

# Inside Elections

with  
**Nathan L. Gonzales**  
Nonpartisan Analysis

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## Nevada Senate: It Matters

By Jacob Rubashkin

With the Senate divided 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans, every seat up is a potential majority-maker in 2022, including Nevada.

Both parties have four major targets on the Senate battlefield. For Democrats, those are Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Florida. For Republicans, those are Arizona, Georgia, New Hampshire and Nevada.

Democrats hope to expand the battlefield into states such as Ohio, Iowa, and even Missouri. But President Joe Biden's recent slip in job approval ratings, and burgeoning crises at home and abroad due to the Covid-19 Delta variant and the Afghanistan withdrawal, have made that less likely.

Republicans, however, don't have much room to expand beyond their four pickup opportunities either. The next states on the list — Colorado, Illinois, and Washington — are difficult for the GOP to win even in a favorable environment. That places a premium on success in the four top targets.

Arizona and Georgia are only just beginning competitive GOP primaries, and New Hampshire is still months away from the race-defining decision to run (or not to run) from Gov. Chris Sununu.

Nevada is already moving quickly toward general election mode as Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto looks to fend off a challenge from likely GOP nominee Adam Laxalt.

The recent entrance of the former state attorney general/2018 gubernatorial nominee, and endorsement from former President Donald Trump, seems to have warded off other high-profile potential candidates such as former Lt. Gov. Mark Hutchinson, Rep. Mark Amodei, and former Sen. Dean Heller (who looks to be preparing a run for governor instead).

So the stage looks close to set in a competitive race in a Democratic leaning state in a GOP leaning cycle, with the Senate majority on the line.

### The Lay of the Land

Nevada was one of the fastest growing states in the nation over the past decade, with total population increasing 15 percent (double the national rate) between 2010 and 2020, when it clocked in at just over 3.1 million residents.

Seventy-three percent of Nevada's population resides in Clark County, the home of Las Vegas, in the southern tip of the state, and another 16 percent in Washoe County, home of Reno, in the northwest corner. Much of the land in between — upward of 80 percent of it, according to the Congressional Research Service — is owned by the federal government, more than any other state.

The state's economy is dominated by the tourism, entertainment, and hospitality industries, driven by Las Vegas' continued status as a global

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## 2022 Senate Ratings

### BATTLEGROUND

#### Democratic-Held (4)

Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)  
Hassan (D-N.H.)  
Kelly (D-Ariz.)  
Warnock (D-Ga.)

#### Republican-Held (4)

NC Open (Burr, R)  
PA Open (Toomey, R)  
Johnson (R-Wisc.)  
Rubio (R-Fl.)

#### Solid Democratic (10)

Bennet (D-Colo.)  
Blumenthal (D-Conn.)  
Duckworth (D-Ill.)  
Leahy (D-Vt.)  
Murray (D-Wash.)  
Padilla (D-Calif.)  
Schatz (D-Hawaii)  
Schumer (D-N.Y.)  
Van Hollen (D-Md.)  
Wyden (D-Ore.)

#### Solid Republican (16)

AL Open (Shelby, R)  
MO Open (Blunt, R)  
OH Open (Portman, R)  
Boozman (R-Ark.)  
Crapo (R-Idaho)  
Grassley (R-Iowa)  
Hoeven (R-N.D.)  
Kennedy (R-La.)  
Lankford (R-Okla.)  
Lee (R-Utah)  
Moran (R-Kan.)  
Murkowski (R-Alaska)  
Paul (R-Ky.)  
Scott (R-S.C.)  
Thune (R-S.D.)  
Young (R-Ind.)

## CALENDAR

<b>Sept. 14</b>	California Gubernatorial Recall Election
<b>Nov. 2</b>	Virginia & New Jersey Gubernatorial Elections
<b>Nov. 2</b>	Ohio's 11th & 15th Special General Elections
<b>Nov. 2</b>	Florida's 20th District Special Election Primary
<b>Dec. 13</b>	Texas Candidate Filing Deadline
<b>Dec. 17</b>	North Carolina Candidate Filing Deadline
<b>Jan. 11</b>	Florida's 20th District Special General Election

# Minnesota 2: Twin Billing

By Jacob Rubashkin

With history, redistricting, and the current national political environment on their side, Republicans are on the march to the House majority. And if they make big gains in 2022, Minnesota's 2nd District is likely to be in that batch of takeovers.

Democrats are facing the worst national environment since the 2020 election, and they had better hope this is the nadir rather than a sign of what's to come. The Delta variant is powering another Covid-19 resurgence that has put the country's physical and economic health back in critical condition.

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has provided fodder for President Joe Biden's previously befuddled critics and traumatic footage for the news media. And internal Democratic divisions on Capitol Hill are prolonging the party's efforts to pass landmark infrastructure legislation that is supposed to form the linchpin of their 2022 strategy to hold the majority.

