

# Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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## 2026 Senate Ratings

### BATTLEGROUND

#### Democratic-Held (4)

Jon Ossoff (D-Ga.)  
MI Open (Gary Peters, D)  
MN Open (Tina Smith, DFL)  
NH Open (Jeanne Shaheen, D)

#### Republican-Held (2)

Susan Collins (R-Maine)  
Thom Tillis (R-N.C.)

#### Solid Democratic (9)

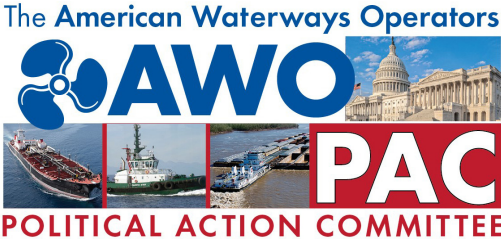
IL Open (Dick Durbin, D)  
John Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)  
Chris Coons (D-Del.)  
Ed Markey (D-Mass.)  
Cory Booker (D-N.J.)  
Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.)  
Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.)  
Jack Reed (D-R.I.)  
Mark Warner (D-Va.)

#### Solid Republican (20)

KY Open (McConnell, R)  
Tommy Tuberville (R-Ala.)  
Dan Sullivan (R-Ak.)  
Tom Cotton (R-Ark.)  
Ashley Moody (R-Fla.)  
Jim Risch (R-Idaho)  
Joni Ernst (R-Iowa)  
Roger Marshall (R-Kan.)  
Bill Cassidy (R-La.)  
Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)  
Steve Daines (R-Mont.)  
Pete Ricketts (R-Neb.)  
Jon Husted (R-Ohio)  
Markwayne Mullin (R-Okla.)  
Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.)  
Mike Rounds (R-S.D.)  
Bill Hagerty (R-Tenn.)  
John Cornyn (R-Texas)  
Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.V.)  
Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.)

### CALENDAR

<b>June 10</b>	New Jersey Gubernatorial Primary
<b>July 15</b>	Arizona's 7th Special Election Democratic Primary
<b>Nov. 4</b>	Texas' 18th District Special Primary
<b>Nov. 4</b>	New Jersey & Virginia Gubernatorial Elections



## New Hampshire Senate: Same Races, Familiar Faces

By Jacob Rubashkin

When three-term incumbent Jeanne Shaheen announced she wouldn't run for re-election next year, she introduced another potential headache for Senate Democrats, who are already defending two Trump-won states and are hard-pressed to find offensive opportunities.

But two months later, Democrats are feeling better about the Granite State, thanks to some lucky breaks and a decline in President Donald Trump's approval rating.

New Hampshire is a fickle and fiercely independent state, and without Shaheen in the race, Democrats can't rest easy. According to *Inside Elections'* Baseline, New Hampshire is the sixth most competitive state, with an average Democratic advantage of 2.3 points.

But at the moment it's a lesser concern than Georgia and Michigan. And for a party that needs a net gain of four seats to recapture the majority, that's a welcome respite.

### The Lay of the Land

New Hampshire's recent political history has something to offer to both parties. At the presidential level, the Granite State has voted Democratic in every election after 2000 (when it provided George W. Bush with decisive electoral votes). In 2024, Vice President Kamala Harris carried it by 3 points over former President Donald Trump, a decrease from Joe Biden's 53-45 percent win in 2020 but an improvement from Hillary Clinton's 47.6-47.3 percent photo finish in 2016.

At the Senate level, Democrats have won five of the last six Senate races. Most recently, Sen. Maggie Hassan outpaced Republican Don Bolduc, 55-44 percent, in 2022, and Shaheen easily won, 57-41 percent, in 2020.

Last decade's races were closer, with Shaheen clinching a second term 51-48 percent in 2014 and Hassan winning a brutally close, 48-47.8 percent race over incumbent Republican Kelly Ayotte in 2016.

At the House level, Democrats have held both seats since 2016.

But at the state level, the picture is the opposite. Republicans have held the governor's mansion since 2016, when Chris Sununu won the first of four two-year terms. Sununu won a close first race but his subsequent victories came by double-digit margins. In 2024, Ayotte succeeded Sununu, winning her race by 9 points, 54-45 percent.

Republicans have also held complete control of the state legislature for 11 of the past 15 years.

### The Democratic Candidate

Rep. Chris Pappas is the only prominent Democrat in the race and barring a surprise will be his party's nominee, even though the primary

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# Wisconsin 3: Drifting Red or Drifting Blue?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Wisconsin is often described as the capital of the political world. But the Badger State is home to just one competitive congressional seat, western Wisconsin's 3rd District.

The 3rd, currently represented by Republican Derrick Van Orden, has an *Inside Elections* Baseline score of just R+1.3, making it one of the most evenly divided districts in the country. But that doesn't tell the whole story, as the district was a Democratic stronghold not too long ago before it shifted rightward along with many others in the Midwest.

After sitting on the periphery of the battleground for three cycles, this district is firmly within Democrats' sights, especially as 2024 nominee Rebecca Cooke returns for a well-funded rematch against Van Orden.

A potential redistricting case may also upend this race later in the year.

## The Lay of the Land

Wisconsin's 3rd District covers the Badger State's Driftless Area, running along the Mississippi River from the outer Twin Cities suburbs south to the Wisconsin-Illinois border. The 3rd also extends a tendril out to include Portage County in Central Wisconsin.

The mostly rural district has a handful of population centers: 19 percent of residents live in the Eau Claire metro area, 16 percent in the La Crosse area, and 10 percent in the Stevens Point area.

Uncoincidentally, Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Portage (Stevens Point) were the only three counties carried by Cooke and Vice President Kamala Harris in 2024.

