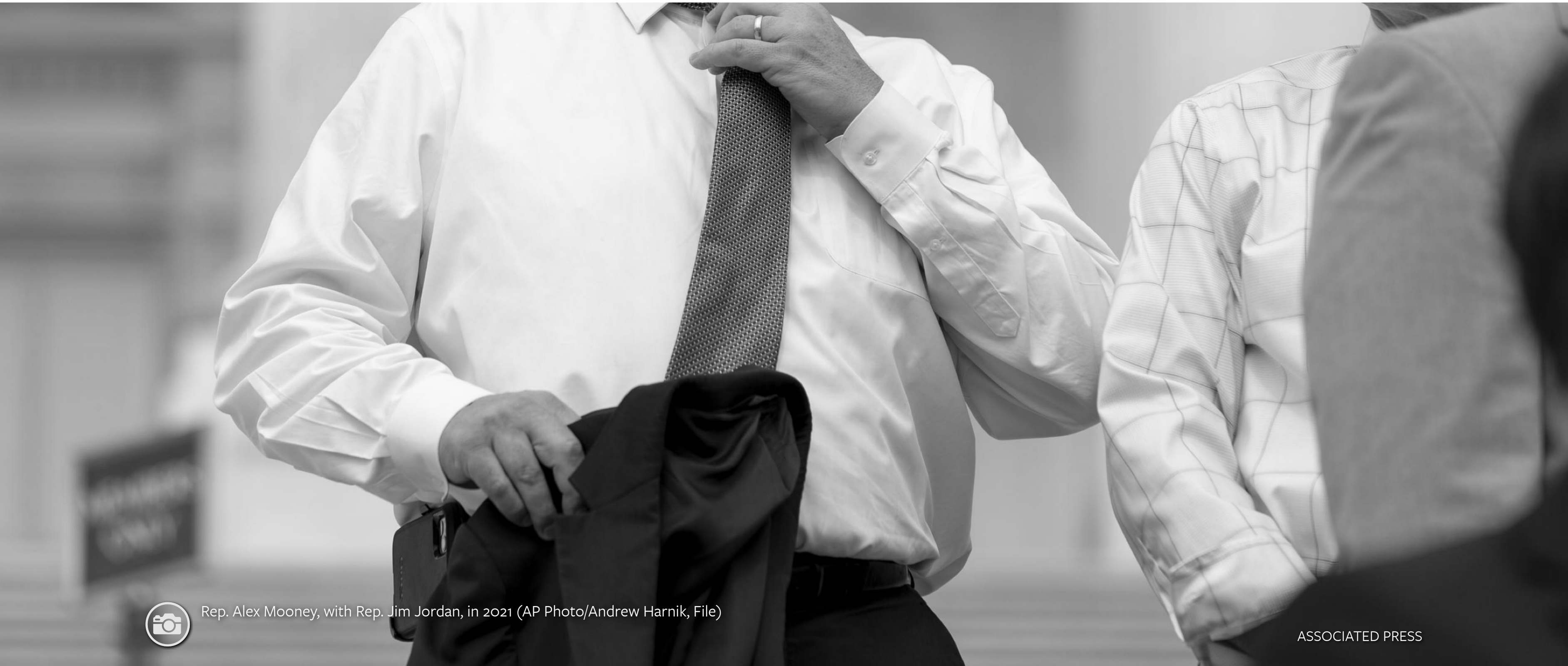


Alex Mooney digs in against Jim Justice

Can the congressman overcome Trump's endorsement in West Virginia's competitive Senate primary?



Rep. Alex Mooney, with Rep. Jim Jordan, in 2021 (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

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Jan. 10, 2024, 4:07 p.m.

There were serious doubts about Rep. Alex Mooney's chances when he faced off against then-Rep. David McKinley in his member-on-member primary in 2022, after their deep-Republican districts in West Virginia had been redrawn together.

Mooney recalled to *National Journal* that early polls [showed him down](#) and that no one thought he could beat McKinley. But in the end, Mooney won by 19 points.

Mooney says he believes he can do it again this year. He's facing the widely popular Gov. Jim Justice in the Republican primary to replace retiring Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin. Justice has been leading in the polls and has the National Republican Senatorial Committee's backing.

"The same people that are telling you right now that Jim Justice is going to win—that's the same people that said McKinley couldn't lose," Mooney said.



Jim Justice will "likely be the next U.S. Senator from West Virginia," latest poll predicts

SYDNEY KASHIWAGI

But there is one major difference this time. When Mooney won in 2022, he did it with the help of former President Trump, who endorsed him over McKinley because of the latter's [vote for](#) President Biden's \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill. Trump, who has won overwhelmingly in West Virginia twice, has [backed Justice over Mooney](#).

Without Trump's backing, West Virginia political observers say it will be extremely difficult, maybe even impossible, for Mooney to beat Justice.

"The fact in West Virginia that Donald Trump is loved by so many Republicans—that made a difference. That made a huge difference," McKinley told *National Journal*. "I don't think there's any way that the representative from the 2nd District can defeat Jim Justice in this, not with the support of Donald Trump."