All this has Republicans salivating at the prospect of taking back the House of Representatives, with room to spare. And the GOP is eager to highlight the "Defund the Police" movement in the shadow of the burnt out Minneapolis police precinct that captured national attention last year.

In many states, that enthusiasm has been constrained by the delayed redistricting process. Without newly-drawn districts, it can be harder to recruit candidates and organize campaign infrastructure, especially in areas where the lines could change significantly.

But Republicans don't have that problem in Minnesota's 2nd, which is one of several around the country where 2022 is looking like it will be a rematch of 2020. While several GOP runner-ups have signalled they're going to try again — Texas' Wesley Hunt and Monica De La Cruz Hernandez, and Pennsylvania's Lisa Scheller come to mind — Minnesota's 2nd stands out.

Last cycle, Marine veteran Tyler Kistner ran a well-regarded campaign in a tough district, and while he came up short he also beat

the expectations of observers in both parties. He's already announced he's running again, and is hoping that his 2020 performance keeps this district on the map of competitive races after his close loss.

Republicans don't need to win districts like Minnesota's 2nd to win the House. The five-seat Democratic majority is so slim that Republicans could wrest back control of the chamber just by winning constituencies carried by Donald Trump in 2020.

But Democratic Rep. Angie Craig's narrow victory — one of the closest of the 2020 cycle — intrigues GOP strategists, and the 2nd is also an opportunity for the party to show that it can once again compete in suburban areas that were not so friendly to President Donald Trump, now that he is out of office.

## The Lay of the Land

The current 2nd District has played host to competitive elections up and down the ballot for much of the last decade.

In 2008, Barack Obama carried the current 2nd by 3 points, 51-48 percent, as he carried the state by 10 points. In 2012, Obama won it by just 226 votes, as he carried the state by 7 points. And in 2016 Trump won the 2nd by a little over one point, 46.5-45.3 percent (all data according to Daily Kos Elections), though he lost statewide by 2 points.

But in 2020, Biden carried the 2nd by 7 points, 52-45 percent, the largest margin of any presidential candidate this decade, while winning the state by 8 points.

At the House level, the district and its predecessor were represented by Republican John Kline from 2002 to 2016. Kline, who was regarded as a moderate, regularly had comfortable victories; his closest race was in 2012, when he won by 8 points.

Kline was succeeded by Republican talk radio host Jason Lewis, who won a narrow 2-point victory in 2016 over Craig, 47-45 percent, with a third-party candidate taking 8 percent of the vote. Two years later, Craig ousted Lewis, winning 53-47 percent, with no third-party candidate on the ballot.

In 2020, when Craig faced Kistner for the first time, she narrowly won, 48-46 percent, with a deceased third-party candidate taking 6 percent of the vote. That candidate, the Legal Marijuana Now Party's Adam Weeks, momentarily caused the election to be canceled and rescheduled for the following February, though a federal judge ordered the election back to the regularly-scheduled November date, two weeks after Weeks' death.

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Angie Craig

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

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Despite Biden carrying the district by 7 points, Craig's victory was the sixth-narrowest of all Democratic House wins by absolute margin, with just 9,580 votes separating her and Kistner.

## Redistricting

Though the redistricting process has only just begun in earnest, insiders don't expect the district's lines to shift all that much. Minnesotans were expecting to lose a seat in the decennial reapportionment, but the state ended up retaining all eight of its districts, making a status quo map much more likely.

The state also has a split legislature (Democrats control the state House, Republicans the state Senate), which decreases the possibility of either party drawing new lines significantly more favorable to their candidates. And strategists on both sides think the state Supreme Court will likely have to step in and draw the maps, as it did in 2011.

In its current configuration, the 2nd District covers the southern Twin Cities suburbs (Dakota County) as well as more rural counties to the southeast along the Wisconsin border. The district will need to shed roughly 19,000 residents in order to hit the state's target population. With the two urban districts to the north also overpopulated, the most likely destination for the 2nd's excess voters is the slightly underpopulated 1st District to the south.

That could have a positive effect for Craig, given that her support is concentrated in the fast-growing suburbs in the northern part of the district. If the divided state legislature opts for an incumbent protection plan (which is unlikely), that could help both Craig and 1st District GOP Rep. Jim Hagedorn, who also faced close races in 2018 and 2020. A court-drawn map could similarly push Craig's district northward, with all eight districts potentially moving counterclockwise to fill out the underpopulated 7th and 8th districts.

But any shifts aren't likely to change the fundamental partisanship of the 2nd, which means another competitive race is likely.

