2022 Senate Ratings

BATTLEGROUND

Democratic-Held (4)	Republican-Held (4)
Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)	NC Open (Burr, R)
Hassan (D-N.H.)	PA Open (Toomey, R)
Kelly (D-Ariz.)	Johnson (R-Wisc.)
Warnock (D-Ga.)	Rubio (R-Fl.)

Solid Democratic (10)	Solid Republican (16)
Bennet (D-Colo.)	AL Open (Shelby, R)
Blumenthal (D-Conn.)	MO Open (Blunt, R)
Duckworth (D-Ill.)	OH Open (Portman, R)
Leahy (D-Vt.)	Boozman (R-Ark.)
Murray (D-Wash.)	Crapo (R-Idaho)
Padilla (D-Calif.)	Grassley (R-Iowa)
Schatz (D-Hawaii)	Hoeven (R-N.D.)
Schumer (D-N.Y.)	Kennedy (R-La.)
Van Hollen (D-Md.)	Lankford (R-Okla.)
Wyden (D-Ore.)	Lee (R-Utah)
	Moran (R-Kan.)
	Murkowski (R-Alaska)
	Paul (R-Ky.)
	Scott (R-S.C.)
	Thune (R-S.D.)
	Young (R-Ind.)

CALENDAR

Texas 6 Special: Two-Step Process

By Jacob Rubashkin

A special election to replace the only member of Congress who died after contracting covid-19 could be the first substantive look at the Biden-era political landscape.

Arlington Republican Rep. Ron Wright, who had won a second term last November, died on February 7 just two weeks after being hospitalized with covid-19 (Wright had lived for several years with lung cancer).

That leaves his Dallas-Fort Worth area district vacant, and Gov. Greg Abbott has set May 1 as the date for the contest to succeed him. Under state law, all candidates will compete on the same ballot and the top two, regardless of party, will move to a runoff if no one receives a majority.

Unlike the four other districts set to hold special elections this year, Texas' 6th has the potential to be a real race between Democrats and Republicans. Though historically Republican, the district's high number of suburban voters have shifted away from the GOP in recent years, making the district competitive at the presidential and Senate levels. And several Democrats are running serious campaigns and hoping to catch fire like some of the candidates who ran in the special elections of 2017.

With the slimmest Democratic majority in the House in a century, every seat counts, and this race presents both parties with the first opportunity of the cycle to claim a real electoral victory.

The Lay of the Land

Eleven Republicans, 10 Democrats, one Libertarian and one independent are running in the 6th District, which stretches from the southeast corner of Tarrant County through all of Ellis and Navarro Counties.

This race has the potential to be the most competitive congressional special election since Trump left office; the former president won it by just 3 points, 51-48 percent, over Joe Biden in 2020, a slide from his 54-42 percent victory in 2016 and a steep drop from the 58-41 percent shellacking Mitt Romney hung on Barack Obama in 2012. Only four districts in Texas swung harder from Hillary Clinton to Biden.

As was the case across the country, the district's leftward march was powered by the suburbs; here, that's Tarrant County, which includes Fort Worth and Arlington. In 2016, Tarrant County voted for Trump by 52-43 percent. Four years later, Biden became the first Democrat in 56 years, since former Texas senator/President Lyndon B. Johnson, to carry Tarrant, 49.3-49.1 percent.

The portion of Tarrant that sits within the 6th District casts accounts for about 70 percent of the district's total votes; it shifted substantially too, from a 49-47 percent Clinton victory to 55-44 percent for Biden.

Biden also bested Clinton's performance in Ellis County, which

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Breaking Down the Redistricting Process

By Nathan L. Gonzales

Ten years is long enough to forget how crazy redistricting cycles can be.

There's the normal uncertainty of new congressional lines and renumbered districts. Add in a narrowly divided House of Representatives, frayed nerves from the 2020 election and subsequent invasion of the Capitol, and data delays from the U.S. Census Bureau, and the foundation is set for a tumultuous two years that will shape the fight for Congress for the next decade.

The stakes in redistricting are high as Republicans need to gain just a half-dozen seats to get back to the majority in the midterm elections. And control of the House will have a fundamental impact on the success and effectiveness of President Joe Biden in the last two years of his first term.

Due to delays from the Census Bureau, the entire process is just getting started. Once reapportionment has been finalized, then states will move to redistricting, navigate inevitable litigation, and finally actually conduct the elections. And each step is fraught with complexities and potential surprises.

Reapportionment?

Every 10 years after the census, the country goes through reapportionment, with the goal of making each congressional district the same size according to population. For some perspective, the average district included 646,952 people following the 2000 census and 710,767 people following the 2010 census. Going even further back, districts for the country's first Congress in 1789 contained approximately 34,000 constituents (except just 3/5ths of enslaved people).

Over the course of a decade, population growth and trends can create districts with wide disparities in population, making reapportionment necessary. For example, Texas' 22nd District, southwest of Houston, had an estimated 2019 population of 960,957 while Texas' 13th District in North Texas had an estimated population of 714,733, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. That difference of 246,000 in population between districts about 500 miles away from each other is a prime reason for the need for reapportionment.

Since the total number of House districts was set at 435 by Congress in 1929, some states will gain or lose seats through the equalization and reapportionment process.

The U.S. Census Bureau is supposed to release reapportionment data by the last day of the census year (in this case December 31, 2020), but it has not so far. The final reapportionment data is now expected to be released by the end of April.

In the absence of official data, reputable analytics firms, such as Election Data Services, have released estimates based on available information.

Seven states are likely to gain at least one seat. Texas is likely to gain three seats, Florida is likely to gain two seats and Arizona, Colorado, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon are poised to gain a single seat each.

On the other side of the ledger nine or 10 states are likely to lose a district. California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New York and West Virginia are likely to lose a district.

Then it's unclear whether New York will lose a second seat or Alabama will lose one district. That could depend on how the Census Bureau counts college students in New York City, who were barred from campuses due to the pandemic on April 1, 2020 when a key count was taken.

Reapportionment also changes the Electoral College votes for the next decade. In 2020, Biden defeated President Donald Trump 306 to 232. If the states vote for the same party in the 2024 presidential race, the Democratic nominee would prevail by a similar 302 to 236 margin, assuming New York loses one seat and Alabama loses one seat.

