

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

MAY 8, 2020

VOLUME 4, NO. 9

California 25: Can Garcia Win the Battle and the War?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Republicans are poised to win back a Democratic leaning district in a special election, but what will it really say about their chances in November?

In 2018, non-profit executive Katie Hill scored one of the midterm's more surprising victories when she unseated two-term GOP Rep. Steve Knight. It wasn't just that Hill had won — Democrats were romping in California, particularly in the Los Angeles area — but that it wasn't even particularly close. Hill defeated Knight, whose father was a famed astronaut and politician who still holds the manned aircraft speed record, by nearly 10 points.

Hill was young, charismatic, and seemed destined for greatness, landing a role in House leadership and fast becoming a star of the freshman class.

But in late 2019, Hill became engulfed in scandal when it surfaced that she had engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a staffer. Along with that news, came an alleged revenge porn attack where nude photos of her were leaked to several tabloids.

Hill chose to resign, triggering a special election for her seat.

The special election takes place in two parts. The first was an all-party primary on March 3, Super Tuesday, in which a candidate could have won the seat outright with a majority of the vote. But since no candidate received more than 50 percent, the top two primary vote-getters moved on to a May 12 runoff.

The closely watched special election will occur amid the worst public health crisis in a century, one that has confined most Americans to their homes and all but ended in-person contact.

With the Democratic presidential contest all but officially over, the California special election will get disproportionately greater attention because it will be the only game in town. Both parties view it as a test of how campaigns and elections operate during coronavirus.

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2020 House Ratings

Toss-Up (2R, 6D)

GA 7 (Open; Woodall, R) NY 22 (Brindisi, D)
IA 3 (Axne, D) OK 5 (Horn, D)
IL 13 (Davis, R) SC 1 (Cunningham, D)
NY 11 (Rose, D) UT 4 (McAdams, D)

Tilt Democratic (10D)

CA 21 (Cox, D)
GA 6 (McBath, D)
IA 1 (Finkenauer, D)
IA 2 (Open; Loeb sack, D)
IL 14 (Underwood, D)
ME 2 (Golden, D)
MN 7 (Peterson, DFL)
NJ 3 (Kim, D)
NM 2 (Torres Small, D)
VA 7 (Spanberger, D)

Tilt Republican (7R)

IA 4 (King, R)
MN 1 (Hagedorn, R)
NJ 2 (Van Drew, R)
PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
PA 10 (Perry, R)
TX 22 (Open; Olson, R)
TX 24 (Open; Marchant, R)

	GOP	DEM
116th Congress	200	234
Currently Solid	170	199
Competitive	30	35
Needed for majority	218	

Lean Democratic (7D, 1R)

CA 48 (Rouda, D)
KS 3 (Davids, D)
NJ 7 (Malinowski, D)
NV 3 (Lee, D)
TX 7 (Fletcher, D)
TX 23 (Open; Hurd, R)
TX 32 (Allred, D)
VA 2 (Luria, D)

Lean Republican (5R, 1I)

MI 3 (Open; Amash, I)*
MO 2 (Wagner, R)
NE 2 (Bacon, R)
NY 2 (Open; King, R)
NY 24 (Katko, R)
OH 1 (Chabot, R)

Likely Democratic (12D, 2R)

AZ 1 (O'Halleran, D)
CA 10 (Harder, D)
CA 25 (Vacant, D)
CA 39 (Cisneros, D)
CA 45 (Porter, D)
FL 26 (Mucarsel-Powell, D)
NH 1 (Pappas, D)
MI 8 (Slotkin, D)
MI 11 (Stevens, D)
NC 2 (Open; Holding, R)
NC 6 (Open; Walker, R)
NY 19 (Delgado, D)
PA 8 (Cartwright, D)
PA 17 (Lamb, D)

Likely Republican (13R)

AZ 6 (Schweikert, R)
FL 15 (Spano, R)
IN 5 (Open; Brooks, R)
MI 6 (Upton, R)
NC 8 (Hudson, R)
NC 9 (Bishop, R)
NY 1 (Zeldin, R)
OH 12 (Balderson, R)
TX2 (Crenshaw, R)
TX 10 (McCaul, R)
TX 21 (Roy, R)
TX 31 (Carter, R)
WA 3 (Herrera-Beutler, R)

moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans Takeovers in Italics

The Senate is in Play, You Know

By Nathan L. Gonzales

It only took about six months, but the country is waking up to the fact that there's more than a presidential race this year and the Senate majority is at stake in November. But this isn't a surprise to *Inside Elections* readers.

"With President Donald Trump struggling to recreate his 2016 Electoral College victory, control of the Senate should be regarded as in play," we wrote in the opening of the Oct. 11, 2019 Senate Overview issue. There were signs going back even further. "Republicans are the early favorites to maintain control of the Senate, but the fight for the majority is likely to get more intense as the 2020 cycle develops," we wrote on June 28.

That time is now and the rest of the media has finally caught up:

- Battle for Control of Senate Takes Shape as Both Parties Seek Firewall (March 2, *The New York Times*)
- Democrats' momentum puts Senate majority in play (April 20, *Politico*)
- Democrats see Senate suddenly within reach, boosted by Biden's ascent (April 26, *The Washington Post*)
- Republicans' Senate majority is now in very real jeopardy (April 27, CNN)

Even though the country is facing a global pandemic and went through a historic impeachment process, the most significant political development in the last few months was former Vice President Joe Biden securing the Democratic presidential nomination.

If Bernie Sanders had been the nominee, Democrats would have struggled to keep second and third tier Senate opportunities in play. With Biden, Democrats have at least seven legitimate takeover opportunities to gain the three seats they need to control the Senate if Biden wins.

Not only are there enough competitive seats for Democrats to win, but the latest public polling in the presidential and key Senate races show Democrats with some momentum. And it will be difficult for Republicans to change the trajectory of the cycle.

Trump needs to improve his standing, but opinions about the president have barely budged since he took office. Republicans need to raise more money to control the conversation and potentially outrun the president, but donors might be watching their wallets more closely now and there's no reason to believe Democratic fundraising will fall off enough for them to lose their advantage.

