percent. Clinton finished just short of 38 percent in November against Trump and Republicans expect to have a much stronger Senate nominee this time around.

GOP Reps. Luke Messer, Susan Brooks, and Todd Rokita are often mentioned as potential candidates. Some Republicans wanted Brooks to run last cycle for the state’s other seat, but she declined to run against fellow Rep. Todd Young, who went on to defeat former Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh. Last summer, when Mike Pence was officially tapped to be the vice presidential nominee, Brooks lost a bid among state central committee members to replace Pence as the gubernatorial nominee. She clearly has statewide aspirations under the right circumstances.

While the party had a Member-vs.-Member Senate primary last year, Members of the GOP congressional delegation seem averse to running against each other and it’s just not clear who comes out on top. The calculation is complicated now that GOPer Eric Holcomb was just elected governor. That means no one can run for that slot for eight years, unless he or she plans to challenge Holcomb in a primary. So there aren’t as many opportunities to move up the ladder. In addition, some movement conservative groups are not satisfied with the three Members mentioned and are searching for an alternative candidate.

Donnelly is regarded as an affable senator with less baggage than Bayh, and he may end up with some key moderate credentials. But he is still a Democrat running for re-election in a state that took a decided turn toward Trump. Toss-up.

MAINE - Angus King (Independent) elected 2012 (53%). Some Republicans are feeling bullish on Maine after Clinton defeated Trump by just 3 points, 48-45 percent, in 2016. King, who caucuses with Democrats, is running for a second term and Republicans will need a strong challenger. GOP Gov. Paul LePage said back in May that he would run if he didn’t get a job in the Trump administration, but he’s a polarizing figure. Republicans might be better off with 2nd District Rep. Bruce Poliquin, who represents half the state and was just re-elected 55-45 percent in a competitive race.

There are a couple other potential wrinkles in the race. If Republican Susan Collins, the state’s other senator, decides to run for governor, aspiring candidates might see her seat as a better opportunity. In November, Maine voters passed the Ranked Choice Voting Initiative, also known as instant-runoff voting. Voters rank candidates on the ballot; if no candidate tops 50 percent in the first round, the last-place candidate would be eliminated and his or her votes would move to the candidate voters selected as their second choice. The process moves along until the...
a candidate gets more than 50 percent. The initiative will likely be challenged in court but, in general, most Republicans believe this will hurt their chances in the short term.

Some Republicans believe Maine, which has a minority population of about 3 percent, is moving in their direction. But there are so many other takeover opportunities, Republicans might not have the resources to play here as well. Poliquin does have personal money. Solid D.

MARYLAND - Ben Cardin (D) elected 2006 (54%), 2012 (56%). Unless popular GOP Gov. Larry Hogan decides to challenge Cardin instead of seeking re-election (which he’s not going to do), Republicans aren’t going to win this seat. In 2016, Clinton defeated Trump 60-34 percent and Democrat Chris Van Hollen defeated Republican Kathy Szeliga 61-36 percent for the state’s other Senate seat. Look for Szeliga to run for the 1st District whenever GOP Rep. Andy Harris decides to leave. The Senate seat is Solid D.

MASSACHUSETTS - Elizabeth Warren (D) elected 2012 (54%). Warren was first elected in a competitive race over former Sen. Scott Brown and passed on a race for president in 2016, which she might have been able to win. Now she just announced her bid for re-election.

Former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling plans to run, as long as his wife allows it. The 50-year-old retired player has a better chance of pitching in a World Series again than winning this race. Some states shifted toward Trump last year, but Massachusetts was not one of them. Clinton won 60-33 percent. And there is no indication Schilling will put together the campaign necessary to seriously challenge Warren, who will have one of the best-funded operations in the country. Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, who is a Democrat, endorsed Schilling for the baseball Hall of Fame and Warren for Senate. Solid D.

MICHIGAN - Debbie Stabenow (D) elected 2000 (49%), 2006 (57%), 2012 (59%). Stabenow was likely going to be on the outsides of any talk about competitive Senate races in 2018 until Trump defeated Clinton, 47.5-47.3 percent, in the Wolverine State. Republicans are still going to need a good candidate, and there doesn’t appear to be a consensus initial target, but last November showed Republicans can be competitive in statewide federal races again. Term-limited state Attorney General Bill Schuette is often the first name mentioned, though a gubernatorial bid might be more likely. Term-limited Lt. Gov. Brian Calley is also a possibility but has a young family. This race will be a test of how transferable Trump’s working-class appeal is to other candidates. Solid D.