Roughly 90 percent of the district's residents are non-Hispanic white, while 4 percent are Hispanic, 2 percent are Asian, and 3 percent are mixed race. Both the 3rd's median household income (\$69,000) and bachelor's degree attainment rate (29 percent) fall below the national averages of \$77,700 and 36 percent.

Farming remains an important part of the 3rd's economy. The agriculture industry employs nearly three times as many residents as the national average, and the Driftless Area in particular has a robust organic farming sector, thanks to its unique geography that makes the massive farms found elsewhere in the Midwest less feasible.

Politically, the 3rd has moved sharply from being a Democratic stronghold in the early 2010s to a GOP-leaning seat.

In 2008, the district would have voted for Barack Obama by 20 points,

59-39 percent and in 2012 it would have voted for Obama by 11 points, 55-44 percent. But in 2016, Trump carried the 3rd by 5 points, 49-45 percent, and by a similar 51-47 percent margin in 2020. In 2024, Trump won the 3rd by 8 points, 53-45 percent.

Some Democrats further down the ballot have fared better. Gov. Tony Evers carried the 3rd in both his 2018 and 2022 wins, by 2 and 1 point margins, respectively. In the Senate, Republican Ron Johnson carried the 3rd by 2 points in 2016 and 6 points in 2022, while Democrat Tammy Baldwin won it by 12 points in 2018 but came 4 points short in 2024, even though she still won statewide.

In the 2025 state supreme court race, which was nominally nonpartisan but featured candidates endorsed by the major parties and saw upward of \$100 million in spending, Democratic-aligned candidate Susan Crawford won the 3rd by 8 points, 54-46 percent.

## The Republican Incumbent

Van Orden, 55, is in his second term. The Hennepin County, Minnesota-born Van Orden enlisted in the Navy after high school,



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Derrick Van Orden

serving from 1988 to 2014. As a Navy SEAL, Van Orden saw five combat deployments, including to Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

After leaving the military, Van Orden earned an undergraduate degree from Excelsior College

(2014). He appeared in small roles in several films, including 2012's *Act of Valor*, which starred active-duty Navy SEALs, and 2019's *Running with the Devil*, starring Nicolas Cage, and also wrote a book, "A Book of Man: A Navy SEAL's Guide to the Lost Art of Manhood." That earned him an appearance on Fox & Friends in 2015 in which he (unsuccessfully) taught host Brian Kilmeade and former Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown how to change a tire.

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Berge, 45, has served on the Eau Claire City Council since 2018, when she ousted an incumbent councilmember. A mental health counselor, Berge attended University of Wisconsin-Stout for her undergraduate (2002) and masters in mental health counseling (2006) degrees. She has practiced in Eau Claire since 2006.

In 2020, Berge ran for a state assembly seat, losing to incumbent Jesse James, 61-39 percent, as Trump carried the district, 57-41 percent. Berge was endorsed in that race by Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, one of 172 state legislative candidates the independent endorsed that year.

She ran unopposed for re-election in 2021 and was chosen as president of the council in 2023.

Her campaign team includes the Adwell Group for paid media.

Benjamin briefly served on the Eau Claire City Council in 2019, winning an at-large seat along with four other candidates. She resigned from the council later that year for personal reasons. An Eau Claire resident since 1999, Benjamin was one of the first (if not the first) openly transgender elected officeholders in Wisconsin; she previously founded and ran a digital marketing firm until 2023.

## The Democratic Primary

Cooke begins the primary with a hefty fundraising advantage, a name recognition edge over her opponents, and near-universal support in Washington, DC among power players on the Democratic side.

In an early show of strength she rolled out endorsements from 15 members of Congress, and reported raising \$1 million in her first month in the race. And she has backing from EMILY's List, which doesn't always intervene in primaries with multiple women running.

Perhaps most crucially for Cooke, Pocan — the outspoken progressive from neighboring Madison who strongly backed Shankland in 2024 — doesn't appear to be interested in making Cooke's life difficult in a primary this cycle.

While Pocan hasn't endorsed Cooke yet, one Democratic source said his priority was beating Van Orden, not litigating the primary.

Berge has been more aggressive in targeting Cooke in the early days of the campaign, revisiting some of Pocan's criticisms of Cooke and labeling her effort a "top-down campaign." Berge also pointed to Cooke's loss in 2024 as a reason not to nominate her again.

Beyond fundraising and name recognition, the challenge for both Berge and Benjamin will be that previous nominees have built in advantages that are tough to overcome, especially after Democrats spent millions of dollars to boost Cooke's image in the 2024 cycle. And voters are often willing to give past nominees another chance, especially after a close race.

It's rare that a previous nominee running again loses their primary. From 2018 through 2024, unsuccessful nominees who ran the following year won their next primary 38 out of 43 times, according to data compiled by elections analyst Nathaniel Rakich.

Some Democratic sources are cautiously optimistic that the primary will be an uneventful affair, with Berge and Benjamin potentially not making it to the ballot at all. One national strategist compared it to the Democratic primary in Iowa's 3rd District last year, when Lanon Baccam, the preferred candidate of House Democratic leadership, faced a challenge from local nonprofit leader Melissa Vine — Baccam outraised Vine by 9-to-1 and largely ignored her candidacy, eventually winning 85-15 percent.

That means Cooke will have a much longer runway to focus on Van Orden compared to her situation in 2024, when she had to spend \$1.4

million to get past Shankland in mid-August, leaving her with just a few months to run a general election campaign.

## The General Election

With both parties anticipating a rematch, the expectation is for a hard-fought and expensive race between Van Orden and Cooke next year.

Cooke entered the race on March 11 and raised \$1 million in her first three weeks, entering April with \$960,000 in the bank. (In comparison,

she raised \$1.2 million over the first nine months of her 2024 campaign.)