On the current path, Biden is more likely than not to be elected president, Democrats will likely win control of the Senate and maintain (if not grow) their majority in the House. Of course there's still time for circumstances to change, but don't use unknown potential events as a crutch to deny the current state of play.



2020 Senate Ratings

Toss-Up		
Collins (R-Maine)		Tillis (R-N.C.)
McSally (R-Ariz.)		
Tilt Democratic		Tilt Republican
Gardner (R-Colo.)		
Lean Democratic		Lean Republican
Peters (D-Mich.)		KS Open (Roberts, R)
		Daines (R-Mont.)
		Ernst (R-Iowa)
		<i>Jones (D-Ala.)</i>
Likely Democratic		Likely Republican
		Cornyn (R-Texas)
		Loeffler (R-Ga.)
		Perdue (R-Ga.)
Solid Democratic		Solid Republican
NM Open (Udall, D)		TN Open (Alexander, R)
Booker (D-N.J.)		WY Open (Enzi, R)
Coons (D-Del.)		Cassidy (R-La.)
Durbin (D-Ill.)		Capito (R-W.Va.)
Markey (D-Mass.)		Cotton (R-Ark.)
Merkley (D-Ore.)		Graham (R-S.C.)
Reed (D-R.I.)		Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)
Shaheen (D-N.H.)		Inhofe (R-Okla.)
Smith (D-Minn.)		McConnell (R-Ky.)
Warner (D-Va.)		Risch (R-Idaho)
	GOP	DEM
116th Congress	53	47
Not up this cycle	30	35
Currently Solid	13	10
Competitive	10	2
		Rounds (R-S.D.)
		Sasse (R-Neb.)
		Sullivan (R-Alaska)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans



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Maine 2: Good as Golden

By Jacob Rubashkin

While every member of Congress likes to think their district is unique, Democratic Rep. Jared Golden may have the best argument for Maine's 2nd.

This rural district, the easternmost of all 435 and the largest in area this side of the Mississippi, has always marched to the beat of its own drum. In 1992 it was the site of independent presidential candidate Ross Perot's strongest performance nationwide, the closest he came to winning an electoral vote in either of his two campaigns. In 2016, it gave an electoral vote to Donald Trump, the only such instance since Maine began its unique apportionment system in 1972.

And in 2018, as a result of a statewide referendum, the district implemented ranked choice voting, the first and only in history to employ such a system to elect a US representative.

On paper, Golden should face a difficult re-election campaign. Trump won the rural district by 10 points in 2016. But to beat the freshman congressman, Republicans first need a quality candidate of their own, a proposition more difficult than anticipated. And if Republicans don't win here, their chances of winning the House majority are slim.

The Lay of the Land

Maine's 2nd District begins at the edge of the Portland and Augusta metropolitan areas and extends northward through the rest of the state, encompassing all of Androscoggin, Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Oxford, Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington counties, and parts of Kennebec County.

According to CityLab's Congressional Density index, Maine's 2nd is the second-most rural district in the entire country. According to ACS data, it is 95 percent White, the second-whitest of any congressional district. Just 1.5 percent of the district identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and 1 percent each identify as Black or Native American. The median household income is \$47,000, and just 24 percent of the district have received a bachelor's degree.

On the presidential level, the district had been a consistent Democratic vote — until 2016, when Trump defeated Hillary Clinton 51-41 percent, the first candidate to win the district while losing statewide since Maine began awarding electors by congressional district. Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney 53-44 percent in 2012 and John McCain 55-43 percent in 2008. John Kerry and Al Gore won narrower victories of 6 points and 1 point, respectively, against George W. Bush in 2004 and 2000.

And in 1996 and 1992, Ross Perot saw some of his best performances in Maine's 2nd, including placing second in 1992 with 33 percent, ahead of President George H. W. Bush (29 percent) but behind Bill Clinton (38 percent).

In the 2018 gubernatorial race, Republican Shawn Moody carried the district 48-45 over Democrat Janet Mills, who won statewide by 7 points. In the concurrent Senate race, independent Sen. Angus King won the district with 49 percent over Republican Eric Brakey (40 percent) and Democrat Zac Ringelstein (8 percent).

In the 2018 congressional election, Golden unseated two-term incumbent GOP Rep. Bruce Poliquin in the nation's first ranked-choice congressional election. Poliquin received more first-place votes than Golden — 46.3 to 45.6 percent — but after two independent candidates were eliminated and their votes redistributed, Golden came out on top, 50.6 to 49.4 percent, a margin of just 3,509 votes. Poliquin unsuccessfully

challenged the outcome in court, arguing that ranked choice voting was unconstitutional, but conceded to Golden in late December.

Poliquin had won his two previous races, both against Democratic state Sen. Emily Cain, by 10 points in 2016 and 5 points in 2014. Last cycle was the first time in a century an incumbent was defeated in the 2nd District.

The Incumbent

Jared Golden, 37, was born in Lewiston, the largest city in the district, in 1982, and grew up on the small golf course his parents owned and operated. Golden went on to the University of Maine at Farmington, but



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Jared Golden

following 9/11 decided to leave college and enlist in the Marine Corps, doing so in 2002. Golden served in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq over four years before returning to Maine in 2006. Golden, then suffering from PTSD, worked several jobs to get by

before being accepted to Bates College in 2007, from which he graduated in 2011 with a degree in politics.

After a brief stint working for a logistics company, Paxton International, in the Middle East in 2011, Golden took a job as a staffer for Republican Sen. Susan Collins, first working on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee and then Collins' personal office.

In 2013, he left Washington to work for Democrats in the Maine state House. A year later, he decided to run for state representative himself, winning a Lewiston-area seat with 66 percent (a margin of 770 votes) and then re-election in 2016 with 72 percent (a 1,400 vote margin). In his second term, he was elected assistant majority leader.

In late 2017, Golden announced his campaign against Poliquin, citing the congressman's votes to repeal Obamacare and give tax cuts to the wealthy. In November 2018, Golden narrowly defeated Poliquin after two rounds of tabulation, which saw him receive the lion's share of second-choice votes from two independent candidates.