Redistricting

Once reapportionment is complete and official, all states go through the redistricting process. Even states that don't gain or lose districts see population shifts within the state, so redrawing congressional lines is necessary except in states that have a single, at-large district.

For example, South Carolina's 1st District had an estimated 2019 population of 821,107 while the neighboring 6th District had an estimated population of 665,215, according to 2019 ACS estimates. But the Palmetto State is likely to maintain its seven districts.

In a typical redistricting cycle, the Census Bureau would have already started releasing on a rolling basis the second set of granular data (including information on race and ethnicity) that states need to actually draw the lines. Instead, that data is scheduled to be released in one batch by Sept. 30.

Delays in delivering that data are putting states behind in the process, particularly states with early 2021 primaries or deadlines imposed by state constitutions to finish the redistricting process. For some perspective from the last redistricting cycle, nearly half of the 435 districts had been redrawn by October 2011, which is about the time the Census Bureau will be releasing data to start the work this year.

Who Draws the Lines?

In a majority of states, a combination of the state legislature and the governor are in charge of drawing and ratifying new lines. But an increasing number of states are moving toward bipartisan or nonpartisan commissions to draw the maps.

Ten years ago, Republicans chose a great time to have a banner year. The GOP's success in the 2010 midterm elections as a result of a backlash against President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress gave them a significant advantage in drawing districts.

Republicans controlled the drawing of 207 districts compared to just 47 for Democrats. Ninety-two seats were drawn by commissions, 82 seats drawn in states with mixed partisan control, and then there were seven states with one seat. Even with that power, Republicans couldn't keep the majority for the entire decade.

This time around, Republicans still have the advantage, but not to the same extent. The GOP has control over drawing 189 districts, Democrats over 77 districts, 40 seats drawn in states with divided partisan control and 122 will be drawn in states with an independent or bipartisan commission.

The Battleground

While every seat will matter in the context of an evenly divided Congress, there is consensus that Texas, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina are the key states to watch in the redistricting battle. And Republicans control the map-making process in all of those states.

Identifying how many seats Republicans could gain from redistricting alone is difficult because elections are complex organisms with multiple dynamic factors. Districts can certainly be drawn to give one party an advantage, but the overall political environment and the quality of candidates and their campaigns will influence the outcomes as well.

Another key factor will be how ambitious Republican cartographers choose to be. Texas is a great example. The Lone Star State will likely gain three seats, but the growth is largely a result of Democratic-leaning voters. So if Republicans stretch their own voters too thin in order to maximize their opportunities, they risk losing more seats in an election cycle when the political environment is working against them.

Instead, Republicans in Texas, or elsewhere, could choose to make some seats Democrats currently hold more Democratic (such as the 7th, held by Lizzie Fletcher, and the 32nd, held by Colin Allred) in order to make surrounding districts more Republican.

It's not a secret that political operatives can draw districts in a sophisticated way to give a nominee from one party a significant advantage in the race. But we should remember that each party's goal is not to create the greatest number of "safe" or solid districts, but instead draw districts that are safe enough. That means spreading out "your" voters across the largest number of districts to create more opportunities. To put it another way, if one party just packs their voters into safe districts, that will create safer districts for the other party in surrounding areas.

A challenge with redistricting for political cartographers is identifying the population and partisan trends so that the advantage survives for a decade worth of elections. Because over the course of 10 years, each party is likely to have good and bad cycles.

Operatives on both sides of the aisle agree that it is unwise to make redistricting decisions based on any single election — specifically the 2020 presidential election. But looking ahead is difficult considering the most recent three election cycles hinged on Trump's unique ability to turn out voters for and against him. And no one knows for sure if the full Trump coalition will turn out for GOP candidates, or if Democrats can maintain enthusiasm with their own base, when Trump is not on the ballot.

Projecting a partisan advantage in redistricting also depends on the work of the commissions, which operatives admit is unpredictable.

State-by-state control of redistricting

Every state sets its own processes for redistricting. Some empower a commission, rather than the state legislature itself, to draw the lines. Others have more complex systems. The following is a breakdown of which party -- if either -- controls the process in every state. It takes into account the state's unique laws, as well as party control of the state legislature and the party of the governor.

STATE	2021 CONTROL	STATE	2021 CONTROL
Alabama	Republican	Montana	Commission
Alaska	Single District	Nebraska	Republican
Arizona	Commission	Nevada	Democratic
Arkansas	Republican	New Hampshire	Republican
California	Commission	New Jersey	Commission
Colorado	Commission	New Mexico	Democratic
Connecticut	Democratic/ Commission	New York	Commission/ Democratic
Delaware	Single District	North Carolina	Republican
Florida	Republican	North Dakota	Single District
Georgia	Republican	Ohio	Republican/ Commission
Hawaii	Commission		
Idaho	Commission	Oklahoma	Republican
Illinois	Democratic	Oregon	Democratic
Indiana	Republican	Pennsylvania	Split
Iowa	Commission/ Republican	Rhode Island	Single District
		South Carolina	Republican
Kansas	Republican	South Dakota	Single District
Kentucky	Republican	Tennessee	Republican
Louisiana	Split	Texas	Republican
Maine	Split	Utah	Republican
Maryland	Democratic	Vermont	Single District
Massachusetts	Democratic	Virginia	Commission
Michigan	Commission	Washington	Commission
Minnesota	Split	West Virginia	Republican
Mississippi	Republican	Wisconsin	Split
Missouri	Republican	Wyoming	Single District

Republican- *GOP controls the map-making process*

Democratic- *Democrats control the map-making process*

Split- *Map-making process is divided between the parties*

Commission- *An independent or bipartisan commission*

Single District- *No redistricting necessary with one, at-large district*

Ohio- *It's complicated. Will revisit in a future issue.*

Unlikely Allies

While redistricting can be a ruthlessly partisan exercise, there can be competing interests that cut across party lines.

In some states in the past, local Black politicians have worked with Republican cartographers in order to gain solidly Democratic, black-majority districts. Black politicians gain by having solid districts and Republicans gain because that means fewer Black, Democratic voters in surrounding districts.