MINNESOTA - Amy Klobuchar (DFL) elected 2006 (58%), 2012 (65%). Hillary Clinton’s loss means Klobuchar still has an opportunity to be the first woman elected president of the United States, but winning re-election would be a good first step. Klobuchar is popular and starts the race with a significant advantage. Some Republicans believe Minnesota is the new Wisconsin in its movement toward the GOP. The party hasn’t won it at the presidential level in 44 years, but Trump came close in November, losing 46.4-44.9 percent. GOP strategists are dreaming of one of the Pawlentys (former Governor Tim or his wife Mary, a former state court judge who could have been elected in the 2nd District last cycle) or Rep. Erik Paulsen taking on the senator. But that looks more like fiction than reality at this stage. Solid D.

MISSISSIPPI - Roger Wicker (R) appointed 2007, elected 2008 special (55%), 2012 (57%). It’s tough to see how the senator would be vulnerable. As chairman of the NRSC, he helped keep the party’s losses to a minimum and held the Senate majority for the GOP. At the same time, Trump defeated Clinton 58-40 percent in the presidential race. Solid R.

MISSOURI - Claire McCaskill (D) elected 2006 (50%), 2012 (55%). McCaskill has been a fortunate politician. She was initially elected in a great Democratic year (over GOP Sen. Jim Talent) and re-elected against Rep. Todd Akin in what has become a famous race focused on the congressman’s biological views. This race isn’t likely going to be as easy, and she even declared herself the underdog in the race to National Journal’s Kimberly Railey.

GOP Rep. Ann Wagner is seriously considering challenging the senator, and is even viewed as likely to run. Fellow Rep. Vicky Hartzler is also mentioned as a potential candidate, although GOP insiders haven’t yet seen her making moves toward a race. After Trump destroyed Clinton, 57-38 percent, in what was once a competitive state, there are plenty of Republicans who will take a look at the race. McCaskill is at serious risk. Toss-up.

MONTANA - Jon Tester (D) elected 2006 (49%), 2012 (49%). Tester just finished a stint as chairman of the DSCC. Now he has to worry about his own re-election. And after Trump defeated Clinton 56-36 percent in November, the senator will be a top takeover target. There was a flurry of headlines about GOP chances taking a hit when Trump nominated At-Large Rep. Ryan Zinke to be secretary of the Interior and how that took Republicans’ best challenger off the table. But Zinke was not the perfect candidate, and Republicans might actually be better off with someone else. That being said, they still need to find someone. You can get more initial analysis in the Dec. 20 issue. Tilt D.

NEBRASKA - Deb Fischer (R) elected 2012 (58%). Fischer was a surprise primary winner in 2012 and is now up for re-election. Her Cornhusker State colleague Ben Sasse received plenty of attention for opposing Trump last year. But Fischer has kept her head down. Nothing


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special expected here next year. Solid R.

NEVADA - Dean Heller (R) appointed 2011, elected 2012 (46%).

Despite a disappointing Election Night for Democrats in 2016, the Silver State was a bright spot. Clinton won Nevada, 48-46 percent, and former state attorney general Catherine Cortez Masto defeated Rep. Joe Heck, 47-45 percent, to keep Harry Reid’s seat in Democratic hands.

Heller was first elected in 2012 by over-performing Mitt Romney, but he also ran against a flawed congresswoman and reached just 46 percent. That makes him a top Democratic target on a map with few Democratic takeover options. But according to veteran Nevada analyst Jon Ralston (who just launched The Nevada Independent, a non-profit news project), the Democratic bench is thin and there is not an obvious challenger to Heller. Rep. Ruben Kihuen could get some initial attention as a potential challenger, even though he was just sworn into the House. Former Treasurer Kate Marshall and state Senate Majority Leader Aaron Ford are also mentioned.

Ralston considers the senator (who announced he will not run for governor) as a strong favorite to start the cycle. GOP strategists believe incumbency and Heller’s ability to overperform in Washoe County (Reno) will be critical. And national Democrats will have to weigh spending money on offense in Nevada against defending incumbents around the country. Lean R.

