

NATIONAL POLITICS | By Charlie Cook, April 18, 2017

## Big Warning Signs for the GOP



*This story was originally published on [nationaljournal.com](http://nationaljournal.com) on April 14, 2017*

The bottom didn't fall out for Republicans in this week's House special election to replace newly-minted CIA Director Mike Pompeo, but a yellow caution light is definitely flashing for the GOP.

State Treasurer Ron Estes, the Republican nominee in Kansas's 4th District, beat civil rights attorney James Thompson, the Democratic standard-bearer, by 7 points, 53 to 46 percent. This wouldn't be a bad margin if Pompeo had not won the district by 31 points last November, President Trump had not carried it by 27 points (60 to 33 percent), and Mitt Romney not prevailed by 26 points (62 to 36 percent) in 2012. The 4th District has a Cook Political Report Partisan Voting Index (PVI) of R+15, meaning that it tends to vote about 15 points more Republican than the country as a whole, making it the 74th-most-Republican district in the country. In other words, a Republican should have won easily there. With another special election coming up Tuesday in Georgia's 6th District to replace new Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, the GOP needs to be very nervous—this district is not nearly as ruby-red Republican as the one in Kansas is.

Every congressional election has unique circumstances, making uninformed generalizations dangerous. In the Kansas race, Estes had a burden to carry on several levels. The biggest was that Kansas's finances are a disaster, the result—at least in my mind—of overly aggressive tax cuts promoted by Gov. Sam Brownback, Estes, and many others in the more conservative wing of the Kansas GOP (the state GOP has two very discernible and combative wings). But that split in the party does not begin to explain this dramatic underperformance. Pre-special-election GOP polling showed that intensity among Democrats in the district was significantly higher than among Republicans, a problem which a congressional majority party that is also holding the White House has to worry about in midterm elections.

Both party campaign committees played the Kansas special election smartly. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the Kansas Democratic Party did not spend anything until the last couple of days before the election; to do so would have been the kiss of death in such a rock-ribbed Republican district. They wanted this campaign to fly under the radar and not become a red-Republican-versus-blue-Democratic race in the minds of reliably conservative GOP voters. The theory was to let GOP voters stay lethargic, some disillusioned with what is going on with their party in Washington, while the Democratic voters in the district would vent their anger at President Trump and the GOP. This reasoning may not impress liberal activists, armchair analysts on the Left, and the netroots, but anyone articulating the opposite line patently doesn't understand congressional elections in general or special elections in particular.

The National Republican Congressional Committee and GOP consultants saw they had a problem in an unexpected place in the last week and went to DEFCON 1. On short notice and with a ton of robocalls—from Trump, Vice

President Mike Pence, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and others—along with an election-eve visit from Sen. Ted Cruz, they managed to stir up enough Republican voters, particularly in rural and small-town areas outside of Sedgwick County (Wichita), to pull Estes across the finish line. Late GOP polling showed that among 4th District voters following the race most closely, the Democrat had actually pulled slightly ahead. The Cook Political Report rating for the race shifted from “Solid Republican” to “Likely Republican” on Thursday, April 6, and one more notch to “Lean Republican” on Monday, the day before the election.

The Georgia special election coming up on Tuesday is a jungle-primary election, as the top two finishers of the 18 filed candidates, including 11 Republicans and five Democrats, will go into a June 20 runoff. The district is primarily Atlanta suburbs, centered on Roswell. Romney beat President Obama by 24 points there, 61 to 37 percent, but Trump prevailed by only a point and a half, 48 to 47 percent, last year. That reflects some change in the nature of the district but more that this is a traditional Republican, upscale suburban district rather than a Trump-oriented, small-town, or rural and populist one. The PVI for this district is R+8, making it the 165th-most-Republican district in the country. Most of the action in congressional elections happens in swing districts that are between R+5 and D+5.

There are five Republican candidates splitting up most of the GOP vote and only one Democrat, Jon Ossoff—a 30-year-old former congressional staffer and film documentarian who had raised an astonishing \$8.3 million as of March 29, largely in out-of-state, small donations from a very agitated Democratic and liberal donor base. While Democrats maintained a largely hands-off status in Kansas, in Georgia there is a full-court press, with at least nine DCCC field staff on the ground. Democrats are working hard to get Ossoff across the finish line on Tuesday, avoiding a runoff.

The highest-profile Republican candidate is former Georgia Secretary of State Karen Handel, but a few more hopefuls also have some notoriety: Bob Gray, running as the Trump-style businessman, coming out of the tech sector; former state Sen. Judson Hill, more the establishment business candidate; David Abrams, another businessman but from the energy sector; Bruce LeVell, a jewelry businessman who ran Trump’s National Diversity Coalition; and former state Sen. Dan Moody. None have particularly caught on, and the immediate challenge for Republicans is to keep Ossoff under 50 percent, forcing a runoff.

Polling shows Ossoff within striking distance of 50 percent. If he wins on Tuesday, this will be a big deal. Should Republicans force a runoff and ultimately win the district in June, that would be a gigantic cause for relief among Republicans, while a Democratic win in the runoff would be a good sign for Democrats but not earth-shattering like an April shutout victory would be.