Back in 2011, then-Ohio state Sen. Nina Turner put it this way: "We have to figure out going forward if we are going to work for what is in the best interest of Black people or the best interest of Democrats as a whole across this state."

In the end, with some help from a heavily-Democratic seat in the Columbus-area, Buckeye State Republicans drew a map that didn't have a single seat switch party hands over the course of the entire decade. That's the goal of partisan redistricting.

Candidates Matter

Even lines drawn in a partisan way for a specific partisan goal don't guarantee that outcome.

Missouri Senate: Open Seat Remains Solid Republican for Now

Republican Sen. Roy Blunt announced he will not seek re-election in Missouri, setting off a scramble to replace him on the Republican side and leaving Democrats with only a marginally better takeover opportunity at this early stage of the cycle.

Blunt is the fifth Republican senator to announce he will not seek re-election, as we wait for Sens. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin and Chuck Grassley of Iowa to make decisions. No Democrats have announced they will not seek re-election.

Remember it is unwise to draw dramatic conclusions simply from which party has more open Senate seats. The number of Senate retirements is not predictive of the final gain or loss of Senate seats that cycle. The location of the state, and its partisanship, is more important than the open seat itself.

The Missouri Senate race continues to be rated Solid Republican for now. Open seats can make things more complicated for the Republicans, and a messy primary seems inevitable. But Blunt not seeking re-election does not automatically make the seat vulnerable.

Potential GOP candidates include former Gov. Eric Greitens (who resigned amidst scandals in May 2018), most members of the House delegation (including Ann Wagner, Vicky Hartzler, Billy Long, and Jason Smith), state Attorney General Eric Schmitt, retired NASCAR driver Carl Edwards, and Lt. Gov. Mike Kehoe.

On the Democratic side, former state Sen. Scott Sifton, who represented a St. Louis state Senate district, was in the race before Blunt's decision. He was joined by attorney Lucas Kunce, who has some support from national progressive groups. But the field isn't necessarily set.

President Donald Trump won the Show Me State by 15 points in 2020 and more than 18 points in 2016. According to Inside Elections Baseline metric, Republicans have a 56-41 percent advantage. Jason Kander gave Blunt a serious challenge in 2016, but the senator still prevailed by 3 points.

Twenty years ago, Democrats controlled the redistricting process in Georgia. Powerful state Senate Majority Leader Charles Walker wanted to draw a district to elect a Black Democrat who just happened to be his son. Nobody dared to grab even a precinct and hurt Charles "Champ" Walker Jr.'s chances of getting elected. But Champ became his own worst enemy.

It wasn't long before Republicans found a treasure trove of opposition research from Walker's early 20s, incidents the *Savannah Morning News* referred to in a 2002 story as "a few run-ins with the law."

In the most prominent example, Walker had been arrested a decade earlier for disorderly conduct at an Applebee's restaurant after a dispute with a waitress over some chicken fingers. Walker also had been arrested less than a year later for shoplifting a $5.49 Slim Fast shaker at a Kroger's grocery store, had been driving on a suspended license and had been previously arrested for leaving the scene of an accident, all charges that had been dropped but weren't public before his House bid. Walker was never convicted, but the political damage had been done.

In the end, a district that was supposed to elect a young, Black Democrat voted for an older, white, Republican college professor named Max Burns, who won by 8 points. Two years later, when Democrats nominated someone who hadn't been arrested at Applebee's, Athens-Clarke County Commissioner John Barrow defeated Burns. But the district still didn't elect a Black candidate.

Impact on Capitol Hill

Redistricting also throws some uncertainty into the legislative process. Normally, the majority of members don't have to sweat re-election and know the voters they need to get re-elected. That's not necessarily the case in a redistricting cycle.

New maps could force them into a competitive primary with a colleague from the same party or a serious general election contest against a fellow incumbent from the opposite party. That uncertainty, and then reality, could impact a member's legislative votes depending on which contest they are worried about.

Ten years ago, thirteen sets of incumbents ran against each other in primary or general elections. One of the most raucous was in Southern California, where Democrats Howard Berman and Brad Sherman faced off after serving together for 14 years. The climax of the race came during an October candidate forum when the two congressmen nearly had a physical altercation over the sponsorship of a bill.

Other members will see their electoral voters change in an instant. After 30 years in Congress, GOP Rep. David Dreier woke up one morning and his district had evaporated. Following the 2010 census, California's new citizen redistricting commission drew pieces of his 26th District into seven different new districts, and no more than a third of his constituents resided in any one new district, according to Daily Kos Elections.

At the time, the new map put him at odds with fellow California Rep. Kevin McCarthy, who was content because he benefited from the new lines with a more Republican district, while Dreier arguably didn't have a district at all and wanted to challenge the map. Ultimately, Dreier decided not to seek re-election.

Litigation

Despite the delays from the Census Bureau, Republican and Democratic operatives agree that new maps will be in place in each state for the 2022 elections. While some states will need to move some deadlines

and even primary elections, the consensus expectation is that the entity in charge of drawing the map in a particular state will be the one to do so.

While lawsuits filed by the party allegedly aggrieved by the process in a particular state are inevitable, partisan operatives agree, again, that the courts are likely to do whatever they can to keep the redistricting process in the hands of the group responsible for drawing the map.

In other words, there's a general reticence of judges to hijack the map-making process. For example: in California, Census Bureau delays were going to cause the commission to miss deadlines for drawing a map. The commission asked for, and was granted, a four-month extension by the state supreme court.

Two U.S. Supreme Court decisions since the last round of redistricting appear to limit some legal options. In 2019, the Court ruled that "partisan gerrymandering claims present political questions beyond the reach of the federal courts." According to Chief Justice John Roberts writing for the 5-4 majority, "Federal judges have no license to reallocate political power between the two major political parties, with no plausible grant of authority in the Constitution, and no legal standards to limit and direct their decisions."

The Court's 2013 ruling in Shelby County vs. Holder struck down Section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which included a formula for states to receive extra scrutiny to curb racial disciminiation. While Section 5, the requirement that certain states get their new maps pre-cleared, remains, it is dormant in practice, according to legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin at the time.