NEW JERSEY - Bob Menendez (D) appointed 2006, elected 2006 (53%), 2012 (58%). Republicans don’t win federal statewide races in the Garden State anymore, but Menendez is under federal indictment. Republicans will try to field a credible candidate (even though Clinton won 56-41 percent in 2016) just in case Menendez implodes. Be warned that Democratic candidates tend to underperform in polling for much of the cycle, but it’s always the same result: a Democratic win. Republicans haven’t won a Senate race in the state since Clifford Case’s re-election in 1972 (although the last time they got close was when Democratic Sen. Bob Torricelli had legal problems). The other challenge is that the entire New Jersey political scene is focused on the gubernatorial race, which takes place this November. So nothing will happen in the Senate race for at least 10 months. Solid D.

NEW MEXICO - Martin Heinrich (D) elected 2012 (51%). Heinrich won a competitive race against Republican Heather Wilson by 6 points but shouldn’t have as much trouble next year. Clinton defeated Trump 48-40 percent and Republicans have so many other, better takeover opportunities that it’s hard to see the party having money to seriously challenge here. Republicans probably need to convince outgoing 2-term Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry (who Republicans recruited to run in 2014) to run to make this a race. Solid D.

NEW YORK - Kirsten Gillibrand (D) appointed 2009, elected 2010 (63%), 2012 (72%). Gillibrand was originally appointed by Democratic Gov. David Paterson to replace Hillary Clinton, as she became President Barack Obama’s secretary of state. Gillibrand, 50, hasn’t had any trouble in her two elections and next year shouldn’t be any different. A potential run for president will get more attention than her run for re-election. Solid D.

NORTH DAKOTA - Heidi Heitkamp (D) elected 2012 (50%).

Heitkamp ran arguably the best campaign in the country and narrowly won her first Senate race a little more than four years ago, outperforming Obama by about 10 points (he lost to Mitt Romney 58-39 percent). Last November, Trump defeated Clinton by 36 points (63-27 percent). Heitkamp is a good politician, and her public flirtation with a Trump cabinet position will give her some great ammunition for the campaign trail to try and deflect criticism. But she is in an extremely vulnerable position.

It looks like Rep. Kevin Cramer, who represents the entire state in an At-Large District, has the right of first refusal on the GOP side. He was first elected in 2012 to replace GOP Rep. Rick Berg, who lost to Heitkamp for the open seat. Cramer defeated state Rep. Pam Guilleston, 55-42 percent, in what was supposed to be a competitive race, and hasn’t had a serious race since. GOP strategists believe he’d be a credible contender, and hopefully without some of Berg’s baggage. Toss-up.

OHIO - Sherrod Brown (D) elected 2006 (56%), 2012 (51%). For all the talk about Ohio’s swing-state status and hosting competitive Senate races, recent contests haven’t been nailbiters. GOP Sen. Rob Portman’s 58-37 percent re-election victory in November is just the latest example. In 2012, Brown faced off against state Treasurer Josh Mandel in one of the most expensive contests in the country, but still prevailed by 6 points.

Mandel is running again. He’s known as a hard worker and a good fundraiser, and GOP strategists expect him to put together a credible campaign. And Trump’s sizable 52-44 percent victory in 2016 is a stark contrast to Obama’s 51-48 percent victory the last time Brown won re-election. But Mandel may not have the field to himself: GOP Rep. Pat Tiberi is interested in running and he had nearly $5.2 million in his campaign account on Nov. 28. But multiple Republican sources doubt he will ultimately run.

Ohio looks poised for a competitive race and Brown can’t take anything for granted, but some Republicans fear there is a difference between getting close and defeating the senator. Brown is regarded as a tough campaigner with a populist brand that Clinton lacked. Lean D.

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Senate: Rhode Island - Vermont

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Pennsylvania - Bob Casey, Jr. (D) elected 2006 (59%), 2012 (54%). With Trump’s 49-48 percent win over Clinton and Sen. Pat Toomey’s re-election in 2016, Republicans are feeling emboldened about their chances of defeating Casey next year. There was a moment when Casey’s 2012 race looked to be in some doubt, but he ended up winning comfortably.

This cycle, GOP Rep. Patrick Meehan received most of the initial attention and has publicly been considering a run. But there hasn’t been as much buzz since his comment to The Huffington Post about “rich people” wanting him to run (a quote that has been removed from the original story) and he would leave behind a vulnerable congressional district in Southeast Pennsylvania that would be difficult for House Republicans to defend. Rep. Mike Kelly is exploring a statewide office but is more focused on governor for the time being. He represents the northwest corner of the state (including Erie), and would be regarded as a credible candidate. In the general election, a successful GOP candidate probably needs Toomey’s margins in and around Philadelphia and Trump’s margins everywhere else. Lean D.

