



WHAT IT TAKES 2024

NRSC's Daines: 'Best map we've seen in a decade' for Senate GOP

A renewed focus on candidate quality might be enough to retake the Senate for Republicans.



National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman Steve Daines (AP Photo/Stephanie Scarbrough)

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Nov. 8, 2023, 5 a.m.

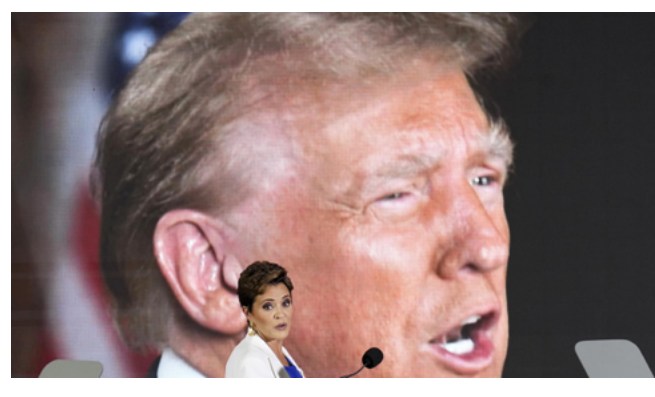
The Senate map is ripe for a Republican comeback following a disappointing midterm cycle in 2022 when the party appeared to have the wind at its back.

Democrats have to defend 23 seats. Three are in red states that former President Trump carried twice, four are in states that Trump carried in 2016 but lost in 2020, and a fifth, Nevada, is a perennial battleground. If Republicans can net just two seats or flip one and win the White House, they will reclaim the Senate.

"It's the best map we've seen in a decade," National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman Steve Daines told *National Journal* during a recent interview at his office at the committee's headquarters.

Republicans are largely on offense this cycle at a time when President Biden has been performing poorly in the polls. Daines says he feels good about the party's chances of flipping the trio of Trump-state seats held by Democratic Sens. Jon Tester of Montana, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, and Joe Manchin of West Virginia. Trump won these states by a wide margin in 2016 and 2020.

"You compound that with putting Joe Biden at the top of the ticket in these red states—that spells trouble for Democrats," Daines said.



DAILY

Senate GOP has yet to replicate House GOP success in recruiting women

The NRCC has pursued a strategy to recruit diverse candidates who can connect with constituents in their districts.

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On the reverse side, opportunities for Democrats to expand their majority are few and far between. Their best bets are in Florida and Texas—two states that voted for Trump twice.

Republicans this cycle are trying to avoid repeating the mistakes of last cycle, when party leaders were not unified on candidates or strategy.

A blame game ensued after the party's 2022 losses. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell criticized the quality of candidates and pointed fingers at former NRSC Chair Rick Scott for his hands-off approach to primaries, and at Trump for backing candidates who ultimately lost general elections. The NRSC in turn blamed McConnell and his aligned PAC, the Senate Leadership Fund, for [undermining](#) the committee's candidates.

"In order to win a Senate race, you've got to be able to put together a good campaign, you've got to be able to raise the money, and you've got to be able to win over not only your party but also pitch to people in the middle," SLF CEO Steven Law said of Republicans' troubles last year. "We had an unusually large number of candidates who simply didn't have the experience or the temperament to be able to get that done."

To avoid those pitfalls, the NRSC has taken a more hands-on approach in the primaries. This time, the committee is backing Gov. Jim Justice in West Virginia, former Navy SEAL Tim Sheehy in Montana, 2022 candidate Sam Brown in Nevada, former Rep. Mike Rogers in Michigan, and 2022 candidate David McCormick in Pennsylvania.

