Opinion
NCR Voices



A file photo shows the American flag below the U.S. Capitol dome in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



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Control of the U.S. Senate is on the ballot Nov. 5 and it is difficult to see how the Democrats can maintain their narrow margin of control in the upper chamber.

If Donald Trump regains the White House, the Senate is the only check on his power to appoint not only judges, but military officers.

Gone are the days when Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater could lead a delegation of other conservative Republicans down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House and tell Richard Nixon he needs to resign. Today's Republican Party is filled with Trump acolytes.

Currently, the Democrats, joined by three independent senators who caucus with them, hold a 51-49 majority in the chamber. If the party loses any particular senator on a given vote, Vice President Kamala Harris can break the tie. If Trump wins, and the Senate is 50-50, JD Vance will be breaking the ties.

Related: NCR poll: The 'Catholic vote' is elusive, but Catholics will decide the election

While the news looks grim in the Senate for the Democrats, there are hopeful signs in the House, which I will explore in a future column.

The Democrats are sure to forfeit the West Virginia seat currently held by Sen. Joe Manchin, who is retiring. The Cook Political Report lists the race as "solid Republican" so expect Republican Gov. Jim Justice to take Manchin's seat.



Official portrait of Sen. Jon Tester of Montana (tester.senate.gov)

In Montana, former Navy SEAL and businessman Tim Sheehy has opened up a consistent lead over incumbent Democratic Sen. Jon Tester. Sheehy's business is no mom-and-pop shop: He makes about $5 million a year as CEO of an aerial firefighting company, and an additional $2 million in non-investment income from other ventures. He is not self-funding; A gaggle of billionaires is pouring money into the race. Tester, a farmer, is not poor, to be sure. His net worth is over $3.6 million.

In 2018, Tester eked out a victory over Matt Rosendale by fewer than 20,000 votes even though Trump had swept the state by a margin of 20 points two years prior. Affable, approachable and able to work on both sides of the aisle, Tester may not be able to withstand the nationalization of politics in the Trump era. It doesn't help that photogenic Sheehy could star in a remake of the 1972 flick "The Candidate," replacing Robert Redford in the title role.

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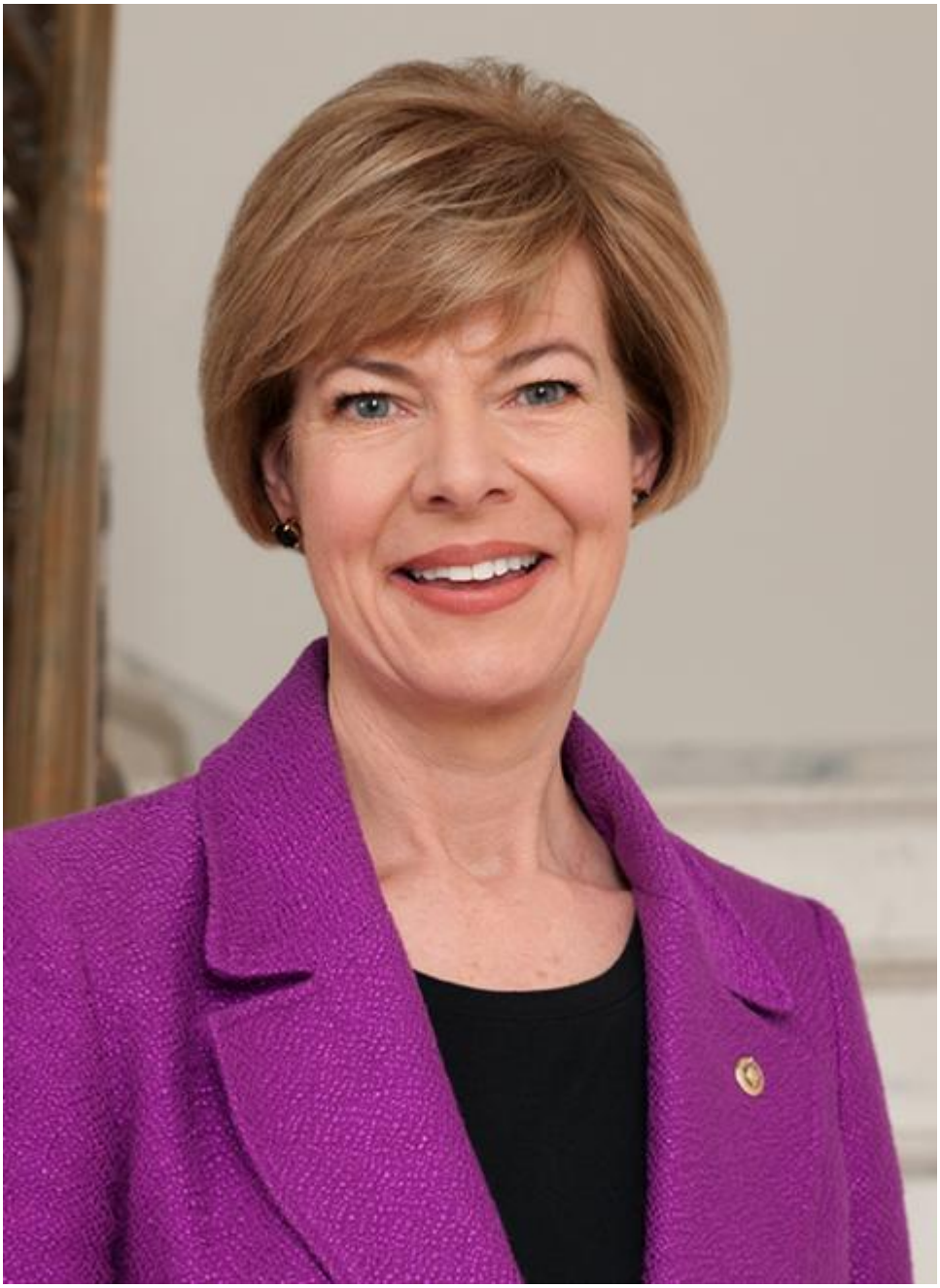