Rhode Island - Sheldon Whitehouse (D) elected 2006 (54%), 2012 (65%). Whitehouse looks safe for a third term as long as he runs for re-election. There is no GOP buzz about this race. Solid D.

Tennessee - Bob Corker (R) elected 2006 (51%), 2012 (65%). Trump won The Volunteer State with 61 percent in November, so any vulnerability for Corker would be in the Republican primary. Corker, who is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was considered a top candidate to become Trump’s first secretary of state, but he appears to be running for re-election. If Corker doesn’t run or runs for governor, there would be a sizable field of GOP candidates to replace him. Democrats haven’t won a Senate race in Tennessee since Al Gore was re-elected in 1990. Solid R.

Texas - Ted Cruz (R) elected 2012 (56%). Cruz planned on being in the Oval Office in 2018 rather than running for re-election, but once his presidential bid ended, it didn’t take him long to shift back and announce his run for a second term. Cruz’s biggest vulnerability is probably in a primary because of Republicans who may not like his brand of confrontational (and to some, self-serving) conservatism, but that’s not saying much. Establishment Republicans would love for wealthy Rep. Mike McCaul to run, but it’s unclear why he would give up his chairmanship of the House Homeland Security Committee for an uncertain bid.

Cruz won’t get a free ride in the general election. Self term-limited Democratic Rep. Beto O’Rourke (who represents the 16th District in far western Texas) is likely to run, according to Texas Tribune’s Abby Livingston. But it’s hard to see how he raises the money necessary to compete statewide and how the Democratic Party has enough money to invest, considering their other vulnerabilities and takeover opportunities (in smaller states).

Former George W. Bush political adviser Matt Dowd is considering a run as an independent, as first reported by Livingston as well. But, as with O’Rourke, the fundraising climb is very steep in Texas, and Dowd starts the race with no name identification beyond political insiders and people who might have seen him on ABC News as a political analyst. And as long as Democrats nominate someone with a pulse, there just are not enough votes for an independent candidate to win. The nightmare scenario for Republicans is that Cruz and Dowd split enough votes to allow a Democrat to win. We’re skeptical. Solid R.

Utah - Orrin Hatch (R) elected 1976 (54%), 1982 (58%), 1988 (67%), 1994 (69%), 2000 (66%), 2006 (63%), 2012 (65%). After GOP Sen. Bob Bennett was ousted by Mike Lee in 2010, there was some concern that grassroots Republicans would come for Hatch next, but the long-time politician successfully dispatched a credible primary challenger by 32 points. During that campaign, Hatch said his current term would be his last, but the senator appears to be more than open to running for re-election. And there is a disconnect between Republicans in Washington and those in Utah on Hatch’s strength.

Republicans inside the Beltway see a hard-working senator who already survived an insurgency, while GOP sources in the Beehive State see potential Hatch fatigue and a senator with significant vulnerabilities. A poll conducted for Senate Conservatives Fund showed Hatch with a 72 percent favorable rating among likely GOP caucus/primary voters, but only 17 percent said he should run again, after being prompted that he had been in office for 40 years. Hatch’s former campaign manager told the Salt Lake Tribune that the senator has some work to do.

Hatch could benefit from a new primary system which allows candidates to make a primary ballot through the convention or by gathering signatures. That could lead to a more crowded and fractured field against the incumbent.

The next biggest question is, who might challenge Hatch? The biggest name is former Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. He is soundly dismissed by Republicans in DC as a failed presidential candidate who moved left in recent years. But GOP sources in Utah say the family brand in the state is very different and still revered. There was some talk of Huntsman running as an Independent, but he prefers to run as a Republican, according to local sources. This seat isn’t at risk of going Democratic, but could provide some excitement this cycle. Solid R.

Vermont - Bernie Sanders (Independent) elected 2006 (65%), 2012 (71%). Continuing a revolution probably involves winning

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Senate: Virginia - Wyoming

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re-election for the former presidential candidate. The independent senator from Vermont probably couldn’t have imagined his political star ascending as high as it did in 2016, particularly at 75 years old. Sanders has said he would run as a Democrat in future elections, but he was non-committal in an interview with Chuck Todd on Meet the Press Daily last week. Even though Republicans just elected a governor in The Green Mountain State, there is virtually no chance of the GOP winning this race, unless new Gov. Phil Scott decides to run. Solid R (because Sanders will caucus with Democrats if he runs again as an Independent).