Van Orden has also stepped up his fundraising, raising \$1.1 million over the first three months of 2025. That represents his second-best fundraising quarter



Rebecca Cooke

ever, just trailing his \$1.4 million October 2024 report. He began April with \$1.2 million in cash-on-hand.

Democrats acknowledge that many of the attacks they have levied against Van Orden haven't stuck to the self-described "salty old war dog" over the years, and that focusing on his policies more than his personality is the key to beating him.

In 2020, Kind and his allies highlighted passages from Van Orden's book to accuse the Republican of sexual harassment. That attack took a back seat in 2022 to attacks on Van Orden for his presence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Two years later, the primary personal hit on the Republican was a profane late-night tirade Van Orden directed at high school Senate pages in the Capitol building.

"He's a target rich environment," said one Cooke ally, "and it's on us to give one coherent narrative to voters that he doesn't deserve to be Congress."

To that end, Cooke and her allies are more likely to focus on economic concerns like cost of living, agriculture jobs, and possible cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

"I think we'll see more about those issues and less about his personal issues, from the entire ecosystem," said one national Democratic strategist.

In particular, Democrats see Cooke as well-suited to delivering that economic message; one of her most-aired ads in 2024 featured her sitting with her aging parents talking about their high medical bills. "She's good at capturing what people are pissed off about," said one ally, "it's not as simple as the environment being better for Democrats, it's that it's better for her specifically."

While Republicans don't appear to be sweating Medicaid issues in this district at the moment — one GOP source said they felt comfortable in Van Orden's ability to shift that conversation back to illegal immigration — the looming threat of tariffs and their potential impact on the agriculture industry has some strategists feeling skittish.

"If Wisconsin finds itself in a situation where its ag exports are going to suffer because of the tariff situation," said one longtime Wisconsin Republican, "Van Orden is going to have to take some sort of role in saying he's gotten some issues with the tariffs."

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An ally of the congressman expressed a similar sentiment, telling *Inside Elections* the tariffs were the biggest “wildcard” in the race and the issue that could cause the biggest headache for Van Orden.

But Republicans still feel time is on their side to right the economic ship before voters really tune in. “The White House needs to slow down and make sure that voters are aware of the great stuff that they’re doing,” said one national GOP strategist.

Another operative concurred, pointing to the opportunity for House Republicans to pass an extension of the Trump tax cuts as a key piece of Van Orden’s message, saying he is “going to be able to run on some things and talk about how things have gotten better.”

Republicans are confident in the playbook they employed against Cooke in 2024, with ads portraying her as a shady liberal political operative masquerading as a populist. In particular, GOP ads tied Cooke, who ran as a Blue Dog Democrat, to the more vocally progressive candidates she supported or worked with in the past, such as 2022 Democratic Senate nominee Mandela Barnes.

In 2024, Republicans spent \$4.9 million airing TV ads highlighting Cooke’s past work as a political consultant, per AdImpact — more than half of the \$7.6 million GOP groups spent on TV ads overall — and intend to dig deeper into her fundraising work to find more hits.

Cooke’s allies believe that those attacks didn’t stick last cycle thanks to her ability to showcase her working class bona fides (some of her ads featured her in her waitress uniform), and point to her overperformance in the district’s most GOP-friendly and rural areas as evidence that her profile and message had appeal among Republican-leaning voters. While Cooke outran Harris by 3.8 points in the district’s three Democratic counties, she outran her by 5.2 points in the rest of the district. Cooke’s image also remained in positive territory on Election Day.

That doesn’t deter Van Orden’s allies, who are confident that a

less crowded paid media environment in 2026 will make it easier for Republicans to drive home negative messaging on Cooke.

In 2024, thanks to the concurrent president and Senate races in Wisconsin, voters in the 3rd District were subjected to \$260 million in TV advertising. But in 2026, the only other major contest will be the gubernatorial race. In 2022, 3rd District voters saw just \$27 million in general election advertising in that race.

And unlike in 2024, Van Orden’s allies anticipate that the spending disparity between Democratic and Republican outside groups will not be so significant.

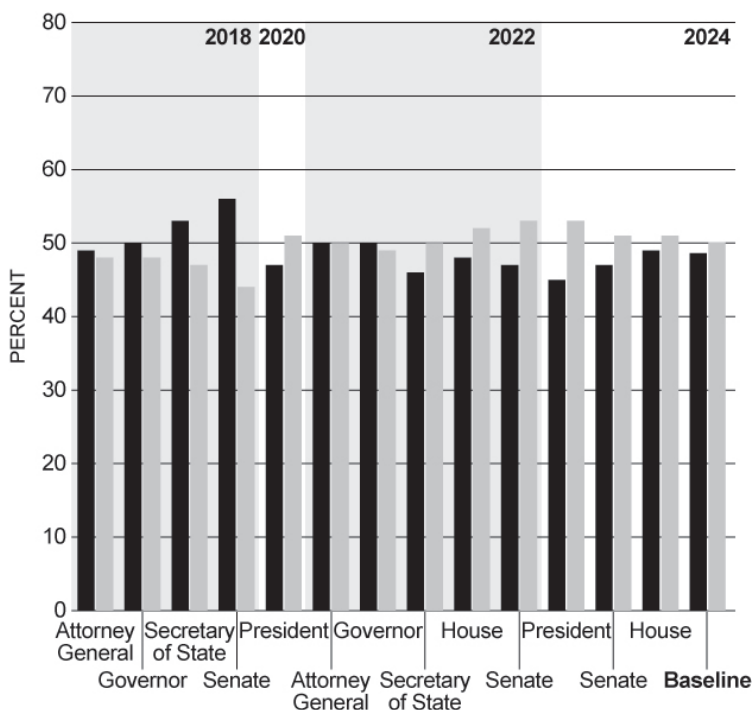
Democrats are banking on an improved political environment and more favorable turnout to help boost Cooke past Van Orden. Operatives from both parties are loath to read too much into April’s state supreme court election (Republicans especially). But an analysis by *Split Ticket* found that voter turnout in the Driftless Area was 13 points more Democratic than in 2024, the most significant change of any region in the state and indicating that Republicans had the most difficulty motivating their voters there.