In Congress, Golden serves on the Armed Services and Small Business committees, and is the chairman of the Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce. Golden was one of 13 Democrats not to vote for Nancy Pelosi in the 2019 election for Speaker of the House, instead voting for Illinois Rep. Cheri Bustos, who is also chairwoman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Golden also was the only House member to split his votes on Trump's impeachment, voting to impeach the president for abuse of power but not for obstruction of justice.

On March 31, Golden had \$1.7 million cash on hand after raising \$1.8 million for the cycle through the first three months of this year.

Golden's campaign is managed by his former district director, Margaret Reynolds, and his team includes Ian Russell of Beacon Media for media, Mark Mellman of Mellman Group for polling, and Alan Moore of Moore Campaigns for direct mail.

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The Challengers

Three Republicans are vying for a chance to take on Golden: former state Sen. Eric Brakey, former state Rep. Dale Crafts, and Adrienne Bennett, who was a spokeswoman for former Gov. Paul LePage.

Brakey, 31, was born in Cleveland, graduated from Ohio University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater performance in 2010, and moved to Maine in 2012 to work as state director for Ron Paul's presidential campaign. After the campaign ended, Brakey founded a Maine-focused libertarian PAC, and in 2014 he ran for a seat in the state Senate as a Republican, defeating incumbent Democrat John Cleveland 56-40 percent, a 3,000-vote margin. In 2016, Brakey was re-elected 59-37 percent over Democrat Kimberly Sampson, a margin of 4,800 votes. In his two terms, Brakey was consistently rated the most or one of the most conservative Maine senators by the American Conservative Union.

In 2018, Brakey received 35 percent in an unsuccessful U.S. Senate run against independent Sen. Angus King (54 percent) and Democratic nominee Zac Ringelstein (10 percent). Brakey didn't even come close in the 2nd District, where he lost 49-40 percent to King, or his state Senate seat, which he lost to King 48-43 percent.

Crafts, 61, was born in Ft. Lauderdale, moved to Maine as a young child and grew up in Lisbon, Maine, where he worked as a carpenter for Bath Iron Works. In 1983, Crafts was hit by a car while riding his motorcycle, becoming paralyzed from the waist down as a result. Crafts would go on to found Mobility Plus, a company that helps paraplegics regain the ability to drive, and a string of other businesses including a self-storage company, a shipping center, and an auto dealership.

In 2008, Crafts won a Lisbon-area seat in the Maine state House, defeating Democrat Deborah Danuski 63-27 percent (an 1,100-vote margin). He won re-election in 2010 with 68 percent, and in 2012 and 2014 ran unopposed for re-election.

Crafts' campaign is managed by veteran Maine political operative Keith Herrick, with the firm Dirigo Partners as general consultants. FP1 is handling media, Eaton River Strategies is doing direct mail, and Greg Strimple of GS Strategy Group is doing polling.

Bennett, 41, grew up in Troy, Maine, and attended the University of Maine at Orono before receiving an Associate degree in communications, radio and television from the New England School of Communications at Husson University in 2001. After working as a journalist for Bangor's CBS affiliate, Bennett became newly-elected Gov. Paul LePage's press secretary in 2011, a position she held until 2017. After brief stints as a vice president at Kennebec Savings Bank and policy director at the Maine Department of Labor, Bennett became a real estate agent, and announced her campaign for Congress in October of 2019.

Bennett's campaign is managed by former LePage senior advisor Aaron Chadbourne, with Michael Leavitt of Red Maverick Media serving as a general consultant. Bennett's paid media is handled by Jamestown Associates, and its direct mail by Red Maverick as well.

The GOP Primary

The primary was originally scheduled for June 9, but Gov. Janet Mills postponed it till July 14 due to COVID-19.

The race for the nomination remains relatively open, as no one of the three candidates has managed to separate themselves entirely from the pack. Brakey and Crafts are considered the top tier contenders, followed by Bennett. Brakey and Crafts have also been added to the NRCC's "On

the Radar" list, the lowest tier of the Young Guns program for promising candidates, while Bennett has not.

Brakey has amassed significant support from his former colleagues in the state Senate, as well as endorsements from Sen. Rand Paul (Ky.) and the Club for Growth. The Club has already reserved \$417,000 of advertising time in the three weeks leading up to the July 14 primary, the only significant reservation in the primary up to this point.

Brakey also has the benefit of having run statewide before, giving him experience with a larger campaign, increased name recognition, and



Courtesy Brakey for Congress

Eric Brakey

a list of donors he tapped for \$1 million just a few years ago. One GOP survey found Brakey's name ID was more than double Crafts', but neither were known to a majority of voters. Brakey also has connections to a larger network of Tea Party-

affiliated organizations from his time with the Ron Paul campaign and afterwards. That includes the Koch-aligned FreedomWorks, which has endorsed him.

However, Brakey's performance in the 2018 Senate race — where he failed to reach 41 percent in the district — does not inspire confidence, even though he was running against a popular incumbent. Brakey even underperformed GOP gubernatorial nominee Shawn Moody in the 2nd District by 8 points.

Brakey also faces lingering embarrassment from his fledgling acting career; in 2011, he took part in a commercial for a coconut water drink that saw him dancing awkwardly in a hotel room mirror wearing nothing but a Speedo.

But the biggest challenge for Brakey will likely be comments he made about Donald Trump during the 2016 GOP presidential primary. Brakey, a delegate to the Republican National Convention, supported Rand Paul's candidacy and joked in 2015 about burning a box of Trump t-shirts during a radio show interview. He also called a Trump nomination "a disaster for all those who believe in limited government and the Constitution," and for a while refused to say who he voted for in 2016 (only that he didn't vote for Clinton), though he later said he voted for Trump and now calls him "transformational."

While Brakey is far from the only GOP politician to have supported another hopeful in 2016, his opponents are attempting to use his old comments to paint him as an anti-Trump candidate.

Crafts, the former state representative, has the endorsement of LePage, and cuts a more traditional political profile than Brakey. Initially, some Republican observers thought that between the LePage endorsement, state legislative experience, business career, and inspiring life story, Crafts could establish himself as a frontrunner, but that has not come to pass. LePage, a towering governor, decamped to Florida after leaving office and has not been a presence in the state or the race, depriving Crafts of a valuable primary surrogate.