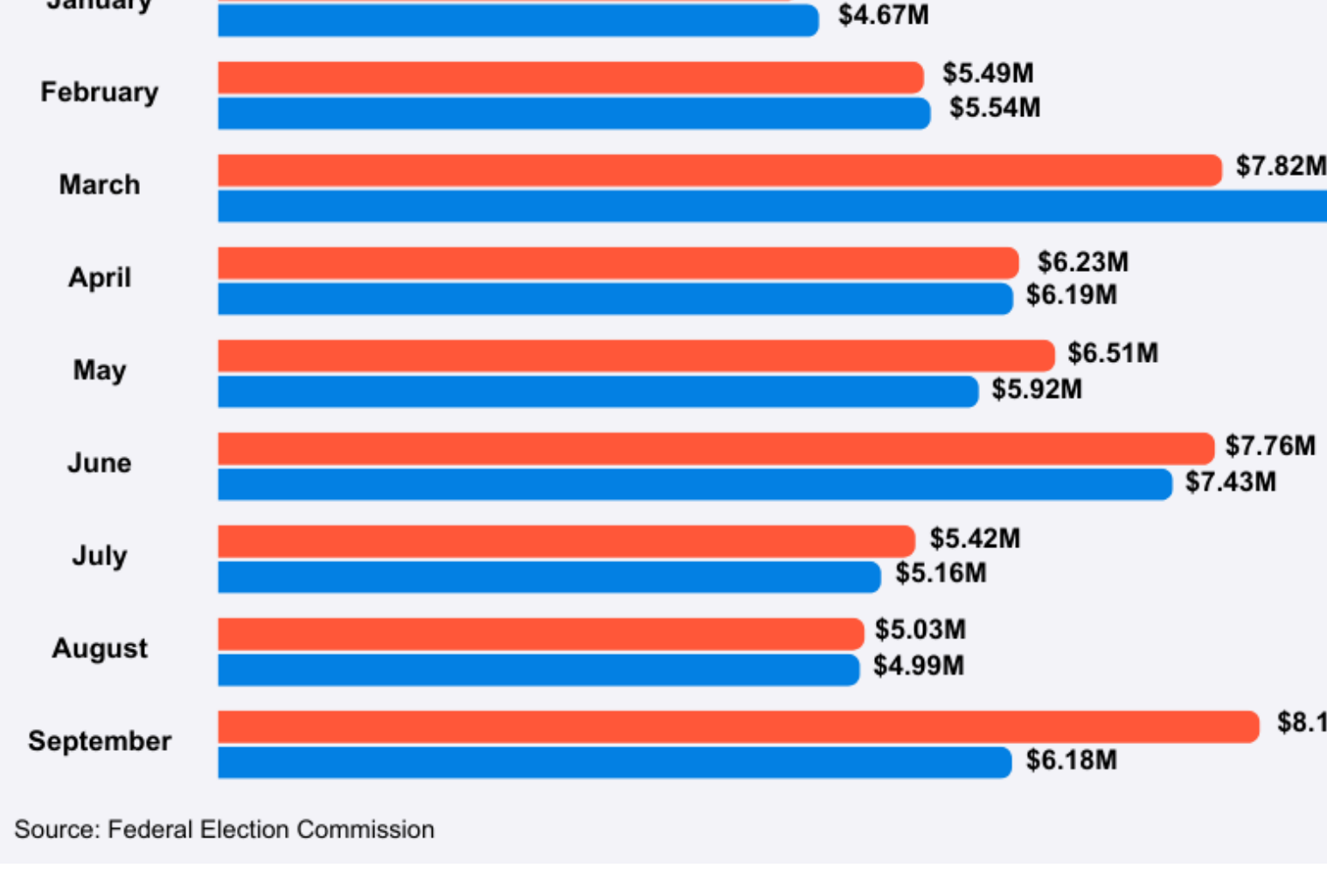
The NRSC is also considering getting behind wealthy real estate executive Eric Hovde in Wisconsin and 2022 gubernatorial nominee Karl Lake in Arizona. Daines called Lake "one of the most talented candidates across the entire country" and said the committee has had "very positive and constructive" conversations with her.

"We've been very deliberate and intentional in working to recruit candidates that can not only win a primary but can also win a general election, candidates that can appeal not only across the Republican base but, importantly, appeal to independents," Daines said. "That's the winning formula for the elections in 2024."