The liberal judicial candidate’s landslide victory can’t be ignored, especially because the spending and participation rivaled a typical midterm year. Turnout hit 51 percent in April, not far from the 58 percent rate in the 2022 midterm elections. “If [national Republicans] don’t want to recognize that dynamic,” said one Wisconsin Republican of the Democratic enthusiasm edge last month, “they’ll lose another election.”

As it will be for Republicans across the country, the challenge for Van Orden will be to bring out the Trump coalition without Trump on the ballot — and, depending on the competitiveness of the gubernatorial race, no other major race driving turnout.

Republican strategists point to Van Orden winning in 2022 despite Evers’ carrying the district as evidence he can outperform the top of the ticket, though in the Senate race Johnson won the 3rd by 6 points.

## Statewide Election Results in Wisconsin’s 3rd District



## How It Plays Out

One complicating factor is the potential for another round of congressional redistricting in Wisconsin before the 2026 elections.

The current map was selected by the state Supreme Court in 2022 under a novel “least changes” standard that preserved much of a GOP gerrymander implemented in 2011. While Republicans in the state legislature had initially drawn the 3rd District as a Democratic district more than a decade ago, its shift in the 2010s meant the court’s decision cemented it as a GOP-leaning district.

Following a change in the court’s ideological composition in 2023, Democrats successfully challenged the state’s legislative maps, leading to

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## Inside Elections Podcast

Nathan, Jacob and expert guests discuss the latest election news in a nonpartisan, data-driven and accessible way.

**Episode 45:** Reaction to Trump’s agenda on the ground in key states and election coverage with Adam Levy of the BBC

**Episode 44:** Trump, Tariffs, the Economy and Elections with Laura Weiss of Punchbowl News

**Episode 43:** House Special Election analysis w/ Erin Covey of The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter

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significant gains in both chambers. A similar suit targeting the congressional map stalled out last year, but there may be a renewed push following Democrats' win in another state supreme court election last month.

Democratic sources say a new map would likely target the 1st District south of Milwaukee before the 3rd District. But it's possible to redraw the 3rd to be more Democratic, potentially by including some of Dane County (Madison).

There are plenty of unanswered questions, but at best a redrawn map would be a status quo result for Van Orden, and at worst it could make his re-election more difficult.

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is more than a year away.

Fellow Rep. Maggie Goodlander had publicly flirted with a bid but ultimately passed, leaving Pappas a clear path to the nomination.

At just 44, the Manchester-born Pappas is already a fixture in state politics. He has held elected office for more than two decades, but the underlying source of his relationships in the state is his family restaurant, the century-old Puritan Backroom, which claims to have invented the chicken tender and which Pappas still co-owns and helps operate.

After graduating from Harvard in 2002 he won a seat in New Hampshire's overstuffed state House, the only Democrat to win one of six available seats in his multi-member district. He outpaced the seventh-place finisher by just 73 votes.

Pappas won a more comfortable re-election in 2004, and in 2006 he won a tight race for Hillsborough County Treasurer, 51.5-48.5 percent. In 2008, Pappas won re-election over Republican Bob Burns, 52.5-47.5 percent, but in 2010 Burns defeated him in a landslide, 58-42 percent — Pappas' sole electoral loss.

In 2012, Pappas got his revenge on Burns, beating him 53-42 percent for a seat on New Hampshire's Executive Council, a unique body that shares some authority with the governor. He beat Burns again in 2014, 52-48 percent, and won a third term, 49-46 percent, in 2016.

In 2018, Pappas won a crowded Democratic primary for the nomination in the 1st District, which spans the eastern half of the state and had voted narrowly for Trump in 2016. In the general election, Pappas outpaced Republican police chief Eddie Edwards, 54-45 percent, becoming the first openly gay representative from the Granite State. (If elected to the Senate, Pappas would be the first openly gay man to serve in the chamber.)

In 2020, Pappas faced former state party official Matt Mowers in a race that garnered minimal outside attention; the congressman won, 51-46 percent.

In 2022, future White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt defeated Mowers in the GOP primary despite national Republicans backing him. Outside GOP groups still poured in nearly \$10 million to defeat Pappas



Chris Pappas

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

## The Bottom Line

While Trump's performance at the top of the ticket might make the 3rd District appear at the edge of the battleground, non-Trump Republicans have struggled to match his success, and Democrats have shown that with the right candidate and right environment they can carry the district.

Democrats need a net gain of just three seats to reclaim the House, and as a repeat candidate in the race early Cooke will get her fair share of attention this cycle. The 3rd isn't a must-win for the party, which will focus first on the seats Harris carried or narrowly lost in 2024. But it's one to keep an eye on to see if a Democratic wave is building. **IE**

but he handily beat back Leavitt, 54-46 percent.

In 2024, a jumbled GOP primary gave Pappas a long head start against eventual opponent Russell Prescott, who he defeated 54-46 percent as Harris carried his district by a more narrow 2-point margin and Ayotte won it by 10 points.

In Congress, Pappas serves on the Veterans' Affairs and Transportation committees.

His campaign team includes media consultant Pia Carusone of SKDK, and pollsters Al Quinlan and Anna Greenberg of GQR.

## The Republican Candidates

As was the case in 2022, Senate Republicans initially hoped former Gov. Chris Sununu would run. But Sununu took his name out of contention earlier this year, opting to pursue a more lucrative career in the private sector.

With Sununu out, and the only other Republican to win statewide office in more than two decades just starting her first term as governor, the GOP bench in the state is thinner than its evenly divided politics would suggest.