Official portrait of Rep. Colin Allred (allred.house.gov)

A Tester loss will cost the Democrats more than a necessary seat. He is the last Democratic senator to represent a largely rural state, with no major urban centers. Losing his voice in the caucus will further push the party towards its coastal elites.

Democrats have pinned their hopes on flipping Texas for years and each time their hearts are broken. The Senate race there is the only one held by a Republican incumbent, Sen. Ted Cruz, that the Cook Political Report lists as only "lean Republican." During their debate last week Democratic Rep. Colin Allred was sharp and focused. Cruz was obnoxious and evasive.

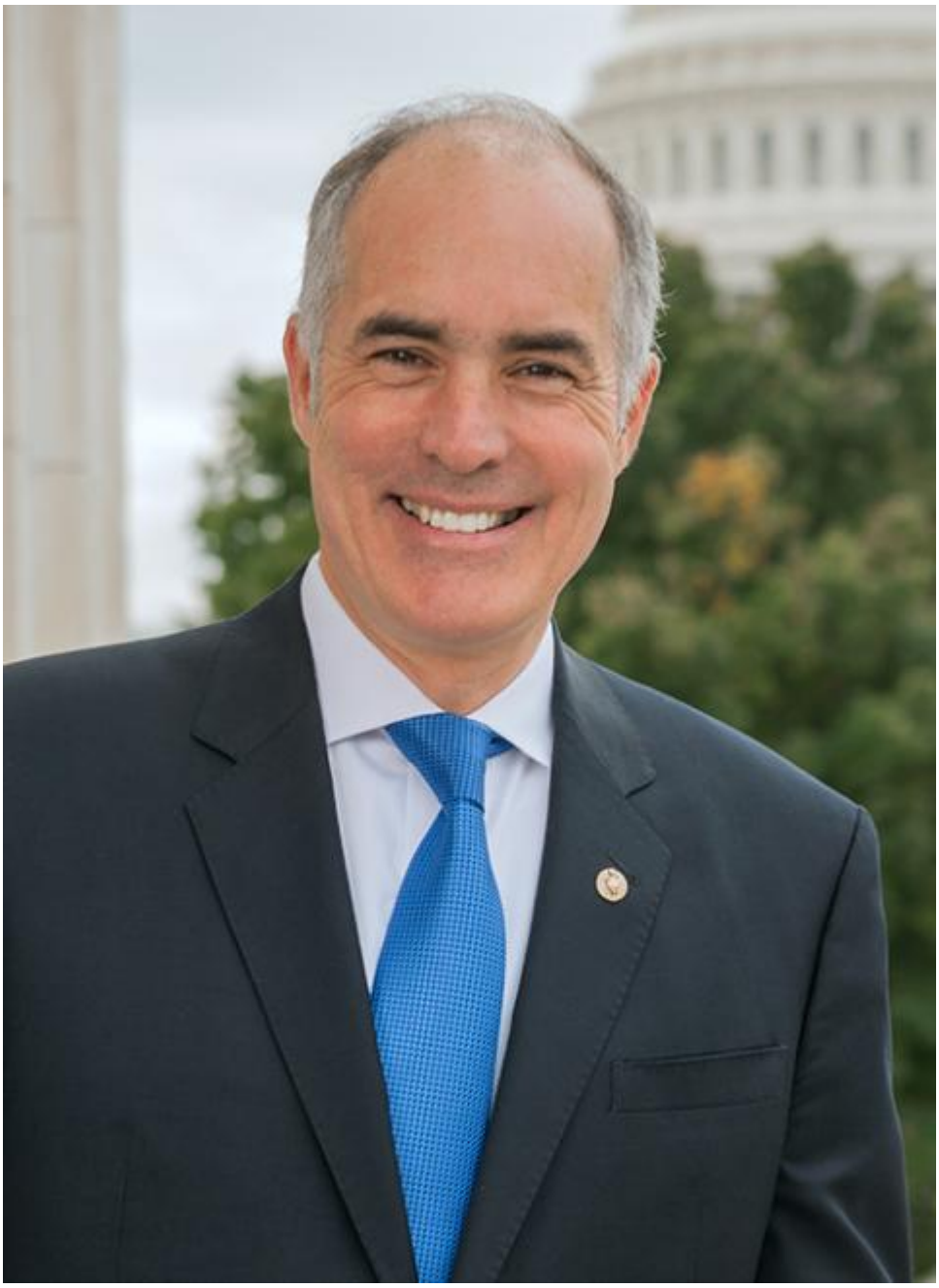
The Texas Political Project has the best polling in the state, and its poll released Friday has Cruz beating Allred 51-44%.



Official portrait of Sen. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin (baldwin.senate.gov)

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown is one of the most articulate spokesmen for the kind of progressive economic policies the Democrats abandoned in the Clinton and Obama years. His opponent, Trump-endorsed businessman Bernie Moreno has echoed Trump's lies about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio. In the primary, Moreno defeated the candidate supported by Ohio's popular Governor Mike DeWine. Cook lists the race as a toss-up.

The Senate race in Wisconsin is also rated a toss-up by Cook. Unlike Ohio, Wisconsin is also a battleground state in the presidential contest, so it will be very difficult for incumbent Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin to outperform Vice President Kamala Harris. Polls show Baldwin slightly ahead of real estate developer Eric Hovde but if Trump wins the state, his coattails could send Hovde to the Senate as well.



Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, in an official photo (casey.senate.gov)

Pennsylvania and Nevada are both swing states, and both have competitive contests that "lean Democrat." Sen. Bob Casey was once a hero to pro-life Democrats but his position has shifted over the years on that and other issues. I am betting that, like Joe Biden in 2020, Casey will have enough residual support in the state's heavily Catholic northeastern corner to return to Washington.

In Nevada, Democratic Sen. Jacky Rosen is leading in the polls and, what's more, the Culinary Union has supported her and they have a track record of delivering victory in the state. Unite Here is also active in other states and they should be able to get some Democrats across the finish line, most especially in Nevada where Democratic Rep. Ruben Gallego is running against Trumpian election denier Kari Lake.

If Trump wins, these Senate contests will be critical to the preservation of democracy. Problem is, the Democrats simply are defending too many seats in too many places where Trump won in either 2016 or 2020.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.