Republicans contend that without preclearance, plaintiffs will need to prove discriminatory intent under Section 2 of the VRA. States previously seen as guilty until proven innocent under the Section 4 formula will now be innocent until proven guilty under Section 2. According to Democrats, intent is not required and there are other racial gerrymandering claims that can be made.

Who's to Blame?

Gerrymandering shoulders much of the blame in any discussion about the lack of cooperation by Congress or what is "broken" with the country's political system. While redistricting is a contributing factor to partisanship, voters are accomplices to those alleged political crimes.

Americans continue to sort themselves into like-minded communities. People tend to live near people who look like them, vote like them, shop like them, and worship like them. There's nothing automatically wrong with that except when trying to create competitive and politically diverse congressional districts.

The two most common complaints about redistricting are the strange shape of the districts and the dearth of competitive districts. Both can be noble goals but can sometimes be in conflict.

In order to draw competitive seats, there might need to be a combination of urban, Democratic-leaning areas and rural, GOP-leaning areas, which could require some communities to be separated to achieve partisan balance. Districts don't have to look like they were drawn like a toddler, but competitiveness could require some creativity.

Independent redistricting commissions are an avenue to take the blatant partisanship out of the process, but they aren't necessarily free of bias. And there isn't a lot of evidence that districts drawn by commissions have resulted in more moderate members of Congress.

A key buzzword in the entire redistricting process is "fair," which has no agreed upon definition. For now, in the absence of clear legal guidance, fairness lies in the eyes of the partisan beholder when it comes to what constitutes a competitive district or appropriate composition of a delegation compared to a state's partisanship.

The Bottom Line

Redistricting cycles are always filled with uncertainty, anxiety and even some chaos. Incompetency and data delays by the Census Bureau and a House majority hinging on a half-dozen seats only add to the pressure and importance of redistricting.

While partisan operatives fundamentally disagree on what many of the maps should look like, both parties have a vested interest in preserving the process, since each side is on the inside of the map-making process in some places and left out in the cold in others. Later this spring, we will go through the contours of each state and analyze the most likely outcomes, before new lines are finalized.

Partisan strategists agree that when the dust settles, new maps will be in place for the 2022 elections, even though some primaries might be later than originally scheduled. But until those maps are completed, it is difficult to know which individual districts will be competitive and which party has the upper-hand in the fight for the majority. **IE**

Candidate Conversation

Jana Lynne Sanchez (D)

Texas' 6th District Special --
Rating: Lean Republican

Interview Date: March 11, 2021 (Google Meet)

Date of Birth: July 2, 1964; Fresno, Calif.

Education: Rice Univ. (1986)

Courtesy Sanchez Campaign

Elected Office: None; 2018 6th District nominee

Current Outlook: See Pg. 1 Story

Evaluation: Sanchez got her start in California politics in the 1980s but went on to work as a journalist and then a public relations professional, spending nearly two decades overseas in Amsterdam and London before returning to Ellis County, Texas, where she grew up. She was one of the many women in the country motivated to run for office after Trump won the 2016 election, and in 2018 she won a close Democratic primary in the then-open 6th District. The general election, against Wright, was not initially seen as competitive, but Sanchez outraised the Republican, secured endorsements from EMILY's List and the Dallas Morning News, and in the last three weeks of the race was added to the DCCC's Red-to-Blue list of top targets. Sanchez said the national attention came too late to help that year, but that her 2018 race and her time in 2020 working for 6th District nominee Stephen Daniel and 24th District candidate Kim Olson make her well-prepared to run in this race. She pointed to her opening weekend fundraising haul of $100,000, which took her eight months to raise in 2018.

Sanchez is personable and easy to talk to, even virtually, and was happy to hold forth not just on her professional history but her thoughts on the term "Latinx" (she doesn't think it's necessary), Democrats' struggles with rural Hispanic voters (she says much of her family are Trump supporters), and her songwriting skills. One topic she did not want to discuss were her Democratic opponents, preferring instead to train her fire on Sen. Ted Cruz and Gov. Greg Abbott.

Biden's First Big Bill Among the Most Popular of Its Kind

By Bradley Wascher

By signing the American Rescue Plan into law on March 11, President Joe Biden cleared a high bar: he passed major legislation early in his first term that might actually remain popular.

From the $1.9 trillion price tag to the urgency surrounding its passage, Biden's economic stimulus is different from most other legislative efforts we've seen from newly inaugurated presidents. It's also unique in terms of its broad appeal. Across an average of five polls conducted in March, 64 percent of Americans supported the plan while 33 percent opposed it — a far cry from the 50-50 split so common in today's toplines.

But something similar happened with polls at the start of the pandemic...and it didn't last long. Surveys from March and April 2020 showed unusually broad agreement on lockdown policies, but consensus quickly gave way to typical partisanship as summer continued, conditions worsened, and election messaging ramped up. Unsurprisingly, partisan gaps exist in today's polling about the stimulus package as well: across the same average of five March 2020 surveys, approval among Republicans was just 34 percent, compared to 91 percent among Democrats.

Still, the popularity of Biden's stimulus should not be understated — it's reflected in his +13 net job approval rating overall, as well as in his +30 net rating for his covid-19 response in particular, according to FiveThirtyEight.

Looking to the past can give these numbers more context. After all, this isn't the first time in recent memory that a new president inherited an economic emergency and had to act swiftly.

In response to the global financial crisis and economic recession in 2009, President Barack Obama worked to pass the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, signing it into law just weeks after taking office. Polls at the time suggested varying levels of net-positive favorability for the bill, with CNN/ORC reporting +9 and Gallup finding +26.

But after Obama's plan went into effect, sentiments started to sour, as some thought the $800 billion bill hadn't done enough to stimulate the economy or help them individually. A July 2010 poll from the Pew Research Center asked Americans to evaluate the Recovery Act a year after its signing, and just 35 percent said it had kept unemployment from getting worse. Even Democrats, who initially supported the plan 3-to-1, had grown more skeptical of its effectiveness. In the end, public opinion of the bill dipped.

