

HOUSE OVERVIEW | By David Wasserman, May 12, 2017

House Specials Update: MT-AL Moves to Lean Republican



Georgia's special election is now officially the most expensive House race of all time: the candidates and parties will likely spend in excess of \$40 million to win that deadlocked race. But it's easy to forget there are two specials unfolding in places that have actually elected Democrats to federal office in the last decade (unlike GA-06): Montana's At-Large seat on May 25, and South Carolina's 5th CD on June 20.

Of the two, Montana gives Democrats the better opportunity to score an upset, but both are still serious uphill battles considering President Trump won Montana 56 percent to 36 percent and SC-05 57 percent to 39 percent. This week, we're moving Montana to the Lean Republican column. SC-05 remains in Solid Republican for now, but the margins in both races could help tell us how voters are reacting to the turbulence in Washington.

MT-AL: SPECIAL (Zinke) (R) - Entire State

Lean Republican. With two weeks to go before the May 25 special election, both Democrat Rob Quist and Republican Greg Gianforte are well-known, as are their substantial flaws. A Democrat hasn't won Montana's House seat since 1994, but Democrats' outrage in the wake of the AHCA's House passage and Trump's personnel moves make the race less of a sure thing. Both parties now acknowledge that Gianforte's lead has tightened to the high single digits.

Quist, a banjo-playing rancher who looks like he's straight out of a rodeo, is trying to tap into Montana's tradition of electing left-leaning populists every once in a while. He hasn't matched Georgia Democrat Jon Ossoff's "Netroots" stardom, but he's raised enough money from the left online to be a solid TV presence through the election and enjoys the guidance of Gov. Steve Bullock's political organization.

Like Quist, Gianforte was nominated by party convention. Gianforte grew up on the East coast and moved to Montana in 1995. In 2011, he sold his Bozeman software company to Oracle for \$1.5 billion, and lost the governor's race by 4 points last fall after Bullock attacked his New Jersey roots. Gianforte hasn't lacked for money in this race, and despite his high tech credentials, he wears a camouflage cap in his ads.

In the last month, the race has taken a hard negative turn as the DCCC, NRCC and allied PACs have spent liberally. But if this race is a referendum on Trump, you wouldn't know it from the decidedly localized ads. Democrats have largely reprised Bullock's hits on Gianforte from the governor's race: that he's an out-of-touch millionaire who supported a state sales tax, supported selling off public lands, and blocked public stream access on his lavish property.

In late April, Republicans dumped now-famous opposition research detailing Quist's musical performances at a nudist resort. But on the airwaves, Republicans have stuck to accusing "Liberal Rob Quist" of more fully dressed transgressions: failing to pay taxes on rental income, not having a valid hunting or fishing license, supporting a

national gun registry and "stiffing" a contractor he once hired to build a dance floor at his house.

Gianforte enjoyed a double-digit lead for most of April, but the House's passage of the AHCA may have given Democrats a fresh jolt of outrage right after vote-by-mail ballots dropped on May 1. In a sign of just how unpopular the legislation is nationally, Gianforte has refused to take a public position on the bill even while appearing to praise its passage on a conference call with donors. Up until now, the healthcare has been absent from ads.

In a late April Garin-Hart-Yang poll taken for Senate Majority PAC, Gianforte led Quist 49 percent to 43 percent. The AHCA and turmoil surrounding Trump's firing of FBI Director Jim Comey could add uncertainty in the final two weeks, but Quist's considerable baggage may prevent Democrats from taking advantage. Still, both parties are treating this as highly competitive contest, and for that reason it moves to the Lean Republican column.

SC-05: SPECIAL (Mulvaney) (R) - North central: Rock Hill

Solid Republican. Some Democrats point to the results of KS-04's special election to suggest Democratic tax attorney Archie Parnell could pull off a huge upset here on June 20. In Kansas, Republicans only won by 7 points in a district Trump carried by 27. Theoretically, the same swing would narrowly elect Parnell. But it's not that simple. Not only is this district more racially polarized; the GOP nominee will have had practice rallying his base.

Republican state House Speaker Pro Tempore Tommy Pope and former state Rep. Ralph Norman will face off in a May 16 primary runoff for the right to face Parnell on June 20. In the initial primary on May 2, the pair virtually tied at 30 percent of the vote each, with businessman Tom Mullikin at 20 percent and former state GOP chair Chad Connelly at 14 percent. The quick turnaround to the runoff doesn't leave much time to corral new voters.

Pope started out with more institutional support and higher name recognition from his role prosecuting the the Susan Smith murder trial in 1995. Norman was the GOP nominee against Democratic Rep. John Spratt in 2006, taking 43 percent of the vote. They share a base in York County, which includes suburbs of Charlotte, and took 82 percent of the initial primary vote there. The real runoff battle will take place outside of York, where they combined for just 41 percent.

Norman has benefited from several developments in the past few weeks. First, the Club for Growth endorsed him and went on the air to attack Pope as a wealthy personal injury lawyer who sought a "backdoor" plan to implement Obamacare in the legislature. Second, Connelly (who comes from the rural western end of SC-05) has endorsed Norman. Mullikin has yet to make an endorsement. Still, the runoff is expected to be very close.

Parnell raised \$243,000 (including \$100,000 from himself) through mid-April, and his self-deprecating ads playing himself up as a tax nerd helped him win the Democratic primary with 71 percent. At first glance, a lawyer who worked in compliance for Goldman Sachs before moving back to his hometown of Sumter would seem an awkward fit for rural South Carolina, but for decades this district elected Spratt, a wonk who chaired the House Budget Committee.

However, Parnell is a long way from making this race competitive. First, unlike in GA-06 or KS-04, voting patterns are very racially polarized in this 27 percent African-American seat and there aren't as many persuadable

voters. Second, it's not yet apparent that Pope or Norman have a fatal flaw. And third, it's easy to imagine either attacking Parnell, who lacks a southern accent, as a Wall Street elitist who doesn't share the district's values.

There hasn't been much polling in this district to date, but Democrats looking to pin their hopes for a wave on Parnell should remember the GOP primary drew out 39,000 voters while the Democratic primary attracted just 18,000. This contest remains in the Solid Republican column.