VIRGINIA - Tim Kaine (D) elected 2012 (53%). The fight for this seat was supposed to be very different. Kaine looked set to get elected vice president, prompting Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe to appoint a replacement until a 2017 special election, which would have been the focus of the political universe. But Clinton’s loss erased the entire scenario.

Now Kaine is running for re-election in a competitive state, albeit one that he and Clinton won, 50-44 percent over Trump. But Republicans aren’t going to give him a pass. Potential GOP challengers include former presidential candidate/Hewlett-Packard CEO/2010 California Senate nominee Carly Fiorina, Reps. Barbara Comstock and Rob Wittman, and former state Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, who has been running Senate Conservatives Fund. Fiorina clearly wants to get elected to something, somewhere and has the financial resources to be a serious contender. Comstock posted an impressive 53-47 percent re-election win in November, even though Trump lost her district by 10 points.

Virginia has been moving away from Republicans and Kaine is a good candidate, but it’s still a race to watch as the cycle and candidate field develops. Fiorina seems most likely to run at this point, but this year’s race for governor could influence the thinking on next year’s challenge to Kaine. Likely D.

WASHINGTON - Maria Cantwell (D) elected 2000 (49%), 2006 (57%), 2012 (60%). Despite all of the Republican electoral success across the country over the last six years, the GOP hasn’t been able to crack the West Coast. Cantwell is running for a fourth term and shouldn’t have any trouble winning re-election, as long as GOP Rep. Dave Reichert stays in his House seat. Clinton won 52-36 percent over Trump and Republicans haven’t won a Senate race in the state since 1994, when the Seattle Seahawks were mediocre. Solid D (the Senate seat and Seahawks’ defense).

WEST VIRGINIA - Joe Manchin (D) elected 2010 special (53%), 2012 (61%). Manchin nearly gave Democrats a heart attack by publicly dancing with Trump about a potential cabinet post. Without Manchin, Republicans could probably have claimed this seat with relative ease (even though new-Democratic Gov. Jim Justice would have appointed a replacement temporarily). Manchin now looks likely to seek re-election. Even if he had no intention of accepting a job with Trump, it’s great politics to appear open to the new president, considering Trump destroyed Clinton, 69-27 percent, in the Mountain State. Even though Manchin’s brand is strong, he won’t get a free pass with those presidential numbers.

In spite of Manchin’s keen candidate skills, Republicans believe they have a plethora of options. State Attorney General Patrick Morrisey and Rep. Evan Jenkins are usually the top candidates mentioned, but Rep. David McKinley has been interested and Rep. Alex Mooney hasn’t ruled it out. Morrisey is a statewide elected official, but he’s also from New Jersey and has residual negatives from a tough and expensive re-election race last year that he won 52-42 percent. That’s surprisingly close considering Trump won by 42 points. GOP strategists are also hoping they don’t have to deal with wealthy perennial candidate John Raese again.

In the general election, Republicans will have to demonstrate that Manchin has changed since he was first elected and gotten more liberal than his initial reputation (particularly on guns). The senator’s wife and daughter could also complicate his re-election with their roles on an education board and as head of a large pharmaceutical company.

Toss-up.

WISCONSIN - Tammy Baldwin (D) elected 2012 (51%). Trump just won the Badger State, 47-46 percent, and GOP Sen. Ron Johnson came from behind to win re-election adding to GOP optimism about their surge in the state. Baldwin, who is the first openly gay senator in U.S. history, defeated aging former GOP Gov. Tommy Thompson in 2012 after a bruising Republican primary. GOP strategists are hopeful to get someone younger and more current this cycle. Rep. Sean Duffy is one of the first names mentioned along with state Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald. Republicans have had two successful midterm elections in Wisconsin recently, but it remains to be seen whether they can keep up the trend with a Republican in the White House. Baldwin will have to balance her liberal allies with supporters of Trump and GOP Gov. Scott Walker. Tilt D.

WYOMING - John Barrasso (R) appointed 2007, elected 2008 special (73%), 2012 (76%). Barrasso, who will turn 66 in 2018, shouldn’t have any problems winning another term, as long as he seeks re-election. Any trouble would have to be in a primary, and there isn’t any buzz about a challenger, particularly now that Liz Cheney found her way to Washington by winning the House seat in 2016. Solid R.