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## Comey's Firing Shakes Up Jittery Republicans



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It's time for congressional Republicans and their strategists to start popping their blood-pressure meds. Even before President Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, the potential for GOP problems in next year's midterm elections were real. Obviously no one knows what will happen in an election almost 18 months away. But now is when incumbents start deciding whether they will run again. From a party perspective, it's always easier to defend an incumbent's seat than win an open one.

It's also the time when challengers and open-seat candidates start making decisions. Several of the strongest potential Republican challengers to vulnerable Democratic senators expressed concerns to me about the political environment next year—and that was before Trump's controversial dismissal of Comey.

The Republican majority in the Senate is not much in danger because Democrats are defending 25 seats in 2018, 10 of which are in states that Trump carried last year, to just nine for the GOP. Even so, the difference between a level playing field for Republicans and one with stiff headwinds is the difference between gaining three to five seats versus just breaking even or perhaps suffering the loss of a seat. So it's a big deal whether Republicans come out of 2018 with as many as 57 Senate seats, or just stay at 52, or even drop to 51.

But it's the House that's on the knife's edge. Midterm-election history, combined with Trump's dismal job-approval ratings, already put the House in play. The Comey firing added to Republican miseries, and buttressed the Democratic Party's argument that at least one chamber of Congress should be taken out of Republican hands in order to keep Trump in check. But more than that, the firing is enough to make quite a few Republicans wince—not a good thing when the mood in the GOP already seemed downbeat. The firing also lifted the already high enthusiasm of Democrats.

Many political analysts were focused on the special-election runoff on June 20 in Georgia's 6th Congressional District, to fill the seat previously held by Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price. Handicappers were calling that contest a toss-up before the Comey mess.

An earlier special election, on May 25, to replace Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke in Montana's at-large seat, is increasingly being seen as another canary in the coal mine. While Trump carried the Big Sky State by 21 points last year, Republican nominee Greg Gianforte was leading Democrat Rob Quist by just 8 points, 45 to 37 percent, in an independent survey by Gravis Marketing and by 6 points in a survey by one of the top Democratic polling firms, Garin-Hart-Yang Research. The Gravis poll was taken in the first week of May, and the Garin-Hart-Yang poll was conducted April 25-27. The Democratic poll's respondents said they voted for Trump by 22 points, marginally better than the actual vote in Montana last year. Among respondents most interested in the race, Gianforte's lead was

just 1 point, 48 to 47 percent.

I remain somewhat skeptical about the Democrats' chances in Montana. The path to a Democratic majority is more likely to go through upscale, urban, and suburban districts than rural districts with large white populations. But if the Montana vote is close, it will send tremors through a lot of Republican members who may not have felt vulnerable.

It is certainly a presidential prerogative to fire an FBI director, but this is more complicated than that. My view is that at every point in the FBI's investigation of Hillary Clinton's email use, Comey did what he thought was right. He acted with the best of intentions, and did what he thought was in the best interest of preserving the integrity of his agency, even though in hindsight these decisions turned out to be mistakes.

His actions in the closing weeks of the campaign made the election almost exclusively about Clinton and ultimately helped determine the outcome of the election, though there were certainly plenty of other factors that were important as well. Arguably an FBI or Justice Department inspector general might have recommended that Comey be dismissed, but given the expanding nature of the bureau's investigation into Russia's meddling in last year's election, Trump's firing of Comey was a huge mistake, both in terms of policy and politics. It was a rash act entirely consistent with the worst fears that many had about a Trump presidency, and it certainly will not help his party next year.