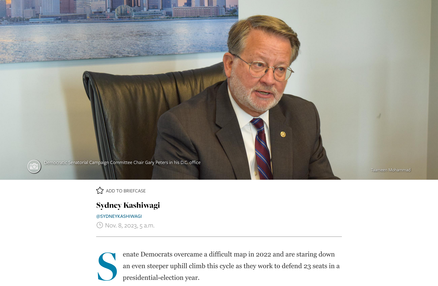
WHAT IT TAKES

# Senate Democrats look to overcome the odds again in 2024

Battle-hardened incumbents are put to the test.



Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Chair Gary Peters in his DSCC office. TASNEEM MUHAMMAD

ADD TO BRIEFCASE

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Senate Democrats overcame a difficult map in 2022 and are staring down an even steeper uphill climb this cycle as they work to defend 23 seats in a presidential-election year.

Last year, Democrats beat the odds by defending all of the party's most vulnerable incumbents. They also successfully flipped a seat in Pennsylvania, doubling their narrow majority. It was the first time since 1934 that Democrats did not lose a Senate seat during a midterm election while controlling the White House.

Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Chair Gary Peters was at the helm last year, and he's back this cycle after initially hesitating to return as chair.

"What changed my mind—just like last cycle—democracy was at stake," Peters said in an interview with *National Journal* at DSCC headquarters. "It's still on the ballot in this election."

Peters says Democrats will deploy the same winning playbook from 2022 by ensuring incumbents have more money than their Republican opponents, focusing on ground operations, and contrasting their candidates' views with Republicans' "extreme" positions, particularly on abortion.

Democratic leadership says the best bet to defend and potentially expand the majority will rest on candidate quality, top-of-the-ticket races, and abortion policies, even if there might be Arizona- and West Virginia-sized curveballs along the way.

"All these races are going to be tough races," Peters said. "They're going to be close, and having superior candidates that are well funded and running on issues that allow them to contrast with Republicans and having a strong campaign, including aggressive ground operations, will lead to victory. I'm confident we're going to hold the majority, and I believe that we have a real shot at expanding that majority as well."

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Coming off of the 2022 victory, Peters said he was ready to refocus on his committee given the time commitment of leading the DSCC. But this time, Sens. Tina Smith and Alex Padilla were brought on as vice chairs to support Peters, who said having them on his team allows him to focus on "strategic decisions" and work with "key players" they need to win. The senators from Minnesota and California, respectively, help Peters with fundraising, candidate recruitment, and working with grassroots groups across the country to get out the vote.

Last cycle, Democrats energized their base after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Democratic candidates outraised their opponents, and the uncertainty of a post-*Roe* world helped fuel the Democratic base in ways it might not have otherwise been in a traditional midterm.

"The abortion issue was very powerful in the last cycle as a result of the *Dobbs* decision. But it will continue to be very powerful in this cycle as well," Peters said.

More than a year after *Dobbs*, abortion appears to remain an issue that drives turnout. Ohio overwhelmingly supported a ballot measure Tuesday in August that enshrined abortion access rights in the state's constitution.

The Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund recently told Republican senators that the term "pro-life" is no longer resonating with voters and that they need to be more specific about their positions on abortion this cycle.

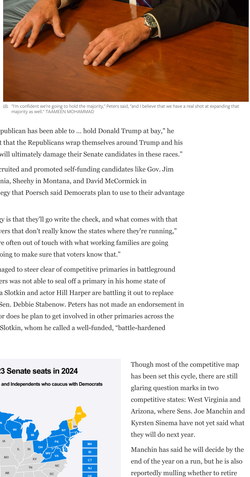
But even if Republicans try to be more specific, Democratic leaders say they will not let voters forget about their past positions on abortion.

"They've all had deep opinions on abortion," said J.B. Poersch, president of the Democratic-aligned Senate Majority PAC. "To a person, they're almost all stridently pro-life, so the plan from the [National Republican Senatorial Committee] appears to be, 'It doesn't matter whether you've said it in the past, say something else.' And it's safe to say that we're not going to let them dismiss the record."

Tough Republican primaries could also play in Democrats' favor, as in 2022. In competitive primaries last cycle, former President Trump boosted more-conservative candidates who ended up losing in the general election.