Both Brakey and Crafts have lagged in their fundraising efforts. Brakey had just \$168,000 on hand on March 31, and Crafts just \$127,000.

Bennett has struggled to gain traction as well. While she has been the

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most vocal in trying to paint Brakey as anti-Trump, and herself as the Trumpiest candidate, Republican observers say she took a serious hit when LePage, for whom she worked directly for seven years, endorsed Crafts over her. Bennett is endorsed by the Value in Electing Women (VIEW) PAC, which is dedicated to increasing the number of Republican women in Congress, but has not been endorsed by Elevate PAC, which was founded by New York Rep. Elise Stefanik after the 2018 midterms to support Republican women running for Congress. Bennett had just \$39,000 in the bank on March 31.

How It Plays Out

Golden begins the race in a relatively strong position. With \$1.7 million on hand, he had a massive 10-to-1 financial advantage at the end of March. And the delayed primary means his GOP opponents will go an extra month attacking each other before they can turn their sights to him, all while he can continue to make his case directly to the district. Private polling from both parties indicates Golden remains popular in the district.

But both Democratic and Republican strategists agree the fundamentals of the district will make this race competitive no matter what. Unlike many of the districts Democrats flipped in 2018, Maine's 2nd is rural, has a small population with college degrees, and Trump did better, not worse, than previous GOP presidential nominees. If anything, it more resembles Minnesota's 8th District, one of just two districts Republicans flipped in the 2018 blue wave.

Nevertheless, the GOP playbook here resembles its strategy in most other battleground districts, and is not particularly dependent on which candidate wins the nomination.

First, Republicans will attempt to convince voters that Golden is not as moderate as he appears. The incumbent's support for Medicare-for-All will feature prominently in GOP messaging, particularly how it will affect rural hospitals (Republicans say it will decimate them). Golden is not a newcomer to M4A — he supported the policy during the 2018 campaign and was an early cosponsor of Washington Rep. Pramila Jayapal's flagship legislation in 2019 — and the issue clearly did not inhibit his initial victory.

But Republicans believe that while last cycle nobody knew what Medicare-for-All was, and the issue as a whole took a back seat to protections for pre-existing conditions, in 2020 voters have been educated by countless news stories and Democratic debates about the nuts and bolts of the policy, allowing them to make a more informed decision.

Republicans will also go after Golden on impeachment, saying Golden's vote-splitting was a cynical move that neither shields him from criticism nor alters the fact that by voting for one of the articles, he was just as much supporting impeachment as representatives that voted for both.

It remains to be seen whether either line of attack is relevant or resonant with voters if the coronavirus continues as a crisis into the fall.

Most importantly, Republicans are hoping for a gangbusters performance by Trump in the district. The president is expected to make a serious play for the district's electoral vote, and Republican polling indicates he remains popular. Combined with a marquee Senate race in which Susan Collins will need to win by a large margin in the 2nd District, Republican strategists believe turnout will be high and ticket-splitting will be low, allowing their candidate to sneak through.

The Golden campaign will focus on the incumbent's constituent casework, his relationship with seniors and the small business and

veterans' communities, and his military service. Several Democratic strategists familiar with the race stress how well Golden fits the district: his military service, nontraditional educational path, tattoos, and quiet, determined demeanor.

Democrats say Golden has only burnished his independent image since arriving in Congress, following through on his commitment not to vote for Nancy Pelosi as speaker and taking a principled and nuanced stand on impeachment. His well-publicized stint working for Collins and his decision to stay out of her competitive Senate race entirely further show how Golden has taken pains to position himself above the partisan fray. Several Democrats also point to Golden's work in standing up for the rights of Maine's lobstermen, participating in a bipartisan fight against restrictive NOAA regulations.

Whether the GOP nominee is Brakey or Crafts does not seem to change Democrats' assessment of the race (Bennett does not factor in), though they believe Brakey is more likely to emerge from the primary. Neither Brakey nor Crafts have shown an ability to raise money in any significant capacity, and with coronavirus it will be difficult to scale up fundraising to Golden's level. Democrats also see all three GOP candidates running hard to the right, putting them out of step with the district that is more independent than it is conservative. Recent private polling showed Golden above 50 percent against his potential GOP opponents, an important marker for incumbents facing re-election.

Democrats also note that the influx of ad spending in the concurrent Senate and presidential races will drive up prices for Republican outside groups looking to provide air cover for their nominee, which will not have access to the lower price points that campaigns do.

Democrats are particularly eager to face Brakey, against whom they see Golden making a striking contrast. As one strategist noted, "While Jared was fighting for his country in Iraq, Eric Brakey was dancing in his underwear in New York City."

And though November is still six months away, Democrats are largely confident that Joe Biden, who has demonstrated appeal among white working class and senior populations, will outperform Clinton in this district, and though he won't likely win it, he will keep it close enough for Golden to peel off some Trump voters and carry the day.

This race is already attracting outside attention: the main Democratic House Super PAC, House Majority PAC, has made an initial advertising reservation of \$2.1 million for the fall, and the main GOP House Super PAC, Congressional Leadership Fund, has reserved \$1.9 million.

The Bottom Line

This is a quirky district that likes to go its own political way, and it sits in a state with similarly unpredictable tendencies. Throw in a high-profile Senate race and a bombastic president running for re-election, and you have a recipe for an expensive, competitive election.

We often write about how Republicans need to start winning back the suburbs if they want to retake the House. That is true, but it also presupposes that Republicans already control districts like Maine's 2nd. If the GOP cannot even dislodge a freshman Democrat in one of the most rural districts in the country, its chances for a majority grow even slimmer.

Republicans have a shot in Maine's 2nd, but they need a credible challenger. The longer the GOP primary drags on, the more time Golden will have to build on voters' positive feelings toward him, defining himself before any of his opponents have the time or resources to make their own case.



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The Lay of the Land

California's 25th District covers most of northern Los Angeles County, above the San Gabriel Mountains, and also includes most of Simi Valley in Ventura County to the west. CityLab classifies it as "Dense Suburban."