At the top of the list is former Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown, who moved to New Hampshire in 2013 and was the nominee for this seat in 2014. Brown is likely to run but that hasn't stopped a half-dozen other names from floating in GOP political circles.

State Attorney General John Formella, Education Commissioner Frank Edelblut, private equity attorney Phil Taub, former auto dealer Andy Crews, private equity executive Jay Lucas, and former 1st District Rep. Frank Guinta are all potential candidates

Brown, 65, endured a difficult childhood in Maine and Massachusetts, eventually joining the Massachusetts National Guard at 19 and graduating from Tufts in 1981. While a law student at Boston College, Brown was voted by *Cosmopolitan* readers as the "sexiest man alive" and began working as a model as he earned his JD in 1985.

His career in politics began with his election to two offices in Wrentham, Massachusetts: assessor in 1992 and selectman in 1995. In 1998, Brown won a race for state House, 50-43 percent, followed by a comfortable re-election in 2000 and an unopposed third term in 2002.

In 2004, he won a nail biter special election to the state Senate, 50.4-49.4 percent, and a full term later that year by 3 points. He was re-elected unopposed in 2006 and by 17 points in 2008.

Following the death of longtime Sen. Teddy Kennedy in 2009, Brown jumped into the special election to succeed the Democratic titan. Initially considered a heavy underdog in the Democratic state, Brown capitalized on growing backlash to the Obama administration and its health care

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reform efforts to raise \$15 million. His opponent, Martha Coakley, made a series of damaging missteps throughout the campaign, and Brown ultimately prevailed by 4 points. His January 2010 victory broke Democrat's filibuster-proof majority in the Senate and previewed the massive losses the Democrats would suffer later that year.

In 2012, Brown was a top target for Senate Democrats. In what was the most expensive Senate race in history at the time, Harvard professor Elizabeth Warren ousted Brown, 54-46 percent.

Brown returned to private practice following his loss but joined Fox News as a contributor and teased several political runs, including for Massachusetts' other Senate seat, for governor, and even for president.

In 2013, he moved to Rye, New Hampshire and quickly announced he would run against Shaheen that year. In the GOP primary, he faced former Sen. Bob Smith and former state Sen. Jim Rubens, winning with roughly half of the vote while Smith and Rubens each won 23 percent.

In the general election, Brown was an underdog to the well-liked Shaheen but kept the race close. On Election Day, the GOP wave nearly swept him into office along with the nine seats Republicans did flip; he lost by just 3 points, 51-48 percent.

Brown was the first former or current senator to endorse Trump in the 2016 primaries, and for that he was rewarded with an ambassadorship to New Zealand, which he held from 2017 to 2020. He briefly served as dean of New England Law Boston in 2021.

His wife, former newscaster Gail Huff Brown, ran for the GOP nomination in New Hampshire's 1st District in 2022 but lost to Leavitt in the primary.

Formella, 39, has served as the state's unelected attorney general since 2021. Before that, Formella was Sununu's chief legal counsel. The Florida State University (2009) and George Washington Law School (2012) graduate previously worked in private practice in New Hampshire and Maine.

As attorney general, Formella joined lawsuits against the Biden administration's environmental policy, and was a member of the group of state attorneys general who sued opioid manufacturers for their role in the addiction crisis that hit New Hampshire particularly hard.

Ayotte declined to renew his four-year appointment last month and has remained mum on whether she will ultimately do so, keeping him on an interim basis in the meantime.

Edelblut, 63, is wrapping up eight years as the state's top education official. A Pennsylvania-born University of Rhode Island graduate (1983), he also has a theological studies masters degree from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (2015). Edelblut worked as an auditor for PwC before founding his own audit and risk management company, which he later sold in 2009.

He first ran for a state House seat in 2012, falling 5 points short of winning a Wilton, NH district. He ran again in 2014, this time winning a brutally close race by 59 votes.

In 2016, he ran for governor as a self-described "staunch conservative," and nearly defeated Sununu in the GOP primary despite Sununu's national backing and political pedigree. He lost, 31-30 percent.

After Sununu won the general election, he appointed Edelblut to oversee the state's education department. A former trustee of Patrick Henry College, Edelblut was a staunch advocate of school choice and his seven children were homeschooled; he frequently clashed with Democrats and progressive groups over his quest to remove certain books and curricula from state classrooms.

Taub, 56, is an attorney with large New England firm Nixon Peabody. A 1990 graduate of Boston University and 1994 graduate of George Washington University law school, Taub also founded a charity, Swim with a Mission, that provides services to veterans of the Global War on Terror.

While Taub has never run for office before, he is a well-known donor and has cut max-out checks to many of the state's House and Senate candidates, as well as five-figure checks to Trump's political operation. Taub explored a bid against Hassan in 2022.

Crews, 55, is a Georgia native who enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school and trained as a mechanic before beginning a long career in auto sales. Crews moved around the country before moving

to New Hampshire to take over Autofair Automotive Group, which he led for 15 years from 2006 to 2021, when he sold the company.

He has sat on several non-profit and business boards (including Taub's Swim with a Mission)



Courtesy US Coast Guard

**Scott Brown**

and has served as a state lottery commissioner since 2020.

Lucas, 70, is one of the few potential candidates who has won a statewide primary before. The private equity executive was the GOP nominee for governor in 1998, losing in a landslide to Shaheen, 66-31 percent.

Lucas has a blue-chip background; while at Yale he ran for a seat in the New Hampshire state House, which he held until 1978, when he left to study at Oxford as a Marshall Scholar. A Harvard MBA in 1982 was followed by 8 years as a partner at Bain & Company. After receiving a law degree from Harvard in 1992, Lucas founded his own private equity group, where he has worked since.