So far, Democrats in the most competitive states this cycle have outraised their Republican counterparts, and contentious Republican primaries are in full swing in states like West Virginia, Ohio, and Michigan. Montana will likely join the list if Rep. Matt Rosendale enters the field against the NRSC's preferred candidate, Tim Sheehy.

And even though it's a presidential year and Trump very well could be at the top of the ticket, Peters said he is confident the former president will energize Democrats "in a big way as well" and ultimately hurt candidates trying to align themselves with him once again.



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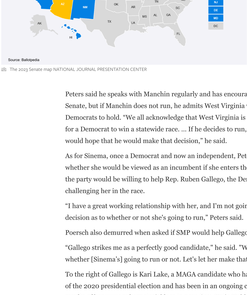
"I don't think any Republican has been able to … hold Donald Trump at bay," he said. "In fact, the fact that the Republicans wrap themselves around Trump and his highly flawed antics will ultimately damage their Senate candidates in these races."

Republicans have recruited and promoted self-funding candidates like Gov. Jim Justice in West Virginia, Sheehy in Montana, and David McCormick in Pennsylvania, a strategy that Poersch said Democrats plan to use to their advantage as well.

"The rich-guy strategy is that they'll go write the check, and what comes with that are often cynical players that don't really know the states where they're running," Poersch said. "They're often out of touch with what working families are going through, and we're going to make sure that voters know that."

Democrats have managed to steer clear of competitive primaries in battleground states. However, Peters was not able to seal off a primary in his home state of Michigan. Rep. Elissa Slotkin and actor Hill Harper are battling it out to replace retiring Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow. Peters has not made an endorsement in the primary there, nor does he plan to get involved in other primaries across the map. But he praised Slotkin, whom he called a well-funded, "battle-hardened candidate."




db The 2023 Senate map NATIONAL JOURNAL PRESENTATION CENTER

Though most of the competitive map has been set this cycle, there are still glaring question marks in two competitive states: West Virginia and Arizona, where Sens. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema have not yet said what they will do next year.

Manchin has said he will decide by the end of the year on a run, but he is also reportedly mulling whether to retire from politics or launch an independent presidential bid.

Peters said he speaks with Manchin regularly and has encouraged him to run for Senate, but if Manchin does not run, he admits West Virginia will be difficult for Democrats to hold. "We all acknowledge that West Virginia is a really tough place for a Democrat to win a statewide race. … If he decides to run, we'll win that race. I would hope that he would make that decision," he said.

As for Sinema, once a Democrat and now an independent, Peters would not say whether she would be viewed as an incumbent if she enters the race and whether the party would be willing to help Rep. Ruben Gallego, the Democrat who is challenging her in the race.

"I have a great working relationship with her, and I'm not going to get ahead of her decision as to whether or not she's going to run," Peters said.

Poersch also demurred when asked if SMP would help Gallego if Sinema runs.

"Gallego strikes me as a perfectly good candidate," he said. "We don't know whether [Sinema's] going to run or not. Let's let her make that decision."

To the right of Gallego is Kari Lake, a MAGA candidate who has denied the results of the 2020 presidential election and has been in an ongoing court battle over the results of her 2022 gubernatorial loss to now-Gov. Katie Hobbs.

Poersch said Democrats plan to remind voters of Lake's positions during her 2022 bid. "Our job is to make sure they know what her track record is," he said.

Peters spoke with *National Journal* as the DSCC announced it would spend seven figures to expand its "Republican accountability program" across the 10 battleground states, including Florida and Texas, where the party is on the offensive. In Florida, former Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell has narrowed the Democratic field to challenge Republican Sen. Rick Scott. In Texas, Democratic Rep. Colin Allred and state Sen. Roland Gutierrez are running against Republican Sen. Ted Cruz, with Allred appearing to be the Democratic front-runner.

"We know that the incumbents in both Texas and in Florida are very weak in their states—the polling numbers are not very strong for either one of those candidates," Peters said. "You contrast it with … candidates who are raising the most money and putting the organization [together], are doing an outstanding job, and building an operation that we think could ultimately be successful during the general election."

*This story is part of* Hotline's *"What It Takes 2024" series. For more articles in the series previewing both parties' path to power next year, click here.*

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