But the story in 2021 is a bit different. Biden's stimulus plan is a few points more popular than Obama's overall, and some of this extra support comes from the popularity of individual provisions included in the 2021 bill. According to a March 3 Monmouth University survey, 62 percent approved of the package's $1,400 payments, which provide immediate and direct relief to 90 million Americans and have polled consistently well throughout the pandemic. Obviously, no similar system appeared in the 2009 legislation.

Additional lessons, however, can be found in another key part of Obama's early legislative agenda, the Affordable Care Act.

Since even before it became law in March 2010, the ACA has been contentious — politically, legally, and in the eyes of the public. The Kaiser Family Foundation's issue-specific tracking poll illustrates just how tight public opinion on it has been. In Kaiser Family Foundation's first survey from April 2010, 46 percent viewed the act favorably and 40 percent viewed it unfavorably. In the most recent survey from February

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, Jim McGovern, Katherine Clark

2021, the ACA's favorability had risen slightly to 54 percent while its unfavorability stayed at 39 percent.

One source of wind in the ACA's sails has been the huffing and puffing of the Republican Party. In light of GOP attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act throughout 2017, views of the bill actually started to veer in its favor as Americans learned the implications of "repeal and replace." During this period, Gallup, the Kaiser Family Foundation, NBC News/*The Wall Street Journal,* and Pew all recorded among the highest-ever support in their tracking polls. With the possibility of its demise looming, the ACA had never been more popular. The bill's approval has since plateaued in most public opinion surveys, but it is now perceived by many as a necessity to our health care system: according to a December 2020 Kaiser Family Foundation poll, 80 percent of adults said future health care policy should either build upon the Affordable Care Act or keep the law as it is.

But the partisan disputes surrounding Obama's health care plan are much deeper seated than those surrounding Biden's economic stimulus. Although Republicans spent the better part of a decade trying to take down the ACA, continuing to attack the stimulus package might have limited success: according to Pew on March 9, more Americans thought the Biden administration — not Republican congressional leaders — worked with good faith on the covid-19 aid deal.

So as long as partisanship somehow stays out of the driver's seat, this will almost certainly turn out better than, for instance, the great fiscal fiasco of late 2017, when President Donald Trump pushed his Tax Cuts and Jobs Act through Congress. The plan polled as one of the least popular tax bills on record, with an average net approval rating of -14. A year after it passed, only 38 percent of adults told Gallup that the bill helped their personal financial situation. By contrast, according to a March 5 CNN/SSRS poll, 55 percent of adults thought Biden's economic stimulus package would "help people like [them]."

For this reason, compared to some of the other major bills passed during previous presidents' first months in office the 2021 economic stimulus plan has been especially well-received — trust earned in no small part thanks to provisions such as the $1,400 checks. While it's impossible to know where public opinion on Biden's first big bill will eventually settle, it leaves the Resolute Desk with high support for now. IE

accounts for about 25 percent of the district's total votes. He only lost the rural county, anchored by Waxahachie, by 34 points, 66-32 percent, while Clinton went down by 45 points, 71-26 percent.

Democrats have seen improvement in the district's down ballot races as well, but Trump appears to have been a particularly poor fit among Republican candidates. In 2012, the district voted for Ted Cruz 57-40 percent, but only backed the senator by 3 points, 51-48 percent, in 2018. In 2020, it backed Sen. John Cornyn 52-45 percent.

At the House level, the area was represented by Republican Joe Barton from 1985 until 2018, when the former energy committee chairman retired in the wake of a sex scandal. Barton never had difficult re-elections, winning under current lines by 25 points (2012), 19 points (2014) and 25 points again (2016).

In 2018, Ron Wright won the open seat 53-45 percent, and won re-election in 2020 by a similar 53-44 percent spread despite a more favorable political environment.

Democrats acknowledge this is red territory — the last Democrat to represent the area was Phil Gramm, who famously quit the Democratic Party in 1983 to reclaim the seat as a Republican — and that they enter this election as underdogs.

But if the party's longer-term goal of turning Texas into a battleground is to come to fruition, Democrats will have to be highly competitive in districts including this one. While nobody in the party will stake their reputation on winning this seat, a close race here would signal that the Lone Star State really is trending in Democrats' direction.

The Republicans

The filing deadline for this race was on March 3, and the election is just six weeks away. Rep. Wright's widow, Susan Wright, is running,

aiming to continue a century-long tradition of widows succeeding their late husbands in Congress — but unlike Julia Letlow, who is running for the seat her late husband won in neighboring Louisiana, Susan Wright's entry did not clear the Republican


Courtesy Wright Campaign

Susan Wright

field. Jake Ellzey and Brian Harrison are running serious campaigns as well, and several other candidates could siphon off valuable votes in the jungle primary.

Wright is no political novice — she has served as district director for the last two state representatives from Tarrant-based state House District 96, where one-fifth of 6th Congressional District voters live, and also sits on the state GOP executive committee.

Wright is running as an explicit continuation of her husband's service, and has endorsements from several members of the Texas delegation — Lance Gooden (5th District), Jodey Arrington (19th), Troy Nehls (22nd), and Kay Granger (12th), the most senior Republican woman in Congress — as well as outgoing five-term Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price, and VIEW Pac, which is dedicated to electing Republican women to Congress.