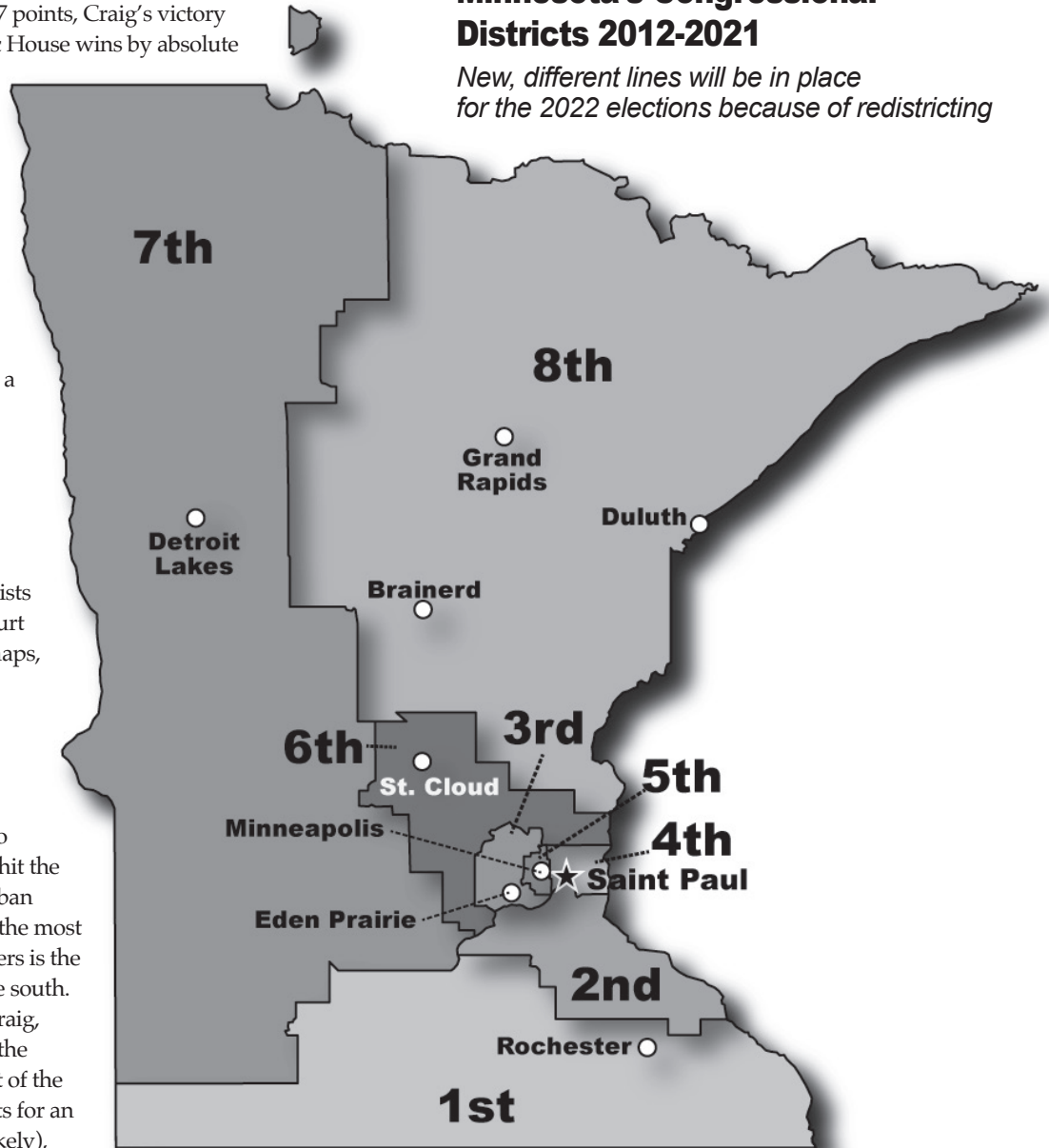
## The DFL Incumbent

Craig, 49, is in her second term as the 2nd District's representative. Born in West Helena, Ark., Craig attended college in Tennessee at the University of Memphis, and moved to Minnesota in 2005 after a stint as a journalist in Memphis and working for a medical device company in London.

Prior to running for Congress, Craig worked for Minnesota-based medical device company St. Jude Medical as an executive, and was involved in local DFL politics. In 2016, she won an unopposed Democratic primary for the 2nd District nomination after her main

## Minnesota's Congressional Districts 2012-2021

*New, different lines will be in place for the 2022 elections because of redistricting*



competition, wealthy physician Mary Lawrence, dropped out of the race.

Craig went on to face talk radio host Jason Lewis in the general election in one of the most closely watched races in the country, both because of its competitiveness and Lewis' history of controversial statements about women, minorities, and slavery.

The National Republican Congressional Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee each spent \$2 million on the race, and Craig herself outraised Lewis nearly 5-to-1 (including nearly \$1 million in personal funds). Ultimately, Craig lost by 2 points, 47-45 percent, with Independence Party candidate Paula Overby taking nearly 8 percent of the vote.

In 2018, Craig sought a rematch, this time defeating Lewis, 53-47 percent. The race again attracted significant outside spending, with the NRCC putting \$3 million behind Lewis and an array of Democratic outside groups including the DCCC (\$1.8 million) and Giffords PAC (\$1

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million) spending upward of \$5 million in support of Craig.

