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## Watching Special Elections for Signs of a Wave



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Wichita is 1,250 miles from Washington, D.C., but you can bet quite a few people inside the Beltway will be checking election returns from there Tuesday night.

Normally, few outside of Kansas would care much about the results of a special election to fill a staunchly Republican House seat like Kansas's 4th District, a vacancy caused by Mike Pompeo's departure to become CIA director. After all, how competitive could a district be that voted for Donald Trump by a 27-point margin (60 to 33 percent for Hillary Clinton) and four years earlier for Mitt Romney by 26 points (62 to 36 percent for President Obama)? Old-timers will remember this district as the one once held by Democrat Dan Glickman, who won in 1976 as Jimmy Carter defeated President Ford and lost in the Republican tidal-wave election of 1994 to Todd Tiahrt. Tiahrt then served eight terms before giving the seat up to run unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate—losing to fellow GOP Rep. Jerry Moran in the Republican primary—and has lost two subsequent efforts to reclaim it.

Cook Political Report House Editor David Wasserman puts the chance that Democratic nominee James Thompson will beat Republican state Treasurer Ron Estes in this race at 30 to 40 percent. But pros will be watching the margin closely to see whether there is something to this idea that Democrats are building a large and intense enthusiasm gap over Republicans, even in ruby-red conservative districts. The 4th District has a Cook Political Report Partisan Voting Index (PVI) rating of R+15, meaning that over the last two presidential races, this district voted 15 points more Republican than the country as a whole, making it the 74th-most-Republican voting district.

Having been the state treasurer for seven years during a period of great financial difficulty for the state and a school funding crisis certainly could undercut Estes's strength. If his victory margin over Thompson, a civil rights attorney, is much under a dozen points, one can assume the anxiety level among Republicans will heighten going in to a far more competitive April 18 special election in Georgia's 6th District.

In the seat vacated by Tom Price, who became secretary of Health and Human Services, Mitt Romney's margin over President Obama was 24 points in 2012 (61 to 37 percent) but Trump beat Clinton by about a point and a half (48 to 47 percent). The PVI for the 6th District is R+8, making it the 165th-most-Republican district in the country. While this Georgia seat should also be reliably Republican, it isn't natural Donald Trump territory; it has a high population of upscale, college-educated whites, many originally from out of state, more comfortable with a Romney, John McCain, or George W. Bush than Trump. If there is a path to a 218-seat House majority for Democrats, it will more likely be through upscale suburban districts, not the rural and small-town-oriented districts in which they used to be very competitive.

The Kansas and Georgia special elections, along with the Virginia governor race, are the canaries in the coal mine

that analysts will be examining for hints of what's to come in the 2018 midterm elections. Presidential election years have become increasingly more parliamentary, as every 2016 Senate election and 400 out of 435 House races voted the same way as the presidential races in those constituencies. While our midterms are getting more parliamentary rather than the "I vote for the person, not the party" approach that voters used to claim to follow, there is also a very strong referendum element to non-presidential cycles. A political party holding a majority in the House and having a sitting president with approval ratings in the 30s or lower has the potential for real problems.

It is absolutely true that there are many fewer competitive congressional districts than there used to be. The number of swing districts—seats that have a PVI of between D+5 and R+5, within 5 points of the country as a whole—dropped from 164 in 1997, when the PVI was first calculated, to just 72 now, a very steady progression downward caused by a combination of population sorting, people choosing to live in environs with like-minded voters, and partisan gerrymandering—drawing legislative and congressional district lines with partisan intent. But while this has had an effect of diminishing the volatility in the House, it does not inoculate a party from the impact of an unpopular president, a lethargic base, and an energetic opposition party.

Lower voter turnout in midterm elections means that who chooses to show up is vitally important. If one party's base is passionate, or better yet, angry, and the other party's base is complacent or disappointed, big and often unusual things can happen. The impact of a wave election may be less than it used to be, but it doesn't mean that it can't be a wave. The kind of wave that once would have generated presidential-party losses of 63 House seats (2010), 55 seats (1946), 54 seats (1994), 48 seats (1958, 1966, and 1974), or 30 seats (2006) might translate into losses of just two or three dozen with today's congressional district boundaries and population-distribution patterns. But when just 24 seats will flip the House, it can certainly happen.

The late Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neill famously pronounced, "All politics is local." In wave years, as opposed to normal "all politics is local" elections, there is a cascading effect, with seats flipping that would never flip in a normal political environment. That's why my variation of the O'Neill adage is, "All politics is local, except when it's not." Normal years are localized; wave years are not. The question is whether any given election will be come nationalized, will be a wave election—whether it has the dynamics that can turn a normal year into one that isn't.