Wright's campaign team includes general consultant Matt Langston
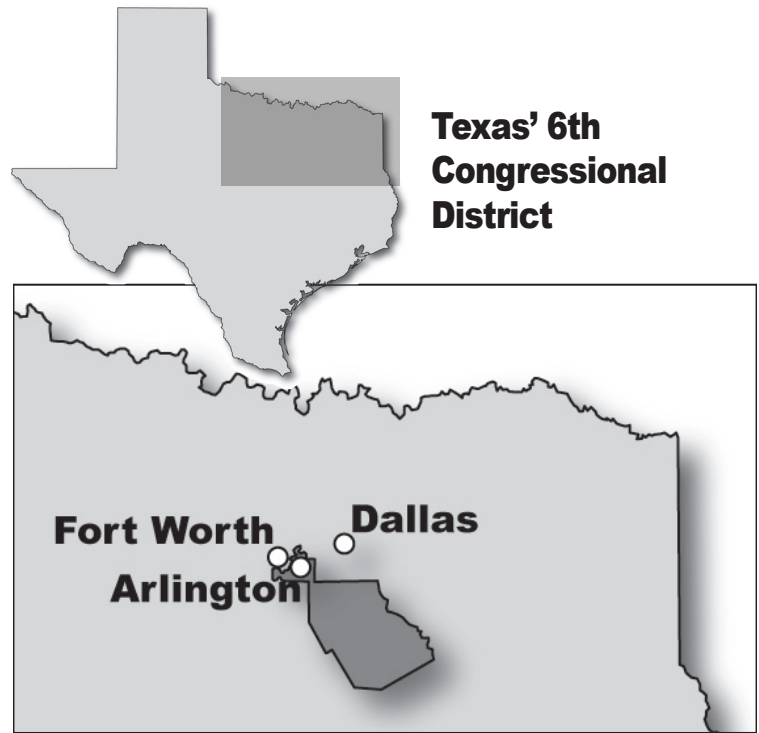
Texas' 6th Congressional District

of Big Dog Strategies, and the Strategy Group Company for media.

Ellzey represents all of Ellis County in the Texas state House — one-quarter of 2020 6th Congressional District voters live in his state House district. Ellzey is a retired Navy fighter pilot who was awarded two Bronze Stars for service in Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequently became a commercial airline pilot. He ran for the 6th District seat in 2018 and narrowly lost the open GOP primary to Ron Wright 52-48 percent in the runoff, an unexpectedly strong showing after he trailed Wright 45-22 percent in the primary's first round. In 2020, Ellzey won his seat in the Texas state House 76-24 percent against a Libertarian candidate (he had run for the seat in 2014, placing third in the GOP primary).

For this race, Ellzey has been endorsed by former Gov. Rick Perry, who appointed Ellzey to the state's veterans' commission in 2014. Ellzey's team includes general and direct mail consultants Craig Murphy and Matt Brownfield of Murphy Nasica & Associates, Ragnar Research Partners for polling, Targeted Victory for digital, and Johnson Strategies for TV ads.

Brian Harrison most recently served as chief of staff to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar in the Trump administration; he also held positions in President George W. Bush's administration. Harrison played a central role in the early days of the pandemic, before Azar was stripped of his position leading the White House coronavirus taskforce. Harrison's tenure was controversial, with detractors in the administration disparaging him as a "dog breeder" (after the Bush years Harrison ran a breeding company called "Dallas Labradoodles"), but since Trump left office, Harrison has been on conservative media as a vocal defender of the Trump administration's coronavirus response.

Harrison's campaign team includes general consultant Chris Homan, a longtime Texas political operative, and media consultant Guy Harrison of OnMessage Inc.

While Brian Harrison is positioning himself as the Trump candidate in the race, he will not have that lane to himself.

Dan Rodimer, who was the Republican nominee for Nevada's 3rd District last fall (he lost 49-46 percent to Democratic incumbent Susie

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Nathan L. Gonzales

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Lee), surprised Republicans when he filed for this seat at the last minute. The former WWE wrestler had an inauspicious start to his campaign: he traveled to Fort Worth to file his candidacy, not realizing he actually had to file in Austin, several hundred miles away. With the deadline fast approaching, he was forced to charter a jet to fly him to the state capital so he could file in time.

Rodimer has lived in Las Vegas for the past decade but says he has moved back to Texas and claims to have support from members of Trump's orbit. It is not clear who is on Rodimer's campaign team, and the campaign itself refuses to say. Several vendors from his 2020 congressional run, including polling firm WPAi, OnMessage, and fundraisers Lilly & Co. are not working with him this time.

Also competing to be the Trumpiest candidate is Sery Kim, a former assistant administrator in the Small Business Administration's Office of Women's Business Ownership. Kim also worked on the Hill as counsel to several congressional committees in the late 2000s and early 2010s, and as deputy coalitions director on the Romney 2012 presidential campaign.

Kim, who was born in Seoul, South Korea, has endorsements from California Reps. Young Kim (no relation) and Michelle Steel, two of the first Korean-American women elected to Congress. Kim is eschewing a traditional campaign structure; she has not hired any consultants and is instead angling hard for a Trump endorsement to power her campaign.

Also running are Michael Wood, a major in the Marine Corps Reserve campaigning as an explicitly anti-Trump Republican (a stance that has won him some media coverage in D.C. and support from anti-Trump GOP Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois); 2020 35th District GOP nominee Jennifer Garcia Sharon (who lost to Rep. Lloyd Doggett 65-30 percent); 2020 Senate candidate John Anthony Castro (who took 5 percent against Cornyn in the

Courtesy Ellzey campaign
Jake Ellzey

GOP primary); Arlington businessman Michael Ballantine; former Green Beret Mike Egan, a Dallas-based vice president at JP Morgan Chase; and Arlington Police Department Officer Travis Rodermund.

One name missing from the list: former Trump campaign spokeswoman Katrina Pierson. Despite reports that she was set to enter the race imminently, Pierson, who unsuccessfully ran in Texas' 32nd District in 2014, opted not to run.

The Democrats

The Democratic field is no less expansive, with 10 hopefuls, and includes the 2018 nominee for this seat and a high-profile 2020 state House candidate.

Jana Lynne Sanchez ran for the open seat in 2018, losing to Ron Wright 53-45 percent. Though not initially considered competitive (our rating was Solid Republican throughout), the race attracted some late national attention, with Sanchez receiving a September endorsement from EMILY's List and a DCCC Red-to-Blue designation in the final weeks of the cycle.

She says she passed up a run in 2020 because she had no personal wealth and could not countenance going four consecutive years without a paying job, but she recruited eventual Democratic nominee Stephen

Daniel, worked for 24th District candidate Kim Olson, and started a nonprofit aimed at increasing voter engagement.

Sanchez, who worked as a Reuters correspondent and PR operative in Europe before returning to Ellis County, Texas in the mid-2010s. She

Courtesy Rodimer campaign
Dan Rodimer

had already been planning on running in 2022 when Wright died in February, so she was able to put together a campaign team quickly. Her team includes general consultant Charly Norton of Bergmann Zwerdling, media consultant Rick Fromberg of the Win Company, pollster Donna Victoria of Victoria Research, and digital strategist Heather Colburn of Run the World.