The district is 40 percent non-Hispanic White, 7 percent Black, 9 percent Asian, and 40 percent Hispanic or Latino. The median household income is \$82,000 and 29 percent of the district has a bachelor's degree or higher.

The district has three population centers: Simi Valley (126,000), Santa Clarita (210,000), and Palmdale (157,000). The three have stark demographic differences: Simi Valley is 60 percent non-Hispanic White, 26 percent Hispanic/Latino, and has a median household income of \$95,000; Santa Clarita is 48 percent non-Hispanic White, 34 percent Hispanic/Latino, and has a median household income of \$94,000. Palmdale is just 20 percent non-Hispanic White, 60 percent Hispanic/Latino, with a median household income of \$60,000.

On the presidential level, the district backed Mitt Romney over Barack Obama by 2 percent in 2012, but voted for Hillary Clinton, 50-43 percent, in 2016.

In 2014, the district backed GOP gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari over Gov. Jerry Brown by 14 points while Brown won statewide 60-40 percent. But in 2018, the district swung toward Democrat Gavin Newsom, who carried it 51-49 over Republican John Cox, another indication of a leftward shift over the past decade.

In 2018, Hill defeated Knight 54-45 percent. Two years earlier, Knight beat back Democrat Brian Caforio 53-47 percent, and in 2014, Knight first won the seat 53-47 percent against fellow Republican Tony Strickland.

The Democrat

Assemblywoman Christy Smith, 50, was born in Wurzburg, Germany where her father was stationed with the US Army, and lived in Indiana until moving to Santa Clarita at age 10 with her family. She attended local schools and then College of the Canyons community college before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science from UCLA in 1993.



Christy Smith

After working as an analyst at the Department of Education in Washington, DC during the Clinton administration, Smith returned to Valencia to raise her family. She became active in local education by serving on the PTA and founding a nonprofit, the Valencia Valley Technological Education Foundation, to help bring technological resources into the Newhall School District. In 2009, she won a seat on the 5-member Newhall School District board, and won re-election four years later.

In 2016, Smith ran for an open Santa Clarita-area state Assembly district. Smith placed first in the all-party primary with 44 percent. But although the district (which had voted for Romney 51-47 percent) was won by Hillary Clinton 50-44 percent, Smith fell short of Republican Dante Acosta 53-47 percent, an 11,000 vote margin.

Smith returned to the Newhall board, where she was named president, and in 2018 sought a rematch with Acosta. This time, Smith defeated Acosta by 4,000 votes, 51-49 percent, becoming the first Democrat to hold the seat in decades.

In the state Assembly, Smith chairs the Joint Legislative Committee on Emergency Management, and sits on the Education Committee. Her record is rated 100 percent by Planned Parenthood, the Sierra Club, and the California Federation of Teachers, and 65 percent by the California Chamber of Commerce (ranked 12th out of 90 Democratic legislators).

Smith's campaign team includes consultants Mac Zilber and Dave Jacobson of J&Z Strategies, who previously worked on Smith's successful Assembly campaign, as well Pivot Group for direct mail and Breakthrough Campaigns for polling. The campaign is managed by Brandon Zavala, an Antelope Valley Democratic organizer.

The Republican

Mike Garcia, 46, was born in Granada Hills, Calif., and moved to Santa Clarita at age six, where he attended local schools. In 1994 he was



Mike Garcia

recommended to the US Naval Academy in Annapolis by then-Rep. Buck McKeon, who represented the 25th District from 1993-2015. Garcia graduated from Annapolis in 1998 with a Bachelor of Science degree in political science, in the

top 3 percent of his class, and in December of 1998 received a Masters in national security studies from Georgetown.

From 1999 to 2009 Garcia served as a fighter pilot in the Navy, flying an F/A-18 jet in 30 combat missions in Iraq while deployed on the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier. In 2008 Garcia achieved the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and was honorably discharged in 2009, returning to Santa Clarita and taking a job with defense contractor Raytheon.

Beginning in a mid-level role, Garcia eventually became a vice president of business development for space and airborne systems at the company before transitioning to campaigning full time in 2019. He also invests in real estate.

Garcia announced his campaign a year ago, long before Hill's resignation and with the intention of unseating the freshman Democrat. After Hill left office, former Rep. Steve Knight announced he would seek to reclaim his old seat in both the special and regular 2020 elections. On March 3, Garcia finished in second place, ahead of Knight in both the special primary, 26-18 percent, and the regular election primary, 25-20 percent. Garcia's performance came as a relief to national Republicans, who viewed Knight as a weaker general election candidate.

In mid-April, Garcia was added to the top tier of the National Republican Congressional Committee's Young Guns list, and was endorsed by President Trump on Twitter.

Garcia's campaign includes general consultant Joe Pileggi (former political director at the NRCC), media consultant Jon Reedy of SRCP Media, pollster Chip Englander, and manager Chelsea Orzechowski, a Santa Clarita-area communications professional.

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The May Special Election

Smith was the Democrats' candidate of choice, and she handily beat back a challenge from left wing provocateur Cenk Uygur in the primary: she placed first with 35 percent, he placed fourth with 6 percent. But that hasn't stopped Democrats, many of whom had hoped Smith might win outright aided by strong turnout from the concurrent Democratic presidential primary, from growing increasingly anxious about holding on to this seat on May 12.

Strategists from both parties agree that the race is a toss-up heading into Election Day, with Garcia having a slight edge.

Though there has been no public polling of this race, the Garcia campaign released a survey from early March showing him ahead by 4 points. Private polling conducted by outside groups has consistently shown Smith trailing Garcia by low single digits, though often within the margin of error. None of the polling shared with *Inside Elections* showed Smith with a lead.

Like many other Southern California districts, the 25th is becoming more Democratic. A 4-point GOP advantage in voter registration in 2013 has turned to a 7-point Democratic advantage in voter registration this year. But observers from both parties say that the fundamentals of this district make it less friendly to Democrats than neighboring Orange County due to lower levels of college education and a higher concentration of working class voters.