In 2020, Lewis passed on a rubber match against Craig, running instead for the U.S. Senate against DFL incumbent Tina Smith, losing 49-44 percent. In his stead, Republicans nominated Kistner. Though the district was on the NRCC's initial target list, and Craig was on the DCCC's list of vulnerable incumbents, the contest attracted little attention or outside money. The only significant independent expenditure was a \$400,000 buy in late October by House Majority PAC to support Craig.

That contest was also briefly derailed after the Legal Marijuana Now Party candidate, Adam Weeks, died in September. Under Minnesota law, that meant the election was canceled and rescheduled for the following February. But Craig successfully challenged that law in federal court, and a judge reinstated the November election after a two-week limbo period.

A voicemail later surfaced in which Weeks claimed Republican operatives had offered him \$15,000 to launch his candidacy for the explicit purpose of siphoning votes away from Craig. Though deceased, Weeks won nearly 6 percent of the vote, contributing to a closer-than-expected election that saw Craig defeat Kistner by 2 points, 48-46 percent.

Trump (197,005 votes) and Kistner (194,954 votes) performed roughly equally, but Craig (204,534 votes) significantly underperformed Biden (226,589 votes), indicating that Weeks' 24,751-vote haul took disproportionately from the Democrat.

In Congress, Craig sits on the Agriculture, Energy and Commerce, and Small Business committees. A co-chair of the LGBT Equality Caucus, Craig was the first lesbian mother ever elected to Congress.

Craig's campaign team includes media consultants Jon Lapp and Jason Ralston of Ralston Lapp Guinn, pollster Jill Normington of Normington Petts, digital consultant Geoff Mackler of Blueprint Interactive, and direct mail by Ed Peavy of Mission Control.

## The Republican Challenger

Kistner, 40, is a St. Louis Park native making his second run for elected office. Kistner joined the Marine Corps in 2010 after graduating from University of Minnesota. He served eight years, including five years in the special forces as a Marine Raider, with two tours in North Africa and two in the Indo-Pacific. Kistner left active duty in 2019 at the rank of captain and is currently a reserve officer.

In 2020, Kistner entered a crowded primary to take on Craig that also included former state Rep. Regina Barr, Air Force Reserve Lt. Col. Erika Cashin, attorney Kerry Zeiler, and former Michigan state Rep. Rick Olson. At the Minnesota 2nd District GOP convention, Kistner won the party's endorsement with 62 percent of the vote. Though the convention was a separate process from the primary, which did not happen until August, the other contenders dropped out leaving Kistner unopposed for the nomination.



Eric Pratt

Courtesy Minnesota State Senate

Kistner was a strong first-time candidate but struggled to attract support from national Republicans. Despite out-raising Craig in a handful of quarters toward the end of the race, Kistner was out-raised overall by nearly 2-to-1, a disparity that played a role in motivating his early entrance this time. He eventually raised \$3 million overall.

When a federal judge ruled the election back on after Weeks' death, Kistner appealed the decision to an appeals court and the U.S. Supreme Court, but was rebuffed in both instances.

Despite a poll from the Craig campaign showing Kistner down by 18 points in mid-October, the Marine held the incumbent to a close victory. Kistner conceded the election but later sued to prevent the certification of the result, alleging "vote count anomalies" in a lawsuit that was dismissed by the state Supreme Court.

Billy Grant of Arsenal Media is returning as Kistner's general consultant, and Brock McCleary of Cygnal is returning as the campaign's pollster. Longtime GOP ad man Fred Davis is the media consultant, and HSP Direct is handling direct mail.

Democrats following the race are chattering about a potential run by GOP state Sen. Eric Pratt, an eight-year state legislator from the same town as Kistner. But Democrats don't get to pick the GOP nominee, and Republicans aren't really talking about Pratt at all at this stage of the race.

## How It Plays Out

Craig starts out with a financial edge, having \$1 million left over from last cycle and out-raising Kistner \$1.1 million to \$429,000 over the first six months of the year. She ended June with \$1.9 million in the bank compared to the Republican's \$189,000.

But Kistner may not have to make up the difference entirely by himself.

Kistner's supporters hope that the close 2020 result will encourage Republicans to invest in the race this time around. The 2nd is once again on the NRCC's target list, and the GOP-aligned American Action Network has already spent \$156,000 on anti-Craig messaging, according to media analytics firm Kantar. (Craig has also received some air support, from Democratic leadership-affiliated House Majority Forward, which spent \$110,000 to support her.)

It may also give Kistner a leg up that the NRCC is once again helmed by neighboring Minnesota Rep. Tom Emmer.

After making Kistner's Marine background the primary focus last time, the Kistner team is hoping to soften his image. While he's retained his slogan "Send in the Marine" from 2020, his campaign believes that image is engrained enough in voters' minds to make family and policy the new focus.