In 1998, he defeated state Sen. Jim Rubens in the GOP primary for governor, self-funding his campaign with \$900,000, but lost badly to Shaheen months later.

Lucas retreated from politics but has begun to slowly re-emerge on the public scene, publishing a book on American values in 2018 and funding a philanthropic initiative to revitalize his hometown of Newport, NH. He also floated his name as a potential Senate candidate against Shaheen in the 2020 cycle.

Guinta represented the 1st District for two non-consecutive terms in the early 2010s. The 54-year-old Assumption College graduate won his first term in the state House in 2000 and won re-election in 2002. Concurrently, he ran for a Manchester alderman position in 2001, winning two terms to the 14-person board (the state legislature is a part-time position). In 2004 he left the state House to work as a congressional staffer but stayed on the Manchester board, and in 2005 he ran for mayor of the state's largest city.

He won a narrow, 2.7-point victory in that race, ousting the incumbent Democratic mayor. He won re-election in 2007, 54-46 percent, and did not seek re-election in 2009.

In 2010, Guinta ran for Congress, first winning a competitive GOP primary with 32 percent and then ousting Democratic Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, 54-42 percent, from her seat in the 1st District. During the campaign,

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Guinta came under fire for campaign finance discrepancies surrounding a loan to his campaign. He later settled with the FEC in 2015, and faced calls to resign from Congress, including from then-Sen. Ayotte.

In 2012, Shea-Porter ran for her old seat; this time, she defeated Guinta, 50-46 percent, as Obama carried the district at the top of the ticket narrowly. Two years later, it was Guinta's turn again, and buoyed by the GOP wave he won his seat back, 52-48 percent.

In 2016, Guinta nearly lost the GOP primary to Richard Ashooh, one of his opponents from 2010, but prevailed, 46-45 percent. In the general election, he lost to Shea-Porter one last time, 44-43 percent.

Since leaving Congress he has worked as a lobbyist in Washington, DC.

## The Republican Primary

Brown is the likeliest to run, and a launch may be imminent — his website is currently password-protected, indicating it may be being redesigned ahead of a campaign.

GOP sources say Brown is the safest choice for Republicans now that Sununu is not longer in the running. He is a proven fundraiser, he already has connections in Washington, DC and a national network, and he showed his political skill in his previous races.

The party's last two Senate nominees, 2020's Corky Messner and 2022's Don Bolduc, were not the preferred candidates of Senate leadership.

While GOP sources say that the carpetbagger label doesn't hurt Brown much, some Republicans are concerned that his everyman persona may not be as effective as it was a decade ago.

In 2010, Brown burst on the national scene with his pickup truck and barn jacket, running circles around the out-of-touch Coakley but also highlighting a blueprint (oft-abused) for candidates to appeal to working men and women.

But it remains to be seen if a decade spent in a wealthy beach town on the Atlantic Coast plus four years as an ambassador has diminished Brown's ability to connect with people or if his unabashedness about his good looks still plays as well.

Brown, a self-described "social moderate" could also have some policy vulnerability, particularly the strong pro-choice stances he took as a Senate candidate a decade ago when he broke with the pro-life state GOP to say he would "protect a woman's right to choose." Brown's position on abortion even became an issue for his wife, Gail Huff Brown, in her 2022 congressional campaign, when she had to assure voters she was "much more conservative" than her husband and that she supported the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

That could create an opening for a candidate such as Edelblut to get to Brown's right on social issues. In 2016, Edelblut rode a groundswell of grassroots support from conservative groups such as the New Hampshire Right to Life and the Coalition of New Hampshire Taxpayers to finish so close to the more moderate Sununu.

Several of the candidates also have the potential to self-fund. Lucas, Taub and Crews, and to a lesser extent Edelblut have some degree of personal wealth. Edelblut spent \$515,000 on his 2016 campaign; Lucas spent nearly \$800,000 on his 1998 gubernatorial bid.

But the track record for self-funders in state politics is lackluster. In 2022, GOP Senate candidate Bruce Fenton loaned his campaign \$1.8 million but finished fifth in the primary. In 2020, Republican Corky Messner poured \$3 million into his Senate campaign, winning the

nomination but losing to Shaheen. In 2010, Bill Binnie spent \$6.7 million in the GOP primary to come in third to Ayotte. Just one self-funding candidate, tech CEO Craig Benson, successfully self-funded his way to victory in New Hampshire in recent memory, with a \$10 million campaign for governor in 2002. And he only lasted one two-year term.

"Giving money to Kelly Ayotte and Chris Sununu, that translates into nothing when you run for office," said one New Hampshire Republican, casting doubt on the ability of any potential self-funder to win. "It translates into a tight circle, but one that seems larger than it is."

And of course, a Trump endorsement could rearrange the whole primary process. In 2020 and 2022, Trump's real or perceived support elevated the eventual winner of the GOP primary above their opponents, and the president is as popular among GOP primary voters as he has ever been. While there's always some concern among GOP strategists that Trump could endorse a candidate less suitable for the general election, as he did in several Senate races in 2022, national GOP operatives are more confident in the president's focus on electability this year.

Trump's endorsement of Sununu (before the former governor ruled himself out) despite their often-frosty relationship is evidence that may be the case — at least for now.

Brown was a Trump appointee and an early endorser in 2016, but he also said Trump bears some responsibility for the events of January 6, and backed a bipartisan commission to investigate the insurrection.

But it seems less likely that an original MAGA-world adherent, such as former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski or Trump's 2016 New Hampshire co-chair Stephen Stepanek will run for Senate.

## The General Election

Regardless of who their nominee is, without Sununu the seat is a bigger reach for Republicans than if the popular former governor had run.

For a brief moment, Republicans held out hope that Sununu would run while Democrats sorted out a messy primary between Pappas and Goodlander. Now the shoe is on the other foot, with Republicans staring down the potential for a competitive primary that goes unresolved until September of next year while Pappas consolidates support.