Lydia Bean was the Democratic nominee for state House District 93 in 2020. Her race was targeted by Texas and national Democrats and she raised $1.2 million, enough to advertise on broadcast TV, but lost 55-46 percent to incumbent Matt Krause. Roughly 6 percent of 6th District voters cast ballots in that state House race.

Bean earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard and taught as an assistant professor at Baylor before serving as executive director of a faith-based social justice nonprofit. She now runs a design studio with her husband.

Bean's campaign team includes pollsters Andrew Baumann and Rosa Mendoza of Global Strategy Group, direct mail consultants Chris Cooper and Ansley Tuten Mendelson of Convergence Targeted, digital strategists Emily Todebush and Jennifer Holcomb of BattleAxe Digital, and media consultants BJ Neidhardt and Maura Dougherty of Prism Communication. Bean had previously worked with Convergence Targeted and Prism Communication on her state House race.

The third credible Democratic candidate is Shawn Lassiter, a former high school biology teacher who is now the diversity and equity chief at Leadership ISD, a Dallas-based education nonprofit. Lassiter had been planning to run for a Fort Worth City Council seat this spring but switched to the congressional race after Wright's death.

As the only top-tier Democratic candidate who has not been on the ballot or on TV sometime in the last three years, Lassiter has ground to make up against Sanchez and Bean, and not much time to do it. Her campaign believes that as the only major Black candidate in the race, Lassiter can appeal to the quarter of the district that is Black, as well as white progressives looking to elevate women of color to office.

Lassiter's campaign team includes pollster Cornell Belcher of Brilliant Corners Research & Strategies, direct mail consultant Michelle Gajewski of Ambrosino, Muir, Hansen & Crounse, media consultant Cayce McCabe of Putnam Partners, and digital strategy firm Break Something.

Joining those three on the ballot will be Army veteran Daryl Eddings of Midlothian; Dallas-area property developer Matthew Hinterlong; former Federal Bureau of Prisons counsel Tammy Allison Holloway of Dallas; pastor and former Federal Protective Service officer Patrick Moses of Mansfield; Dallas Realtor Manuel Salazar; former NASA engineer Brian Stephenson of Houston; and Chris Suprun, a paramedic and former Republican who was a faithless Texas elector in 2016, casting a vote for

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former Ohio Gov. John Kasich instead of Trump. Suprun also ran in the 27th District special election in 2018, receiving 0.1 percent of the vote.

The Logistics

Election Day is officially Saturday, May 1, but voters will be able to cast their ballots early in person from April 19 to April 27. Texas requires an excuse to vote by mail; that method is only available to those 65 or older, sick or disabled, out of the county during voting, or incarcerated but eligible to vote.

Strategists in both parties anticipate that roughly 70 percent of the special election vote will be cast early.

In recent years, a majority of Texas voters have cast their ballot early rather than on Election Day. In 2018, 73 percent of the 6th District's ballots were cast early; in 2020 that number rose to 87 percent, due in part to the coronavirus pandemic. And in 2019, municipal elections in Arlington and Fort Worth — both of which overlap with the district — saw 60 and 54 percent early voting, respectively.

The specific order in which the 23 candidates appear on the ballot is determined at the county level by random draw. That means in the 6th District, voters will see one of three orderings of candidates, depending on which county they vote in.

If no candidate receives a majority of the vote on May 1 (it is not likely one will), then the governor will schedule a runoff election, the earliest possible date being May 24, 2021. Unlike in Louisiana, the governor does not set a date for a runoff until after it is clear one is necessary.

The May 1 Primary

Although Election Day is just six weeks away, with early voting starting a week before that, local sources say this race has only just started to develop.

Voter awareness is still quite low, according to local sources, and the winter storm that caused nearly $200 billion in damage across the state has been a distraction for voters and candidates alike. Only one candidate, Brian Harrison, has gone up on TV so far, with a one-week flight on Fox News, and strategists from both parties say that broadcast TV is likely to be prohibitively expensive for most, if not all, campaigns. Also contributing to

Brian Harrison

Courtesy Harrison Campaign

the slow start were Facebook and Google's bans on political advertising, both of which were lifted at the beginning of March.

Although all the candidates will appear on the same ballot, the race is still unfolding like two traditional primaries, with the Republican hopefuls focused on each other and the GOP electorate, and Democratic contenders doing the same.

Susan Wright is seen as the early frontrunner by parties for at least one of the two runoff spots, but her inability to entirely clear the field surprised some observers; one GOP source noted that both of her main challengers, Ellzey and Harrison, come from Ellis County rather than Tarrant County, where Ron Wright was more well-known (and, his detractors say, more present).

Wright is campaigning on a continuation of her late husband's record, and in addition to centering the Wright family's legacy in the district, she talks about the same issues he focused on: lowering taxes and combating illegal immigration.

Ellzey's campaign highlights his military service, as well as his connection to the more rural parts of the district, an implicit contrast to Wright. His announcement video (likely to be the basis for his first TV ad, according to his campaign) features him wearing a white Stetson, with a stable and horse in the background. But the newly elected state legislator will

Lydia Bean

Courtesy Bean campaign

have to defend himself against accusations of ladder-climbing, having announced his congressional campaign not two months after taking his seat in the state House.

Harrison, the former HHS official, is leaning hard on his time in the administration and on social issues — his TV ad features photos of him with the former president, and centers on a pledge to defund Planned Parenthood. The decision to go up on TV early, even just on Fox News, was strategic, GOP sources say. Unlike with Ellzey or Wright, voters are not used to seeing Harrison's last name on the ballot, and his campaign understands he is playing catchup with name recognition.

While Rodimer, the former wrestler, attracted media attention for his late entry, Republicans in the district seem unimpressed with his campaign so far, with one GOP source terming it "amateur hour" and another saying he should "put up or shut up" about the financial resources and Trump-world backing he claims to have. Rodimer, who has never lived in the district, and only briefly lived in Texas earlier in his life, will also face charges of opportunism and carpetbagging. His past legal problems — a focus of the 2020 race in Nevada — could also come up.