It remains to be seen if the campaign can execute that strategy. It is worth noting that Arsenal Media Group is known for its bombastic messaging campaigns for candidates such as Madison Cawthorn, Lauren Boebert, and Kim Klacik, and that Kistner's new media consultant, Davis, is famous for out-there ads such as "Demon Sheep" for Carly Fiorina in California. Kistner, who was mild-mannered in his interview last year with *Inside Elections*, doesn't fit that mold.

Craig will again run as a business-friendly pragmatist, drawing on her experience as a corporate executive to burnish her down-the-middle bona fides. (Craig was a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus in her first term but left the group in 2021.)

Like many vulnerable Democrats, Craig hopes to run on Biden's major infrastructure plans. For that to happen, of course, those plans

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have to pass Congress, and as summer turns to fall Democrats still haven't found a sure path forward for the bipartisan infrastructure plan and the reconciliation bill.

Since her first run in 2016, Craig has also focused on college and trade school affordability, and on lowering prescription drug prices (the subject of AAN's ads against her earlier this year).

Craig's new seat on the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee could also help her strengthen ties with local business in the district, as could her role in facilitating Covid-19 relief loans to small businesses across the district — a theme of her 2020 re-election campaign.

And Democrats believe that the new Texas abortion law and the potential for the Supreme Court to curtail or overturn *Roe vs. Wade* — while a serious policy defeat — could be a major motivator for voters who might not otherwise be tuned into the midterm elections, helping Democrats eat away at the GOP's enthusiasm gap.

Both parties are closely watching a November 2021 referendum in Minneapolis that would replace the city's police department with a Department of Public Safety, a proposal with roots in the Defund the Police movement that came about following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year.

Craig, who doesn't represent Minneapolis, has come out against the proposal. But that won't stop Republicans from claiming that she supports defunding the police and tying her to figures such as state Attorney General Keith Ellison and Rep. Ilhan Omar, who support the referendum. Craig will have to spend to communicate her stance to voters — Democrats in other competitive races, such as the Virginia gubernatorial contest and the New Mexico 1 special, have run ads featuring current and former law enforcement officers vouching for them.

Whether or not the referendum succeeds could affect how much of an issue policing is. If it passes, the process of dismantling and recreating the city's law enforcement division could remain in the news well into next year. If it fails, voters and the media may move on, especially if the left wing also falters in this November's city council races.

Republicans will also look to tie Craig to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in part by pointing to an old clip of Craig chastising Lewis for voting in lockstep with leadership — which they say shows her hypocrisy now that, according to *ProPublica*, she votes with Pelosi 98 percent of the time. Pelosi has previously signalled this will be her last term in leadership, and Republicans have been using her as a cudgel for the past 15 years.

One wild card is the former president, whose standing in the district took a serious hit over the past four years and who didn't do much to endear himself to suburban voters in the months after he lost re-election. Trump is Democrats' best turnout booster, and Democratic strategists are eager to keep tying Republican candidates to him in districts where he struggled in 2020. But in order for that strategy to be effective, Trump has to be a presence in voters' minds.



Tyler Kistner

Courtesy Kistner for Congress

## Minnesota's Congressional Districts

### 2020 Population vs. Target Population Through Redistricting

District	2020 Population	2020 - Target
1st (Hagedorn, R)	690,726	-22,586
2nd (Craig, DFL)	731,958	18,646
3rd (Phillips, DFL)	737,898	24,586
4th (McCollum, DFL)	726,476	13,164
5th (Omar, DFL)	736,036	22,724
6th (Emmer, R)	733,957	20,645
7th (Fischbach, R)	673,514	-39,798
8th (Stauber, R)	675,929	-37,383
<b>Statewide Population</b>	<b>5,706,494</b>	
<b>Target District Population</b>	<b>713,312</b>	

While he's been laying (relatively) low since leaving office, and he still hasn't regained access to social media, the former president seems to be encouraging growing chatter about a 2024 presidential run. If he starts making more serious moves in that direction, Democrats will be able to raise the specter of another Trump presidency to motivate their voters as they did in 2018 and 2020.

Another big question is if a third party candidate joins the race. None have announced yet, but strategists from both parties expect at least one to emerge. Overby, the Independence Party candidate who may have contributed to Craig's 2016 loss, tried to replace the deceased Weeks on the ballot in 2020 and could run again in 2022.

In the last three congressional elections, the Republican candidate has received between 46 and 47 percent of the vote. That's remarkably stable despite three different national political environments and outcomes at the top of the ticket. The challenge for Republicans will be to nudge that percentage up just a bit, and rely on the district's independent streak to cost Democrats a chunk of votes to a third-party candidate.

Specifically on the issue of marijuana, Democrats hope that Craig's pro-legalization stance, and the state government's recent move to legalize medical marijuana, will blunt the appeal of future candidates from the Legal Marijuana Now and Legalize Cannabis parties.