The NRSC has outraised the DSCC in monthly filings since April

Total receipts by month, 2023

National Republican Senatorial Committee Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee



Source: Federal Election Commission

Republicans have so far managed to dodge contentious primaries in some key states. No opponent has emerged against McCormick in Pennsylvania. In Arizona, a candidate who would have been Lake's biggest GOP threat, 2022 Senate nominee Blake Masters, announced he would run for the House instead.

In Wisconsin, the field is still wide open after Republicans' top recruits passed on running against Sen. Tammy Baldwin.

Daines said he has had "really good conversations" with Hovde, who he's optimistic will run. Hovde has been "[seriously considering](#)" a run for several months, but Wisconsin Republicans say he likely will not enter the race [until later this year](#) or even next year.

"He's got a strong business background; he brings financial resources to that race as well. I'm hopeful we can get him in the race," Daines said.

But despite its best efforts, the NRSC has not been able to seal off every primary field.

Justice is up against Rep. Alex Mooney, who is backed by the deep-pocketed conservative group Club for Growth. And though the NRSC has not taken a position on any candidate in Ohio, there's a three-way primary between self-funders—state Sen. Matt Dolan and Bernie Moreno—along with Secretary of State Frank LaRose.

In Montana, it's expected that Rep. Matt Rosendale, a Freedom Caucus member, will jump into the race against Sheehy, the wealthy CEO of Bridger Aerospace.

In Nevada, Brown, who came up short in the GOP primary last year, is in a contentious three-way primary with Trump's former ambassador to Iceland Jeffrey Ross Gunter and Jim Marchant, a 2022 nominee for secretary of state whom Trump [previously supported](#).

In Michigan, Rogers is up against 2022 gubernatorial candidate James Craig and former Rep. Peter Meijer.

Not everyone agrees that the committee's strategy is any different from last cycle or that recruiting a self-funding candidate guarantees victory.

GOP strategist Chris Hartline, who was Scott's communications director at the NRSC, says the candidates this cycle are good but disagrees with the notion that they are better than the ones in 2022.

"If we're talking about criticism of candidate recruitment, it's some of the same candidates," Hartline said.

“The winning message is to make sure we paint the very important contrast between the extreme view the Democrats have taken.”

— NRSC CHAIR STEVE DAINES, ON GOP ABORTION MESSAGING

"We're not God. I know people in Washington like to think that they're God, but we can't sit here and pick and choose who runs in races," he added. "It's just not how it works. So primaries are going to happen, and they're just a reality of statewide races."

McCormick, Brown, and Dolan all ran unsuccessfully in primaries last cycle. Hovde ran unsuccessfully in 2012.

Republican strategist Caroline Wren, who supports Lake, Riverton Mayor Trent Staggs in Utah, and some of the party's more conservative members like Craig and Rosendale, says Republicans should not blame 2022 losses on bad candidates.

"The Republicans have universally rejected self-funders in primaries. You can see that as evidenced by a million different races, but typically the donor class is very out of step with where the Republican base is right now," Wren said. "The most funded candidates, or self-funders, or who raises the most money is not who emerges from a Republican primary. It's because we've emerged much more into a populist movement."

Not only did poor candidates and party infighting tank Republicans' chances at retaking the Senate in 2022, but candidates' far-right positions on abortion and denial of the results of the 2020 presidential election did, too.

The *Dobbs* decision helped Democrats boost turnout, raise hundreds of millions, and use abortion "as shorthand for Republicans being extreme," Law said.

But this cycle, Republicans are expressing confidence they can win back voters on the abortion issue. After the party's 2022 losses, Daines said, SLF looked into how voters feel about abortion and found that if candidates are "clear about where they stand" and do not say abortion is a matter of state policy but "articulate support for certain exceptions and hard cases" and "embrace some general guardrails" so that they do not support abortion up until the moment of birth, that "pro-choice voters support that view."

Law also said the research found that Democrats "wedded to a no-limits position" will be in danger. If Republican candidates can speak about their position on abortion more "adroitly," he said, the party can win on abortion messaging.