The challenge for Smith is the composition of the electorate in May. Special elections generally see significantly lower turnout, especially from minority voters, and voters without party affiliation, who in California tend to be Democratic constituencies. The issue is exacerbated in districts such as the 25th, where most Democrats are lower-information voters and the L.A. media market makes effective communication difficult and expensive, even without a pandemic. As early as March, Democratic operatives were projecting an electorate that skewed Republican by 4 to 6 points, compared to a 2018 electorate that favored Democrats by roughly 2 to 4 points.

That's not a death knell for Smith; voter registration isn't always determinative of results (Democrats held a 4-point advantage when Hill won by 9 points in 2018), and a third of the district's voters are not affiliated with either party. But it makes things more difficult.

That difficulty is then compounded by the coronavirus and Gov. Newsom's decision to conduct this election entirely by mail, with all 424,000 eligible voters mailed a ballot. Democrats have a vaunted organizational advantage in California, but much of that is predicated on in-person contact, particularly when it comes to what Democrats call "ballot access organization" and Republicans derisively refer to as "ballot harvesting." This practice is where organizers collect completed ballots from the homes of voters and return them to their voting precinct so that the voter does not have to go themselves.

Republicans, who have previously insinuated that the process was tantamount to voter fraud, had this year trumpeted the launch of a similar effort.

But door-to-door organizing is out of the question due to social distancing guidelines, so both parties will have to rely on virtual contact to encourage lower-propensity voters to submit their ballots. Though these methods have been used in previous cycles, it has always been in tandem with in-person efforts, so this special may serve as a dry run for future "contactless campaigning."

Despite the national narrative that Democrats benefit more from vote-by-mail, Democratic strategists maintain that in California's 25th the effect of all-VBM will be more muted; one operative noted that voters who were already used to voting by mail generally skewed whiter, wealthier, and more Republican, while voters accustomed to voting in person on Election Day tended to be Latino, lower propensity, and unaffiliated, all Democratic-leaning constituencies.

In addition to a more challenging electorate, Democrats are also facing one of the GOP's best recruits in Garcia.

The Republican fighter pilot is a favorite of national party operatives, who say his background as a first-generation American and veteran resonates with the district, 20 percent of which is foreign-born, and that he has been able to appeal to the district's Latino community, reducing Democrats' advantage with that demographic. Garcia's bio plays an outsized role in his messaging (his website even includes a 7-chapter, 6,500 word first-person life story).

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Candidate Conversation



Courtesy House Freedom Fund

Jim Marchant (R)

Nevada's 4th District — Rating: Solid Democratic

Interview Date: April 29, 2020 (via Google Meet)

Date of Birth: May 28, 1956; Gainesville, Florida

Education: Troy University (1978)

Elected Office: State Assembly (former)

Current Outlook: Marchant is a top contender for the GOP nomination but faces Lisa Song Sutton, Sam Peters, and others in the June 9 primary. Any of them will start as the underdog in the general election against Democratic Rep Steven Horsford in a district Hillary Clinton carried in 2016.

Evaluation: Marchant grew up in Florida, working in his father's convenience stores before getting into the software business. He founded one of the early internet service providers in the mid-1990s, and successfully lobbied Florida to exempt ISPs from sales tax, an effort he credits getting him into politics. Marchant retired to Las Vegas in 2005, and in 2016 became so fed up with the new Republican statehouse majority, which he viewed as insufficiently conservative, that he successfully defeated his own state representative, 63-37 percent, in the GOP primary. In our interview Marchant positioned himself as the most conservative candidate in the 4th District primary, noting he often was too conservative even for his own assembly caucus, and that he supported a Donald Trump presidential run all the way back in 2012. But Marchant also came off as soft-spoken and earnest, a contrast to the demeanors of his political role models, Reps. Jim Jordan and Devin Nunes. With two previous competitive campaigns that overlap with the district, Marchant is not a bad bet to win this primary, but knocking off an incumbent in the general election will be difficult considering the partisan lean and the challenge of campaigning in the vast rural middle of the state. Marchant and Republicans need Trump to win here at the top of the ballot, but that doesn't look likely.

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Additionally, both Republicans and Democrats say that Garcia's status as a political outsider is a benefit.

Garcia has also proven to be one of Republicans' better fundraisers this cycle, one of the few Republicans to outraise their Democratic opponent in a competitive race. Garcia raised \$2.33 million through April 22, compared to \$2.29 million for Smith, and Garcia also showed slightly more cash on hand (\$336,000) than Smith (\$319,000).

Smith's first television ad features the candidate discussing her mother's early death, which she says was a result of not being able to afford insulin. Health care issues feature prominently in Smith's campaign materials, following the successful blueprint of Democrats in 2018 by

making the protection of people with pre-existing conditions a centerpiece of her pitch to voters, with the added touch of a personal story.

Smith has also emphasized her long history in education, from her time as a PTA member to her leadership on the Newhall School board during the Great Recession, to her work in the Assembly. In particular, on the school board Smith played a significant role in the campaign to secure a \$60 million bond to fund capital developments in the district, and in the Assembly secured hundreds of thousands of dollars for College of the Canyons community college, her alma mater, to construct a new science facility.

Smith's closing message against Garcia ties him to President Trump and the White House's ineffective response to the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing economic and social damage. Particularly prominent in Smith's final ad were Garcia's comments that "everyone should have to figure out how to fend for themselves." He made those comments in 2019, as part of an argument for getting rid of food stamps, but Democrats say it points to a general lack of empathy for others that extends to the expansion of health care benefits, protections for people with pre-existing conditions, and economic relief from coronavirus. Smith has contrasted those comments with her own emphasis on community, including footage of herself in a mask delivering food and supplies to others in several of her advertisements.

There's been growing concern from national Democrats that the Smith campaign team that got her elected to the state Assembly was not making the proper improvements for a competitive congressional special election. In January, the DCCC dispatched former DCCC Executive Director Dan Sena and former DCCC Communications Director Meredith Kelly to advise the Smith campaign.

The candidate has also made missteps that could be an issue for Democrats. In late April, during a tele-town hall, Smith joked with supporters (and evidently at least one non-supporter) about Garcia's emphasis on his military background, asking in jest, "Did you know he's a pilot? That had escaped me," and comparing his "pictures of planes" with her "constitutional law books." The comments received national attention, and Republicans seized on the remarks as evidence that Smith does not respect Garcia's military service (or, by implication, anyone else's).

