

Trump Polling Slump Fuels Democratic Hopes of Expanding Majority

By Emily Wilkins | July 28, 2020 10:37AM ET

House Democrats are in position to grow their majority a year and a half after beginning preparations to simply hold it for a second straight Congress.

With just less than 100 days until the election, the party remains focused on defending the more than two dozen Democrats representing districts that voted for President Donald Trump. But a combination of strong fundraising and Trump's low polling has both strengthened their most vulnerable incumbents and expanded their offensive opportunities.

"We began 2020 with the idea that maybe we would end up somewhere between minus two to five seats, because of the seats that Democrats hold that are even more challenging to hold in presidential years," said Democratic pollster Jill Normington. "We are in a position to expand. Our pickup opportunities outnumber our potential loses."

There are 29 Democrats, mostly freshmen, seeking re-election in districts Trump carried. All of them are heading into the last months of campaigning with more cash on hand than their opponents — sometimes significantly so.

In a sign of its strategic priorities, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's first independent-expenditure TV ad of its general election campaign was [launched last week](#) not in one of those districts but against Rep. [John Katko](#) (R-N.Y.). He was one of only three Republicans to win in 2018 in a district carried by Hillary Clinton.



Photographer: Anna Moneymaker/The New York Times/Bloomberg
Democrats have launched their first general election ad against Rep. John Katko (R-N.Y.).

Trump at the Top

Trump's slide in the polls is a major factor in Democrats' optimism. In polling over the past few weeks, former Vice President Joe Biden has led Trump by an average of 9 percentage points, according to [Real Clear Politics](#).

The non-partisan Cook Political Report, which handicaps elections, recently [moved its ratings](#) of 20 seats from states across the country in favor of Democrats. It now gives Democrats the edge in three Republican-held seats, and rates 10 as Toss-ups and 14 as Lean Republican. The GOP needs a net gain of 17 seats to win back the majority.

"For the first time this cycle, Democrats have at least as good a chance at gaining House seats as Republicans on a net basis," wrote David Wasserman, Cook's House editor.

While some voters in November will split their tickets, it has become rarer, Normington said. So should Trump's polling numbers translate to his performance at the ballot box, Democrats in districts where Trump won by a small margin, or with less than 50% of the vote, will have to win over fewer Trump voters.

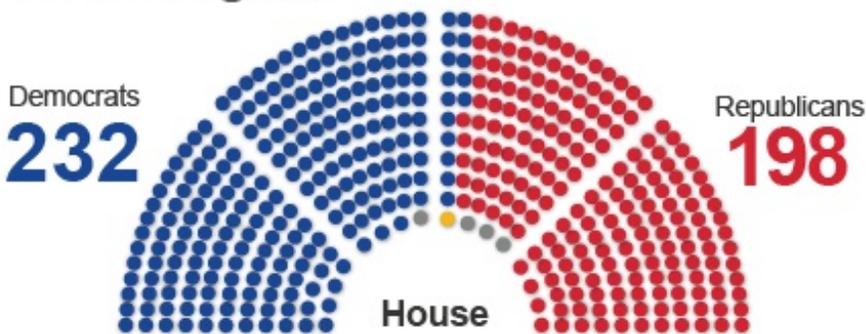
"Ten years ago, 20 years ago you could create some real separation from the national party at the House level," she said. "That is really difficult to do anymore."

Four years after Trump stunned Hillary Clinton, Democratic consultants caution there are still plenty of variables that could alter the environment between now and Nov. 3. Just because Trump's trailing in polls now, doesn't mean his numbers can't rise again, said Jeffrey Pollock, a Democratic pollster.

"It feels like we're on a sugar high," he said. "The problem with sugar highs is they're frequently temporary."

"I have to caution everybody: If the election was today we'd win," Pollock added. "But 60 days ago I could have shown you polls where everything was much tighter. If things can change that easily in 60 days, it can go back in 60 days."

House Balance of Power: 116th Congress



● Libertarian

● The four vacancies are in CA-50, due to the resignation of Duncan Hunter (R); GA-05, due to the death of John Lewis (D); NC-11, due to the resignation of Mark Meadows (R); and TX-04, due to the resignation of John Ratcliffe (R).

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Money Talks

In the absence of in-person campaign events, House Democrats' superior fundraising has allowed them to get on TV and connect with voters quarantined in their homes.

The DCCC and the Democratic-allied House Majority PAC had more in cash on hand at the end of June than their Republican campaign committee and super PAC counterparts, the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Congressional Leadership Fund, respectively. Almost all of the 29 Trump-district Democrats had **three times as much** on hand as their Republican challengers, a Bloomberg Government analysis found.

While the gap is likely too wide for some Republican challengers to ever close, GOP outside groups have helped make up the difference, said Ian Russell, a consultant and former DCCC political director.

"I'm always worried a Republican super PAC can come in and level the playing field," he said. "We've seen that time after time."

Matt Gorman, a Republican consultant and former NRCC communications director, said fundraising will level out closer to Election Day when there's more engagement between lawmakers and voters. He noted WinRed, the GOP's online fundraising tool, is beginning to see more donations come in — it raised more in the second quarter of 2020 than in all of 2019.

“Between outside groups and candidates, Republicans will absolutely not lack for resources by any stretch of the imagination,” Gorman said.

As Frontline Democrats attempt to define themselves as independent and able to work across the aisle, Republicans will spotlight other aspects of their record. That includes highlighting their support for legislation ([H.R. 1](#)) that included a congressional campaign donation matching program and tying moderate Democrats to more progressive issues, such as the Green New Deal and Medicare for All, said NRCC spokesman Michael McAdams.

“Voters will be ready to reject Democrats' socialist agenda,” McAdams said.

A Record to Run On

The sizable war chests have allowed the most vulnerable Democrats in Trump-won districts to begin airing ads highlighting their legislative accomplishments and ability to work with Republicans.

Rep. [Kendra Horn](#) (D-Okla.) tells voters about the times she broke with the Democratic Party to vote with Republicans in her ad. In New York's 22nd district, airwaves tell about Rep. [Anthony Brindisi](#)'s success in getting Trump to sign a bill requiring the military to buy flatware from a company in his district. A Spanish-language ad from Rep. [Xochitl Torres Small](#) (D-N.M.) notes she worked with Republicans in Congress to help pass a coronavirus stimulus package.

DCCC Chair [Cheri Bustos](#) (D-Ill.), who also represents a district that supported Trump, said she advised freshmen to campaign like they're running for mayor.

“Our folks have held town halls, kept their focus hyper-local, and they've built strong local brands,” Bustos said in a statement. “Now they get to use their record-breaking fundraising to communicate their brands and remind voters of their accomplishments early and often.”

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