

GEORGIA HOUSE | By David Wasserman, April 19, 2017

GA-06: Still a Toss Up as Ossoff and Handel Advance to Runoff



If you had told Democrats three months ago that first-time candidate Jon Ossoff would have taken 48 percent of the vote to advance to the GA-06 runoff against GOP former Secretary of State Karen Handel (20 percent), they would have been ecstatic. Now, after all the celebrity tweets, over \$10 million raised and more hype than any House race has ever generated, Ossoff's failure to hit 50 percent has President Trump and the GOP crowing.

Let's take a step back and put things in perspective. If Democrats are to win the House next November, they absolutely need to win seats like GA-06 — suburbs Trump won narrowly (in this case by one point) that are trending towards Democrats. But 1) one race is not make or break 2) this race is not over and 2) even if Democrats strike out in all three of the KS-04, MT-AL and GA-06 special elections, all three outcomes could still bode poorly for Republicans.

Last night, Ossoff and four other Democrats combined for 48.9 percent and 11 Republicans combined for 51 percent. The good news for Democrats is that the race is more a referendum on Trump, who won the district by a similar 1.5 points, and less a reflection of the district's partisan lean (Cook PVI of R+8). The solace for Republicans is that after Democrats spent over \$10 million to rally their base, the Trump needle barely moved from last November.

The June 20 runoff starts out very competitive, but while Democrats have already been energized for months, the two month lag time gives Republicans an even longer window to motivate their base, which was slow to engage in the primary, but turned out just enough on Election Day to prevent Ossoff from winning outright.

It's easy to predict how each side will approach the Ossoff-Handel matchup. Nationally, Democrats will use Handel's past attacks on Planned Parenthood and [2012 dust-up](#) at Susan G. Komen for the Cure to keep Ossoff's fundraising turbo-charged. In the district, however, Ossoff will portray the choice as "future vs. past:" a 30-year old, non-ideological fresh face versus a 55-year old "career politician" who is out for herself.

An ad GOP rival Dan Moody ran against her last week is a ready-made template for Democrats: "Over the last 15 years, Karen Handel's run 6 times for 5 different offices," a narrator intones. "She usually loses, and she didn't even finish the jobs we did give her." The ad alludes to a Lexus Handel leased with taxpayer funds while she was Secretary of State, a symbol sure to be a Democratic refrain in the runoff.

In contrast, Republicans can't wait to frame the "insider vs. outsider" runoff choice in geographic terms: a longstanding public servant from the community versus an over-ambitious Democrat who doesn't even live in the district, took payment from Qatar-based Al-Jazeera for use of his films, and is bankrolled by both Nancy Pelosi and Hollywood notables like Jane Fonda, Samuel L. Jackson, Chelsea Handler and Alyssa Milano.

But notice who's missing from these scripts? Donald Trump. For a race that's been billed by multiple cable networks and major print outlets as a "serious test" for his presidency, it's surprisingly devoid of talk about him, beyond Handel tweeting about receiving a congratulatory call last night. That's because in a district this evenly divided, attacking him and embracing him are both risks. But that could change if his approval rises or sinks by June.

Bottom line: Ossoff's staggering fundraising has blown the importance of GA-06's special election way out of proportion, and last night didn't change much. The runoff remains a **Toss Up**, although Democrats could struggle to maintain their high energy level for another two months. And even if Handel manages to keep the seat in GOP hands, it's no guarantee that Republicans will hold the House 16 months later.