The gaffe hurt Smith, who apologized on Twitter five days later, citing her family's long military history and expressing respect for Garcia's service. Democratic operatives hoped that her apology put the issue to rest and that the fast pace of the news cycle would direct voters' attention elsewhere, and while Republicans agreed that the news would move on, they did not rule out the possibility that Smith's comments could continue to be used against her in paid media until November.

Democrats, however, say they still have confidence in Smith as a candidate, whom they view as a smart and capable politician with a compelling story to tell. (Given that Smith is also running in the fall, it is unlikely most Democrats would cast doubt on her abilities as a candidate even if they felt that way.)

In addition to capitalizing on the pilot gaffe (the NRCC quickly cut a digital ad using the footage), Garcia has attacked Smith as a "Sacramento politician" who voted to raise taxes after she promised not to. He also blames California's notable homeless problem on Democrats in Sacramento, including Smith. It is notable that the Democratic bogeymen in this race are local, not national like in other races, a reflection that voters in the district are getting bluer on a national level but still may have state-level residual Republican leanings.

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2020 Presidential Ratings (Electoral Votes)

Toss-Up (66)

Arizona (11) Florida (29) Nebraska 2nd (1) North Carolina (15)
Wisconsin (10)

Tilt Democratic (36)

Michigan (16) Pennsylvania (20) Maine 2nd (1)

Tilt Republican (1)

Lean Democratic (14)

Minnesota (10) New Hampshire (4) Georgia (16) Iowa (6)

Lean Republican (22)

Likely Democratic (8)

Maine At-Large (2) Nevada (6) Ohio (18) Texas (38)

Likely Republican (56)

Solid Democratic (210)

California (55) Colorado (9) Connecticut (7) Delaware (3) D.C. (3) Hawaii (4) Illinois (20) Maine 1st (1) Maryland (10) Massachusetts (11) New Jersey (14) New Mexico (5) New York (29) Oregon (7) Rhode Island (4) Vermont (3) Virginia (13) Washington (12)

Solid Republican (125)

Alabama (9) Alaska (3) Arkansas (6) Idaho (4) Indiana (11) Kansas (6) Kentucky (8) Louisiana (8) Mississippi (6) Missouri (10) Montana (3) Nebraska At-Large (2) Nebraska 1st (1) Nebraska 3rd (1) North Dakota (3) Oklahoma (7) South Carolina (9) South Dakota (3)

270 needed to win

moved benefiting Democrats,

* moved benefiting Republicans

	GOP	DEM
2016 Results	304	227
2020 Ratings	204	268
Toss-up	66	

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Garcia also accuses Smith of laying off teachers while she took a salary from the school board, clearly irritating Smith, who has contested the charge fiercely.

All the specific policy issues dovetail into Garcia's larger message, which is that voters shouldn't send another politician to Congress, but rather an outsider like him.



The contrasting messages of the two candidates is perhaps best encapsulated by their campaign logos. Garcia's reads "Fighter Pilot Mike Garcia for U.S. Congress" in bold letters and features military iconography: stars and a stylized aviator badge. It projects strength, competence, and all-Americanness.



Smith's logo reads "Christy Smith for U.S. Congress," with "Christy" handwritten in cursive, suggesting a more personal touch in keeping with Smith's focus on her long history in and personal relationships with the district's community.

Just Days to Go

Because the election is taking place almost entirely by mail, "Election Day" is really more like "Election 21 Days," with nearly a quarter of all ballots already returned a week before May 12. Candidates, staff, and volunteers are also relatively confined in their movements, so you won't see the fever pitch of rallies, phone banking, canvassing, and other activities that usually accompanies the final week of a campaign.

But that hasn't stopped some people from making eleventh-hour moves to try and sway voters.

On April 30, former Rep. Katie Hill announced a \$200,000 GOTV effort funded by her new PAC, HER Time. The first \$70,000 went toward a bizarre video apparently shot by Hill herself in front of the White House where she dramatically removes a black face mask and says "It's me, Katie Hill," before telling viewers to vote in the special (legally, Hill's PAC is prohibited from supporting an individual candidate, though Hill has personally endorsed Smith).

The video blindsided Democrats, who uniformly said it was unhelpful to their cause. Democrats say Hill remains unpopular in the district (several Democrats say that voters feel betrayed by her) but had believed that she was not generally on the minds of voters, especially during coronavirus. But some California strategists had expressed lingering fears that Hill's insistence on maintaining a profile was detrimental to Smith's campaign, and Hill's last-minute play has only

frustrated them. Both Republican and Democratic strategists struggled to see an upside for Smith in Hill's intervention, noting that voters who follow and support Katie Hill were already going to vote for Smith, and for everyone else the ads would only serve to remind voters what happened the last time they sent a Democrat to Washington.

A more positive development came a few days later, when former President Barack Obama and 2016 presidential nominee Hillary Clinton endorsed Smith. It gave Smith a much-needed positive news cycle, and unlike the Katie Hill ad, there's limited downside to the popular figures weighing in, though some observers say that the endorsement signals desperation. One veteran California Democrat said that Obama was unlikely to persuade Garcia voters or undecideds, and was likely aimed at encouraging younger Democrats, who have lagged behind in returning their ballots, to remember to vote. Another Democratic strategist questioned how effective the endorsement would be, coming so late in the game, unless it had serious money behind it in robocalls and mailings.

How the November Election Plays Out

Depending on what happens on Tuesday, the November election could look very different. If Smith manages to pull off a victory, not only would it dash GOP hopes, but she would enter the general election as an incumbent, and the race could largely fall off the competitive map. Republican strategists acknowledge that the president remains deeply unpopular in the district and will likely lose it again, potentially by a larger margin than he did in 2016.

If Garcia cannot win the district even with the more favorable special election electorate, then his chances of defeating an incumbent, when the electorate is at presidential levels, are even longer. There are other, more promising pickup opportunities for Republicans elsewhere, in districts where advertising is less expensive and the president could have coattails.

If Garcia wins, the situation becomes more nuanced.

