Opinion

News



A protester holds a U.S.flag during a rally outside the San Diego federal courthouse July 2. (CNS/David Maung)



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Last week, I wrote about the internal fighting among House Democrats and how the more liberal members have to remember that they are now in the majority because many more moderate members flipped a purplish district. Those more moderate members need to hold on to their seats in 2020 for the Democrats to retain their majority in the House.

The same day that column published, the Washington Post published an examination of the 2020 Senate races that are deemed competitive. Everything I said about the Democrats' prospects in the House is doubly true if they have any hope of retaking the Senate.

It would be difficult to overstate how important it is for Democrats to retake the Senate. Even if they win the White House, so long as Sen. Mitch McConnell is the Majority Leader, and so long as he remains committed to a Machiavellian approach to the exercise of political power, even if the Democrats keep the House and defeat President Donald Trump, the new Democratic president would be hobbled from the outset by McConnell's intransigence. When President Barack Obama was not yet two years into his presidency, before the 2010 midterms, McConnell said: "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." That was before he blocked the legitimate nomination of Judge Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court, which certainly emboldened the Majority Leader: He succeeded where Franklin Roosevelt had failed. He packed the Supreme Court.

The problem for the Democrats in 2020 is that even though the Republicans have to defend 22 seats and the Democrats only have to defend 12, only two of the Republican seats are in states that Trump lost in 2016: Colorado and Maine. Of the two, Colorado has been trending more and more Democratic and Sen. Cory Gardner is the most embattled Senate Republican to be sure. In Maine, while women's groups were furious with Sen. Susan Collins for voting to confirm Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court Justice, Collins maintains high favorability ratings from her constituents and defeating her will not be easy. Besides, Maniacs are an ornery lot and they do not take kindly to outside groups telling them what to do.

On the other hand, perhaps the most endangered senator this cycle is not even a Republican. In Alabama, Sen. Doug Jones won a special election narrowly two years ago and he was running against the arch-conservative Roy Moore, who was accused of molesting underage girls in the weeks before the election. This year, you can bet Trump will win Alabama by a wide margin and the coattails might even be enough to get Moore, who is running again, into the Senate.

I am not sure why the Washington Post list did not include Kansas, where incumbent Republican Sen. Pat Roberts is retiring. There, former Secretary of State Kris Kobach has thrown his hat into the ring. Kobach, who strongly supported Trump in 2016, lost to Laura Kelly in last year's gubernatorial contest, and Washington Republicans were quick to distance themselves from his candidacy. But, like people in Maine, I am not sure Kansas primary voters will like being told whom to nominate. If Kobach is the GOP candidate, the Democrats' chances of retaking the Senate shift from implausible to possible.

In all the other potentially competitive races, Democrats need to field candidates who can appeal to independent voters and even some Republicans. The Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez model is not going to help Democrats win a Senate seat in North Carolina or Texas. And, as I noted last week, Democrats who wish to signal moderation tend to do it on economic issues, not social ones, because of the organized power of groups motivated by social issues in Democratic primaries.

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But, when you get to the general election, only a sliver of voters, 3.8 percent, self-identify as socially liberal and economically conservative, while more than a quarter — 28.9 percent — consider themselves liberal on economic issues but conservative on social ones. Blessings upon the Democratic campaign consultants and strategists who convince candidates to distance themselves from the abortion-on-demand orthodoxy that abortion rights groups want to impose upon the party.

When the Supreme Court ruled that the courts have no business getting involved in gerrymandering cases, Democrats complained that the decision would favor Republicans. In the short term, they are undoubtedly right … unless the Democrats stand up to the abortion rights groups and the gay rights groups and the politically correct, identity politics approach to public life. The reason so many state

legislatures are in the hands of Republicans in the first place is because Democrats have become tone deaf to the electorate's moral qualms about abortion, transgender issues, and the like. Democrats have been only too willing to mouth the latest jargon about race and gender, all of it wrapped in a sense of moral righteousness that is misplaced.

In the Senate, gerrymandering is not an issue so you would think the prospect of giving McConnell another term as Majority Leader would force the Democrats to champion a few pro-life Democrats, acknowledge that there are legitimate, as well as bigoted, concerns about transgender issues especially among young people, and — more than anything — focusing on the kitchen table issues that most concern most voters. Alas, campaign consultants want to get paid, and more money on the Democratic side is driven by social concerns than economic ones. There is a reason the presidential candidate who raked in the most money in the second quarter was South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg*.

More than anything else, Democrats have to rid themselves of the condescending tone they sometimes adopt when speaking about working class voters and their concerns. Otherwise, their chances of winning the Senate — and of defeating Trump — grow dimmer and dimmer. Trump won not only because he successfully stokes a sense of grievance. He won because Democrats failed to appeal to working class voters with a sense of hope and respect. According to a recent study, 40% of Americans still struggle to make ends meet every month, and they have not benefited from the booming economy. They should be the base of the party that fights for working people. Trump has failed them, but so did Obama. Winning should not be brain surgery for the Democrats.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

**The city has been corrected from the earlier version.*