### The Bottom Line

In 2018, Democrats were propelled to the House majority by winning not just districts that Hillary Clinton had carried or nearly carried, but also by capturing more strongly Trump districts. In 2020, Republicans won back many of those Trump districts.

While winning those seats was enough to overperform expectations, it wasn't enough to win back the House.

In 2022, if Republicans want to win back the House with room to spare, they will have to start regaining ground in districts where Biden performed well, districts with fast-growing suburbs and college educated populations — districts like Minnesota's 2nd.

To do so, they'll need strong candidates who can take advantage of a favorable environment, and the party feels like it has that in Kistner. While there is some uncertainty on the shape of the district until new lines are finalized, this will likely be a race to watch for the duration of the cycle.

*Continued from page 1*

gaming mecca. True to its name, the Silver State also retains a notable mining and energy extraction industry, producing much of the county's gold and silver.

Politically, Nevada is a swing state that often chooses not to swing. It has voted for the Democratic presidential nominee in six out of the last eight elections, only casting its votes for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. In 2020, Nevada voted for Biden by 2.4 points, 50.1-47.7 percent, and was one of just a handful of states in which Biden's margin was smaller than Hillary Clinton's in 2016, who won 47.9-45.5 percent. Barack Obama won by slightly larger margins, 52-47 percent in 2012 and 55-43 percent in 2008.

Democrats currently control both Senate seats, with Jacky Rosen wresting the Class I seat from Republican Sen. Dean Heller 50-45 percent in 2018 (Heller had won his first term in a squeaker in 2012, 46-45 percent over Democratic Rep. Shelley Berkley). And Cortez Masto won her first term 47-45 percent over Republican Rep. Joe Heck in 2016, keeping that seat in Democratic hands after longtime party floor leader Harry Reid retired.

Republicans have had more historical success in the governor's mansion, which the party held continuously for 20 years from 1999 to 2018, when Democrat Steve Sisolak defeated Adam Laxalt, 49-45 percent.

The high water mark for Republicans came in 2014 when the uber-popular GOP Gov. Brian Sandoval took advantage of a favorable national political environment to lead a top-to-bottom GOP rout that saw him win re-election by 47 points while Republicans swept the five other statewide elected offices and reclaimed majorities in both houses of the state legislature and in the congressional delegation. That all took place in a midterm with a Democrat in the Oval Office.

## The Democratic Incumbent

Cortez Masto, 57, made headlines last year when she was a rumored contender to be Biden's vice presidential pick before taking herself out of consideration. But it was in another role — chairwoman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee — that the first-term senator made her biggest impact on national politics, shepherding in Democratic control of the chamber for the first time in six years.

Born in Las Vegas to a Clark County commissioner and friend of future Sen. Harry Reid, Cortez

Masto trained as a lawyer and got her start in politics as chief of staff to Gov. Bob Miller in the mid-1990s. After stints as an assistant U.S. Attorney in Washington, DC and assistant Clark County manager, Cortez Masto made her first run for office in 2006 when state Attorney General (and future Gov.) Brian Sandoval was appointed to the federal bench.

She defeated Republican state judge Don Chairez 59-36 percent, and was re-elected in 2010 over Republican Travis Barrick, a Las Vegas lawyer, 53-36 percent.



Catherine Cortez Masto

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Term-limited as attorney general, Cortez Masto passed on a run for governor in 2014. But in 2015, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid announced he wouldn't seek re-election and signalled he wanted Cortez Masto to succeed him.

With the power of the Reid machine backing her, Cortez Masto avoided any serious competition in the Democratic primary, and faced 3rd District GOP Rep. Joe Heck, a top GOP recruit with a background as a physician and brigadier general in the Army Reserve, in the general election.

In a rare bright spot for Democrats on election night of 2016, Cortez Masto held off Heck, 47-45 percent, to win Reid's seat and become the nation's first Latina senator. "None of these candidates," a unique option Nevada voters have the ability to choose at the ballot box, took nearly 4 percent of the vote, almost double Cortez Masto's margin of victory.

In the Senate, she sits on the Banking, Energy and Natural Resources, Rules, Commerce, and Indian Affairs committees.

During the 2020 cycle, she served as the chairwoman of the DSCC. On election night, Democrats fell short of expectations in the Senate, failing to win in North Carolina, Maine, and Iowa, and not securing an outright majority. That would have been a demerit for Cortez Masto if not for the party's stunning twin victories in the January 2021 Georgia Senate runoffs, which delivered them control.

Her campaign team includes Magnus Pearson for media, Hart Research Associates for polling, and AMHC for direct mail.

## The Republicans

Laxalt, 43, was born in Reno but raised in Washington, DC and is the grandson of former Nevada governor and Sen. Paul Laxalt. He is also the son of former New Mexico Sen. Pete Domenici, though that relationship was not acknowledged until 2013.