As an incumbent, Garcia will have certain advantages heading into the fall, Republicans say. He will have access to a new class of donors. He will be able to command a level of earned media, both locally and nationally, that is generally only available to members of Congress. He will have the opportunity to provide constituent services to the district. And several strategists suggested that Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, a fellow Californian, would have a vested interest in protecting Garcia at a time when the state GOP is becoming an endangered species.

But incumbency comes with disadvantages as well. Serving in Congress will physically take Garcia out of the district, balancing a campaign with regular cross country travel. Though Garcia may gain greater access to fundraising resources, he won't have much time to take advantage of it. Similarly, any constituent services his office may be able to provide will be limited by how fast he can set up a fully functioning office in the midst of a pandemic.

Serving as a member of Congress will also make Garcia a politician, and much of his campaign has emphasized that he's not a politician. More importantly, as a member of Congress Garcia will have to take difficult votes in the Democratic-controlled House on coronavirus and other issues, and the Smith campaign will be watching to find new lines of attack.

The Garcia campaign's messaging will likely remain consistent with its special election strategy. Garcia will continue to highlight his service as a fighter pilot, his support for small businesses, his photogenic family and compelling life story, and will continue to paint Smith as a

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Sacramento politician who wants to raise taxes and fire teachers.

For Smith, a Garcia win is a setback and could turn into an embarrassment, for her and for national Democrats after losing a district Clinton carried handily. But it's not entirely unfamiliar territory for Smith, who lost a close assembly race in 2016 and bounced back to defeat the same opponent two years later. In this instance her timeline is much more compressed, and the scrutiny much greater.

One Democrat said that the six months between May and November could give Smith a chance to get back to her core messages of community and expanding health care. In the run-up to the election, the campaign has been dominated by Smith's pilot gaffe and apology, the Katie Hill surprise, and a back and forth on teacher's salaries; moreover, potential voters are not particularly focused on politics these days.

After a loss in the special election, Democrats say Smith should return to the note she struck in her announcement video about the untimely death of her mother due to insulin prices, and highlight her eight years on the local school board and her support from teachers' unions as a way to emphasize her community service and defuse Republicans' attacks. Smith may also see additional outside support from independent expenditure groups that largely sat out the special election because they did not want to invest in a race that would be repeated a few months later.

For the most part, Smith and Democrats will try to stay the course and tamp down any national panic in the party that a loss might cause.

A Garcia win will not change the electorate in November, which will be determined by the presidential election. While Katie Hill's 9-point victory over Knight in 2018 may prove to be a bit of an outlier for this district, Democrats are undeniably increasing their numbers, and the 25th will not be friendly territory for Republicans. Unlike in May, Democrats will have Trump, the ultimate motivator, to help turn out Latinos, those without party affiliation, and low information voters. And Garcia won't just be a handsome fighter pilot running as an outsider; he'll be tied to Trump as a member of the Republican caucus.

If Garcia wins, national Republicans will say this race is a canary in the coal mine for Democrats, that enthusiasm is on their side, and that November will see the suburbs swing back to the GOP. That is a tenuous notion: this is a unique race with a great Republican candidate against a shakier Democratic candidate in contrast to races around the country featuring second-tier GOP challengers against well-financed and tested Democratic incumbents.

Nevertheless, Democrats will have to answer for the loss, and unlike in other special elections, they cannot blame their candidate because she's also their nominee in November. Outwardly, this means they will play down Smith's missteps and focus on the unfavorable electorate.

Internally, a loss may be the catalyst for some change. One long-time California Democratic consultant noted that Smith is versed in the rough and tumble Democratic politics of the state, and that she'll be willing and able to make adjustments if she needs to, to get herself back in a winning position.

The Bottom Line

In an ideal world for Democrats, this special election would never have needed to happen, and Katie Hill would be well on her way to a second term. But that's not the case, and now Democrats stand a very real risk of losing this seat.

For Republicans, the special election is a chance to reset the increasingly dire narrative heading into the summer, displaying some residual strength in the suburbs and giving the DCCC a black eye in the process.

For Democrats, it's an opportunity to show that 2018 was not a fluke in California or in the suburbs, and to prove that even the GOP's most heralded recruits aren't good enough to win back the districts Republicans lost last cycle.

For both parties, it's a chance to workshop the strategies and technology that may be central to a campaign during coronavirus.

For the rest of us, it's best not to read too much into the results of any special election, let alone one as quirky as this one, however it turns out. Remember, Democrats lost the special in Georgia's 6th in 2017, and then reclaimed the House in 2018 by winning districts like (and including) Georgia's 6th.

No matter what happens in this special, the economy won't immediately rebound, coronavirus won't disappear, and Donald Trump will not suddenly regain support from the suburbs. The fundamentals of the 2020 election will remain fundamental.

A Garcia win will give him and his party some much-needed momentum heading into campaign season, but it won't change the facts on the ground, in this district or nationwide.

Like its neighboring districts, California's 25th is shifting decidedly towards Democrats, and a May 12 GOP victory won't stop that movement. It might sound strange, but you'd rather be the Republicans in the special election and Democrats in November. **IE**

2020 Gubernatorial Ratings

Toss-Up

MT Open (Bullock, D)

Tilt Democratic

Cooper (D-N.C.)

Tilt Republican

Lean Democratic

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

Lean Republican

Sununu (R-N.H.)

Likely Democratic

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

Likely Republican

Parson (R-Mo.)
Scott (R-Vt.)

Solid Democratic

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

Solid Republican

UT Open (Herbert, R)
Burgum (R-N.D.)

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

UT Open (Herbert, R)
Burgum (R-N.D.)
Holcomb (R-Ind.)
Justice (R-W.V.)

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

	GOP	DEM
Current Governors	26	24
Not Up This Cycle	19	20
Currently Solid	4	2
Competitive	3	2

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

26 24

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

19 20

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

4 2

Carney (D-Del.)
Inslee (D-Wash.)

3 2

*Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans*

CALENDAR

Sept. 29	First Presidential Debate (Indiana)
Oct. 7	Lone Vice Presidential Debate (Utah)
Oct 15	Second Presidential Debate (Michigan)
Oct. 22	Third Presidential Debate (Tennessee)