Republicans are eager to litigate Pappas' votes from the past six years, including against a Republican bill designed to ban transgender athletes born male from playing on girls' sports teams and against prohibiting states from banning gas cars. Pappas deprived the GOP of a different line of attack more recently when he came out against nuking the filibuster, a few weeks after his equivocation on the issue invited needling from New Hampshire Republicans.

The NRSC released a survey memo (with no pollster listed) summarizing a mid-March poll that found Republicans with a 1-point generic ballot lead in New Hampshire. But Trump's approval rating has slid considerably since then, and while the memo notes that independent voters in the state prioritize inflation and cost of living, those issues may no longer be favorable territory for Republicans.

If Brown is the GOP nominee, the race would feature a striking personality contrast. The former Massachusetts senator is a gregarious backslapper who would break out his guitar on the campaign stage. Pappas is far more understated and has worked to cultivate an image as a hard worker who keeps his head down. His time running the family restaurant, and the mythology that surrounds it, is central to his appeal in the small, parochial state.

"Brown would be the guy you want to have a beer with," said one New

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Hampshire Republican, “but Pappas is the guy you want running your school board, or managing your money. We’ll see which type of guy wins.”

“He’s a very strong candidate and one of their best recruits,” said one national GOP strategist. “There was a reason we were never able to take him out in the House.”

While Ayotte will be at the top of the ticket and is favored to win a second term, New Hampshire voters have no issue splitting their tickets and often deliver victories to members of both parties on the same ballot, such as when Sununu won by 32 and 15 points in 2020 and 2022 even as Shaheen and Hassan won by double-digits in their own races.

## The Bottom Line

Democrats need a net gain of four seats to recapture the Senate. That already difficult task becomes nearly impossible if they lose any seats they already hold, such as New Hampshire.

Shaheen’s retirement put the party on its heels, but Democrats have since benefitted from two lucky breaks, between Sununu and Goodlander passing on bids.

As it did in 2014, 2020, and 2022, the New Hampshire race looks destined to fly under the radar as flashier races in Georgia, North Carolina, Michigan and even neighboring Maine attract more attention and national dollars. If Democrats find themselves in danger of losing New Hampshire on Election Day, Republicans are likely expanding their Senate majority. **IE**

# 2026 Governor Ratings

## Battleground

### Democratic-held (8D)

Hobbs (D-Ariz.)  
Hochul (D-N.Y.)  
Shapiro (D-Penn.)  
Evers (D-Wisc.)  
KS Open (Kelly, D)  
ME Open (Mills, D)  
MI Open (Whitmer, D)  
NM Open (Lujan Grisham, D)

### Republican-held (3R)

Lombardo (R-Nev.)  
GA Open (Kemp, R)  
IA Open (Reynolds, R)

### Solid Democratic (10D)

CA Open (Newsom, D)  
CO Open (Polis, D)  
Lamont (D-Conn.)  
Green (D-Hawaii)  
Pritzker (D-Ill.)  
Moore (D-Md.)  
Healey (D-Mass.)  
Walz (D-Minn.)  
Kotek (D-Ore.)  
McKee (D-R.I.)

### Solid Republican (15R)

AL Open (Ivey, R)  
AK Open (Dunleavy, R)  
FL Open (DeSantis, R)  
OH Open (DeWine, R)  
OK Open (Stitt, R)  
SC Open (McMaster, R)  
TN Open (Lee, R)  
WY Open (Gordon, R)  
Sanders (R-Ark.)  
Little (R-Idaho)  
Pillen (R-Neb.)  
Ayotte (R-N.H.)  
Rhoden (R-S.D.)  
Abbott (R-Texas)  
Scott (R-Vt.)

## 2025 RACES

### Tilt Democratic

VA Open (Youngkin, R)

### Lean Democratic

NJ Open (Murphy, D)

# Illinois Senate: Durbin’s Retirement Sets Up Crowded Democratic Primary

By Jacob Rubashkin

Dick Durbin, the Senate Democratic whip and a five-term incumbent, will not seek re-election next year. Durbin’s decision, which had been telegraphed for the past several weeks, will likely kick off a crowded and expensive primary to replace him.

Durbin is the fifth senator to announce their departure from the chamber, joining Democrats Gary Peters of Michigan, Tina Smith of Minnesota, Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire and Republican Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. Five Senate open seats is the average per cycle going back nearly a century.

Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton wasted no time jumping into the race after Durbin’s announcement, and several other Democrats could join her. Reps. Raja Krishnamoorthi, Robin Kelly, and Lauren Underwood have all expressed an interest in running and could mount credible campaigns.

Stratton, an attorney and former state legislator, quickly secured the support of Gov. J.B. Pritzker, her running mate in 2018 and 2020. That support could come with significant financial backing, as the billionaire governor has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into his own campaigns and the state party over the years. Unlike her potential opponents, Stratton is not a federal official, so she has not been able to stockpile cash in a campaign account.

Krishnamoorthi, who represents the western and northwestern Chicago suburbs and has served in Congress since 2017, reported a whopping \$19 million in his congressional campaign account on March 31, all money he can put toward a Senate run. The former staffer for Barack Obama narrowly lost a statewide Democratic primary for comptroller in 2010.

Kelly represents the south Chicago suburbs and parts of the city’s far southeast side. A longtime state legislator, Kelly briefly served as state party chairwoman after the ousting of longtime party boss Mike Madigan in 2021. She reported \$2 million in her campaign account on March 31.

At 38, Underwood is the youngest of the potential field, and has also been the most explicit about her intent to run, telling supporters weeks ago she was gearing up for a campaign. A registered nurse, Underwood flipped a historically GOP seat in the outer Chicago suburbs in 2018 in an upset, and prevailed in a close 2020 re-election before her seat was redrawn to be less competitive, leading to larger victories in 2022 and 2024. She reported \$1.1 million in the bank on March 31.