Despite his pedigree, Laxalt arrived relatively recently on the political scene. After five years in the Navy JAG corps ending in 2010, he returned to practice law in Reno. In 2013, he was the subject of national headlines after his paternity was revealed, and in 2014 he launched what was initially a longshot bid for state attorney general to succeed the term-limited Cortez Masto.

Laxalt faced Nevada Secretary of State Ross Miller, himself the son of a former Nevada governor, who started and spent much of the race as a heavy favorite. It was a nasty contest that saw millions of dollars in outside spending to boost Laxalt — rare for a state attorney general election — and Laxalt eventually pulled off the upset. Buoyed by a great national environment for Republicans, Laxalt defeated Miller 46-45 percent, with Independent American candidate Jonathan Hansen taking 6 percent and "None of these candidates" taking 3 percent. It was by far the narrowest statewide victory for a Republican ticket led by Sandoval's 47-point smackdown in the gubernatorial race.

As attorney general, Laxalt often clashed with the more moderate Sandoval on social issues such as gay marriage (Laxalt is a strident opponent), abortion (he's pro-life), and the federal DACA immigration plan, as well as Sandoval's signature "commerce tax."

Their divisions ran so deep that when Laxalt ran to succeed Sandoval, the outgoing governor repeatedly refused to endorse him, saying before the primary that he couldn't "support a candidate who seeks to undo what we've done for the past seven years," and declining to endorse once Laxalt won the nomination in a 72-9 percent rout over state Treasurer Dan Schwartz.

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Laxalt went on to lose the general election to Clark County Commissioner Steve Sisolak, 49-45 percent, in a good Democratic year.

In 2020, Laxalt was Trump's Nevada campaign co-chairman. Before the election, Laxalt sued unsuccessfully to stop Clark County from counting mail-in ballots. After Trump lost Nevada, Laxalt began falsely claiming that massive voter fraud cost Trump the state, and filed an unsuccessful lawsuit to have Trump declared the winner.

For this race, the Laxalt campaign includes general consultants Robert Uithoven of Axiom Strategies (a longtime Nevada GOP operative who has been a Laxalt aide since his first run in 2014) and former Mitch McConnell chief of staff Josh Holmes of Cavalry, along with pollster Chris Wilson of WPAi. Cavalry is also handling digital while Owen Brennan of Madison McQueen will do paid media.

Laxalt isn't the only Republican candidate in the race. Sam Brown, a retired U.S. Army captain, is running as well. Brown is a 2006 West Point graduate who served as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan, where he was the victim of an IED attack that left him grievously wounded and with extensive facial and full body scarring.

Brown has captured the attention of some Nevada Republicans who view him as an intriguing alternative to Laxalt. The post-2020 activities of the former attorney general and the level of intensity with which he pursued false claims of voter fraud have made some Republicans uneasy about his candidacy in the blue-tinged state.

Brown has an inspiring life story and has proven to be media savvy, with appearances on Fox News and Newsmax promoting his candidacy. He's also been the subject of several glossy magazine profiles over the past decade, including in *GQ* and *D Magazine*.

But there's plenty of reason to be skeptical Brown will be able to seriously compete against Laxalt, who enters the primary with name recognition and an established donor network. Brown only moved to Nevada in 2018, and previously ran an unsuccessful campaign for the Texas state House in 2014, placing third in the GOP primary.

Most importantly, Laxalt has Trump's endorsement and the implicit approval of Senate Minority Leader McConnell. That alone makes him the prohibitive favorite among today's GOP primary electorate.

## How It Plays Out

Neither party is expecting surprises. "You could write every story about this race for the next 12 months next weekend," according to one Democratic strategist. One Republican strategist said the case against Cortez Masto won't be "about any big oppo hits or scandals or rumors or anything else" but a more straightforward anti-Washington message.

Operatives in both parties acknowledge that Nevada often plays second fiddle to other competitive states because of Democrats' slight but consistent advantage, but neither party seems concerned that their candidates will lack the resources they need even with flashier contests going on in Arizona, Georgia, Florida and elsewhere.

Democrats maintain a slight edge in voter registration — 36 percent to the GOP's 31 percent and unaffiliated voters' 32 percent — but that's down from the party's 8 percent edge in 2008. Nevada recently passed a version of automatic voter registration, which local observers say pushed the number of unaffiliated voters ahead of registered Republicans.

But the state is also famously transient, with high numbers of residents moving in and out over time, whether transplants from California or workers in Las Vegas. That prevents Democrats from resting on their laurels despite their winning streak, because the

coalitions needed to win are constantly shifting. But it also means Democrats have an organizing advantage, according to local Democratic and Republican sources.