Kim, the former SBA official, believes she can win a runoff spot with just 15 percent of the vote, and that Republican voters will gravitate toward a young, conservative immigrant of color. She is also trying hard to network with the goal of securing a Trump endorsement, and the resources and attention that would bring.

The jockeying on the Republican side could provide a window into what primary voters are looking for, whether it is candidates balancing local brands and relationships (Wright and Ellzey) or being the Trump candidate in the race (Harrison, Rodimer, and Kim).

On the Democratic side, both Sanchez and Bean have been working to re-engage their volunteer and donor networks from their previous campaigns, while Lassiter has been focused on making inroads with the district's Black community.

Lassiter's campaign also believes that she has the potential to develop a viral national following, given her background and national Democratic donors' increased interest in Black women candidates — Lassiter's campaign cites Candace Valenzuela, an Afro-Latina woman who defeated a more established Democratic candidate in the primary for Texas' 24th district last year, as a model. Valenzuela, who narrowly

lost the general election but attracted significant national attention, has sent a fundraising appeal for Lassiter to her own donor list.

Democrats underperformed expectations across Texas last fall, and the three top Democratic campaigns in this race place a fair share of the blame on the lack of in-person campaigning — all aim to rectify that during this special, and strategists on all three campaigns signaled that robust field efforts, in addition to direct mail and digital, would be their primary weapons, not TV.

Sanchez, Bean, and Lassiter are largely aligned on the issues. All three have steered clear of more controversial policies such as Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and Defund the Police, though that likely won't stop the GOP from attacking whoever progresses to the runoff as an AOC-style socialist.

All three Democrats also emphasize the importance of accountability in government. Despite there being 23 candidates in the race, none of the three top Democrats want to spend much time attacking each other or even their GOP opponents, instead training their fire on Abbott and Cruz for their responses to the pandemic and to the winter storm that knocked out Texas' power for several days in February. Bean and Lassiter both launched their campaigns with videos decrying the response to the storm, including Cruz's ill-advised trip to Cancun.

With so many candidates on the ballot, it may not take an overwhelming share of the vote to secure a runoff spot — perhaps as little as 19 or 20 percent. Local GOP sources say that could give an advantage to Wright, since she is the only Tarrant-based major Republican candidate.

Sanchez makes a similar argument for herself as the only major Democrat from Ellis or Navarro counties, which cast about 20 percent of the district's Democratic votes last year.

Two recent Democratic polls obtained by *Inside Elections* paint similar pictures of the race, with Wright at an initial advantage but many voters undecided.

A March 9-12 survey by Victoria Research for the Sanchez campaign showed Wright leading the pack with 21 percent, followed by Sanchez (17 percent) and Ellzey (8 percent), with Bean (5 percent) and Lassiter (3 percent) further back. Thirty-nine percent were undecided. The mixed-mode live interview/online survey only listed 8 of the 23 candidates, and did not include Harrison or Rodimer as options.

A March 11-16 live caller poll by GSG for the Bean campaign did include Harrison and Rodimer. It also found Wright out front, with 18 percent, and a closer race for second: Sanchez took 9 percent, Ellzey took 8 percent, and Bean and Harrison tied at 6 percent. Lassiter received 4 percent and Rodimer received 1 percent. Forty-five percent were undecided.

Some Republicans see the possibility of an all-GOP runoff, an outcome also noted in the Bean campaign's poll. Because Republicans outnumber Democrats in the district, if none of the three major Democrats are able to consolidate support, they all could be mired in the low teens, potentially allowing two Republicans to advance.

The Likely Runoff

Without knowing the results of the initial round, it is difficult to handicap a potential runoff.

At the moment, it looks like Democratic outside groups such as the DCCC and EMILY's List are waiting until the dust settles from the primary before getting involved. Should they be encouraged by the results on May 1, either by whichever Democrat advances to the runoff or from the party's collective performance, we could see an increase in

the level of outside involvement.

Whichever Democratic candidate makes it to the runoff — assuming one does — will likely try to nationalize the race. Trump was the

Courtesy Lassiter campaign

Shawn Lassiter

worst-performing Republican candidate in the district over the last decade, and Democrats will want to tie whomever the GOP nominee is to him. That may be easier against Harrison or Rodimer, both of whom are running on Trumpist credibility, than against Wright, who is running on her husband's brand, or Ellzey, who has cultivated a personal brand as well.

The de facto Democratic nominee will also want to nationalize the race in order to tap into the donor network that powered candidates across the country to record fundraising over the past two cycles. While most campaigns see broadcast TV as an inefficient use of resources during the primary, that calculus may change in a runoff.

The big question for both parties is if they can retain the high levels of turnout we have seen over the past four years. For Democrats, this will be the first test of whether the enthusiasm that powered the party to special election overperformances in 2017 and 2018 and allowed them to retake the House has abated now that Biden is president. Democrats will also have to prove that they can continue to win suburban, historically Republican voters who were repelled by Trump.

For Republicans, the question will be whether the new voters Trump brought into the party — including lower propensity working class whites and Hispanics — continue to turn out even when Trump is not on the ballot.

The Bottom Line

Republicans are favored to keep this seat. Despite the increasingly close presidential margins, this district still has deep Republican DNA; that matters in low turnout special elections in which only the most engaged voters participate. This race is not a must-win for Democrats and the national party may choose to stay out of it altogether.

Redistricting is right around the corner, and Texas sources expect the 6th District to be shored up with Republican votes, meaning that even if a Democrat won, they would face a difficult re-election race next year.

And with House Democrats' majority already so slim, going big on a tough Texas race and coming up short could be more demoralizing to the party than staying out of the race and letting the cards fall as they may.

But for Democrats looking to prove that Blue Texas is not just a daydream but an eventuality, this race could present the opportunity to test-drive their case. IE

House Special Election Race Ratings

Louisiana's 2nd District (Richmond, D)	Solid Democratic
Louisiana's 5th District (Letlow, R)	Solid Republican
New Mexico's 1st District (Haaland, D)	Solid Democratic
Ohio's 11th District (Fudge, D)	Solid Democratic
Texas' 6th District (Wright, R)	Lean Republican