"If that issue is either neutralized or narrowly won by Republicans, Democrats have nothing else going into this election. ... They're not going to run on the economy, they're not going to run on Bidenomics, they're not going to run on the interest rates, they're not going to run on the border," he said.

The abortion position Daines says Republicans should be supporting is limiting late-term abortion with exceptions for rape, incest, and the life of the mother.

"The winning message is to make sure we paint the very important contrast between the extreme view the Democrats have taken, which is not putting any limits on abortion, no limits on late-term abortion, no limits at all up to the moment of birth, and including taxpayer-funded abortions from the moment of birth," Daines said.

Heading into 2024, Law said he is pleased with Daines' recruitment efforts and attempts to try to keep candidates out of races who would not perform well in a general election.

The NRSC and SLF are in alignment, and so far Trump appears to be staying on the same page too.

Unlike last cycle, Trump has been aligned with the NRSC, at least for now. He handed an early endorsement to Lake in Arizona. And he recently endorsed Justice and Rep. Jim Banks in Indiana.

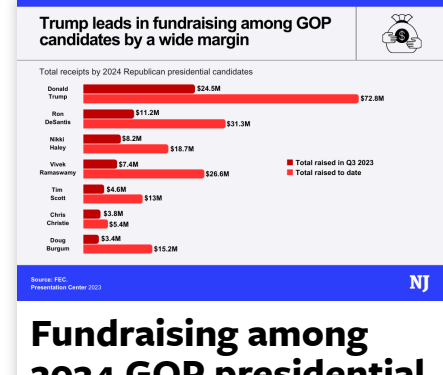
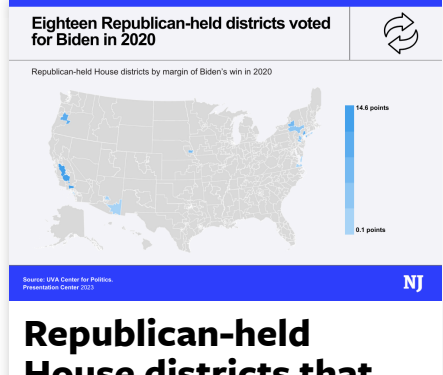
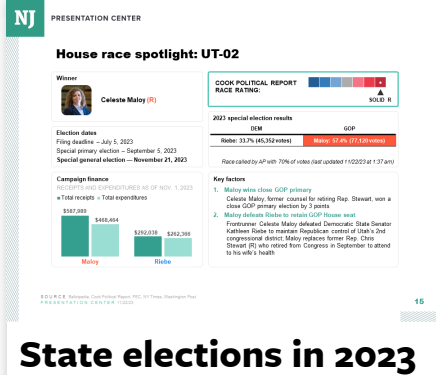
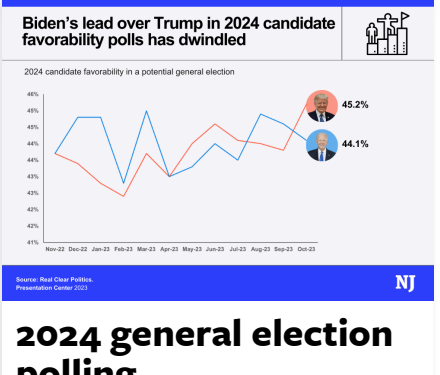
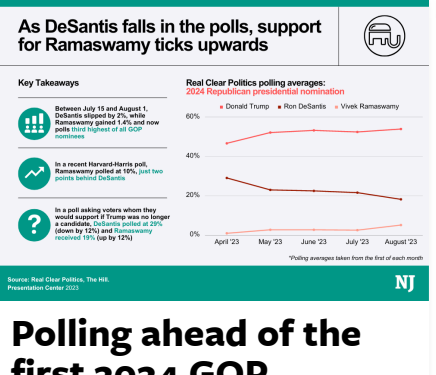
If the candidates the NRSC has gotten behind early can make it through tough primaries and not have to worry about any political infighting in the background or Trump boosting their primary opponents, the Senate could be theirs come 2024.

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](#). [NJ](#)

Contributions by Kirk A. Bado

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