The latest focus for Democrats is Washoe County (Reno), a once traditionally Republican county that has trended toward Democrats over the past decade. In 2016, Cortez Masto lost it by 0.8 percent while Clinton carried it by 1 point. In 2018, both Rosen and Sisolak carried it narrowly, and in 2020 Biden carried it by 4 points.

For Democrats, the path to victory in Nevada is a double-digit win in vote-rich Clark County, and a narrow win in Washoe. Statewide candidates haven't been competitive in the rest of the state for nearly a decade.

To that end, the Washoe County Democratic Party has emerged as a surrogate state party. After the actual state party was taken over by supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Reid machine and the national



Adam Laxalt

party made the decision to turn the Washoe outpost into the home of the 2022 coordinated campaign, effectively bypassing the state party. While Republicans have made a lot of hay over that internal division, the GOP has had its

own struggles, and so far it appears that the state Democratic Party is simply a non-factor.

On the issues, Cortez Masto will run as a work horse, pointing to her efforts to secure 100 percent funding for COBRA benefits in the American Rescue Plan, and like many vulnerable Democrats, she's banking on Congress passing Biden's twin infrastructure plans so she can run on the trillions of dollars in programs they contain.

In addition to the standard roads and bridges messaging, Cortez Masto specifically worked on \$3.4 billion for wildfire prevention in the bipartisan bill that passed the Senate. Democrats point to the recent Lake Tahoe fires as evidence that wildfire prevention and addressing climate change will be top of mind for voters next fall.

Republicans will run against Cortez Masto as a creature of Washington more aligned with Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Sen. Sanders than Nevadans, and will try to tie her to the socialist-controlled state party. GOP strategists also see Biden becoming a liability rather than an asset for Democratic incumbents as his job rating slips, especially among independents.

In the wake of the Texas abortion law and the Supreme Court's decision to allow it to go into effect, Democrats are eager to make reproductive health a major issue. According to 2020 exit polling from the AP, 66 percent of Nevada voters supported legal abortion in all or most cases, among the highest rates in the country. Laxalt is strongly pro-life, having clashed with Sandoval over the issue as attorney general and musing publicly in 2018 about repealing the state's constitutional provision protecting abortion rights.

Democrats also plan to go after Laxalt's post-2020 activities, when he sued to overturn the results of the election. Though Laxalt is far from the only GOP Senate candidate around the country who has promoted false

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theories about the 2020 election, even some Republicans acknowledge that his position could be a liability in Nevada. In 2010, the deeply unpopular Reid was able to soundly defeat state Sen. Sharron Angle despite a terrible national environment for Democrats by painting her as too controversial and conspiratorial, a result that still weighs heavy on Republicans a decade later.

While the Covid-19 pandemic is a major storyline in every election across the country, it is particularly important in Nevada because of how dependent the state is on out-of-state tourism and the close quarters of the Las Vegas entertainment scene. One Nevada Democratic strategist acknowledged that the Delta variant dimmed their outlook on the race, saying “three months ago Cortez Masto’s economic recovery message was pitch perfect” but now it’s more uncertain.

To the extent that something could upset what both parties expect to be a tight race from start to finish, it’s another economic shutdown that threatens to throw the state’s notoriously mercurial economy into a tailspin.

Early private polling indicates a tight race, with Cortez Masto holding a slight lead. The Laxalt campaign recently promoted a survey from VCreek/AMG that showed him with a 10-point lead over Cortez Masto, 42-32 percent. But strategists from both parties say that’s an improbable, bordering on laughable result that doesn’t reflect reality or other polls.

## The Bottom Line

Unlike in Georgia or Arizona, the incumbent Democrat in Nevada isn’t a nationally prominent fundraising juggernaut. Unlike in New

Hampshire, the likely Republican nominee isn’t a uniquely strong contender whose candidacy is race-altering. And unlike even less competitive races such as Ohio and Missouri, neither candidate has a penchant for attracting national media attention.

But none of that makes this race any less integral to the 2022 Senate map. In an evenly divided Senate, every single seat counts, and a state prone to such close races like Nevada cannot be overlooked.

The nature of the state is that this race will likely remain close from now until Election Day, and will occasionally give off indicators one way or another that will result in more than a few lost follicles from the heads of party operatives in Washington. While Democrats are on a hot streak over the past three cycles, the 2014 bloodbath should belie any notion that the state won’t vote for Republicans if the moment is right.

Laxalt is probably the best candidate Republicans could have gotten, especially once it became clear that Sandoval, the popular former governor, had no interest in running for Senate. That said, he isn’t a Chris Sununu-type game changer. His one statewide win in 2014 was underwhelming, as was his loss in 2018 — the first for a Nevada GOP gubernatorial candidate in 24 years. But his entrance gives the GOP a clear shot at this seat at a time when the party is still sorting out its nominees in other top tier races.

While there might be shifts in the national political environment and in some individual races in the year before the midterm elections, Nevada is likely to be a constant presence on the list of states that will decide control of the Senate.

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## Statewide Election Results for Nevada