Republicans have been unable to compete in statewide races in Illinois for over a decade, and have not won a Senate race since Mark Kirk’s upset win in 2010. Rep. Darin LaHood didn’t rule out a run, telling NOTUS earlier this year he didn’t want to “close the door” on the possibility. But he or any other Republican would be a serious underdog, especially during a midterm election with Donald Trump in the White House.

Democrats need a net gain of four seats for a majority in the midterm elections. **IE**

# Report Shorts

**Arizona's 5th District.** Former Cardinals, Bears and Giants kicker Jay Feely announced his campaign for the open seat being left behind by GOP Rep. Andy Biggs, who is running for governor. President Donald Trump finished ahead of Kamala Harris by nearly 20 points in a seat that includes Gilbert and Chandler and sits southeast of Phoenix, so the Republican primary will be the most important race. The GOP field already includes former state House speaker pro tempore Travis Grantham and could be joined by state Sen. Jake Hoffman and former Pinal County Sheriff Mark Lamb. Solid Republican.

**Illinois' 9th District.** Long-time Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky is likely to announce her retirement on May 5, according to Politico. First elected in 1998 after defeating now-Gov. JB Pritzker in a Democratic primary, Schakowsky has represented part of Chicago and some suburbs for 14 terms. The 80-year-old congresswoman faced the prospect of a primary challenge from 26-year-old influencer Kat Abughazaleh. Other Democrats will join the race for the open seat, potentially including state Sen. Laura Fine and Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss. Harris received 68 percent in the district in 2024, so the Democratic primary is the most important race. Solid Democratic.



Kat Abughazaleh

Courtesy Abughazaleh Campaign

**Michigan Senate.** GOP Rep. Bill Huizenga is seriously considering running, potentially joining former Rep. Mike Rogers in the Republican race for the open seat of Democratic Sen. Gary Peters, who is not seeking re-election. Rogers fell just short in 2024 to Democrat Elissa Slotkin for the state's other Senate seat, but the race will be much higher on Republicans' priority list this cycle. Democrats have a competitive primary between Rep. Haley Stevens, state Sen. Mallory McMorrow, former Wayne County health director Abdul El-Sayed and potentially others. Battleground.

**Michigan's 4th District.** If Huizenga runs for the Senate, his open seat could be difficult for Republicans to defend if the national political environment is trending against the party in power. Trump finished ahead of Harris by just 5.5 points. The first step is to see what Huizenga decides to do. Likely Republican.

**Michigan Governor.** An April 8-10 National Research poll for Michigan Conservative Coalition showed Rep. John James with an early advantage with 35 percent followed by 2022 nominee Tudor Dixon (29 percent), state Senate Minority Leader Aric Nesbitt (11 percent), former state attorney general Mike Cox (4 percent) and businessman Kevin Rinke (3 percent). Dixon hasn't announced whether she'll run for governor or the Senate, but the corresponding memo went out of its way to attack James.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist

and Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson are running on the Democratic side. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is not able to seek re-election because of term limits. Battleground.

**Minnesota Senate.** DFL Rep. Angie Craig announced her candidacy for the open seat of DFL Sen. Tina Smith, who is not seeking re-election. Craig, who is the ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee, has proven to be a good fundraiser and strong candidate in a previously competitive district. But her Senate run sets up a competitive primary with Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, and former state Senate Minority Leader Melisa Lopez Franzen.

Republicans believe the open seat gives them a takeover opportunity in a state where Vice President Kamala Harris finished ahead of President Donald Trump by just 4 points in 2024. But the GOP hasn't won a Senate race since the tragic and quirky race in 2002, when Norm Coleman defeated former Vice President Walter Mondale after incumbent Democrat Paul Wellstone died in a plane crash days before the election. Republicans will need to nominate a candidate other than former NBA player Royce White, who lost to Sen. Amy Klobuchar by 16 points in 2024. Battleground.

**North Carolina's 1st District.** Rocky Mount Mayor Sandy Roberson announced his campaign against Democratic Rep. Don Davis in one of the most competitive races in the country. In 2024, Davis won re-election by 1.5 points over Republican Laurie Buckout while Trump finished ahead of Harris by 3 points. Davis finished March with just \$528,000 in his campaign account, a modest total for a vulnerable incumbent. Roberson lost the GOP primary in 2022 to the embattled Sandy Smith. Toss-up.

**Rhode Island Senate.** Elder care worker Connor Burbridge, 30, is challenging Sen. Jack Reed, 75, in the Democratic primary. Burbridge is one of a growing number of younger candidates taking on elderly incumbents on the Democratic side, although most of them are in the House. He'll have a tough fight against an Ocean State political institution. Thirty years old is the constitutional minimum to serve in the Senate. Republicans aren't likely to mount a serious challenge in the general election. Solid Democratic.

**Virginia's 11th District.** Democratic Rep. Gerry Connolly announced that his cancer has returned, so he will not seek re-election in 2026 and will soon step down from his position as the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee. Considering Harris finished ahead of Trump by 34 points in this Northern Virginia seat outside of Washington, D.C., a crowded Democratic field is expected. But with the gubernatorial and state legislative races this year, the congressional race might not take shape until late this year or early next year.

State Del. Dan Helmer is a potential candidate. He finished fourth in the 2018 Democratic primary, won by Jennifer Wexton, in the neighboring 10th District before getting elected to the state legislature. Then he finished second in the 2024 Democratic primary, just 3 points behind now-Rep. Suhas Subramanyam, for the open seat when Wexton declined to run again because of health issues. That primary featured 12 candidates and Subramanyam won the nomination with just 30 percent. That could foreshadow this race. Solid Democratic.

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