But Mooney says he is undeterred.

"There's no circumstance by which my name is not on the ballot May 14," Mooney said. He filed this week to appear on the state's primary ballot.

His support from the conservative Club for Growth is helping him stay in the race. The organization pledged to spend [\\$10 million](#) to support his bid. It's a substantial amount of money in a state with a cheap media market.

Mooney is known as a scrappy politician, and even Manchin has said he should [not be discounted](#). Mooney touts the fact that he's never lost a primary, including a [seven-way race](#) in 2014 when he first ran for Congress in West Virginia, as proof of his success heading into this race.

The Club's money could go a long way in helping Mooney attack Justice and force the governor and the national Republicans backing him to play defense.

"[Justice] will have to defend himself in a lot more instances than he would otherwise. This won't be a coast-to-the-finish sort of campaign for the governor," said Sam Workman, the director of the Institute for Policy Research and Public Affairs at West Virginia University.

Wasting no time, the candidates have started flooding the airwaves with ads attacking each other five months before the primary.

Conservative Americans PAC recently released an ad labeling the congressman as "Maryland Mooney," a moniker that's followed him since his first West Virginia campaign in 2014 because of his 12-year tenure in Maryland's Senate that ended in 2011. [The ad](#) also highlights the fact that Mooney is backed by Club for Growth, which has publicly feuded with and opposed Trump. Conservative Americans PAC has spent \$883,000 on ads in the race so far, according to [Federal Election Commission records](#).

Mooney says Senate GOP leadership is behind the PAC, which means they are taking his campaign seriously. According to [FEC records](#), the PAC uses the same McLean, Virginia-based bank and has the same custodian of records as [More Jobs, Less Government](#), a PAC spending in the Montana Senate race supporting the NRSC's candidate.

"Why would they spend a million bucks that frankly could be used to win states that are in jeopardy of Democrats winning?" Mooney said.

Mooney also [recently lost](#) his campaign manager John Findlay, who left to work for the Trump team.

The Club for Growth recently released an [ad as part of a \\$1.2 million buy](#) criticizing Justice for his past ties to Democrats—he switched parties in 2017 during a rally with Trump.

Noting the Club's past [attack ads against Trump](#), Justice's campaign predicts the group will repeat the same mistake.

"As they did in their million-dollar cash bonfire strategy against President Trump, they will soon learn that their misleading attack ads against Jim Justice will fall flat," Justice's campaign manager Roman Stauffer said in a statement to *National Journal*.

Some West Virginia political observers say attacks on Justice's Democratic past and his legal issues have all been litigated either in [past campaigns](#) or in the press. It could be hard for Mooney to make his attacks stick against a governor who's cultivated an everyman persona, West Virginia GOP pollster Mark Blankenship told *National Journal*.

"[West Virginians] just like him. He's 6-foot-7, 1 million pounds, gregarious—has the dog. He talks like West Virginians; he eats like West Virginians; he acts like West Virginians. He goes to Wendy's to get lunch," Blankenship said. "He's just relatable."

Other West Virginia Republicans speculate that Club for Growth's money for Mooney will not last if internal polling shows him trailing Justice after its first round of ad buys.

"This is akin to a quarterly earnings report by a publicly held corporation," said West Virginia-based Republican strategist Greg Thomas.

But Club for Growth said any talk of them pulling Mooney's money is "absolutely absurd and false."

Mooney also said he has "no reason to believe" the group won't follow through on its pledge to back him.

"Club for Growth Action is even more committed now that McConnell is wasting his money," a spokesperson for the group said, referring to the Conservative Americans PAC ad.

Mooney says he wants to focus on swaying Republican primary voters and distinguishing himself as the most conservative candidate in the race.

"I think the voters look at me as a conservative, like President Trump, who will fight, like President Trump. And Trump endorsed me last cycle against McKinley," he said. [M](#)

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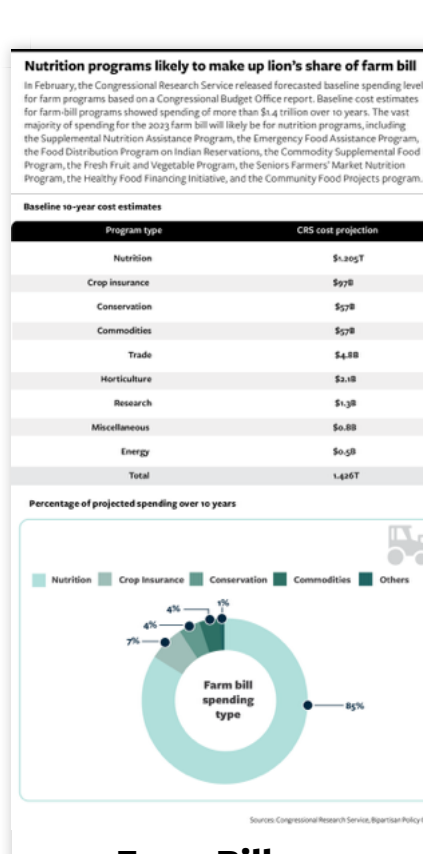
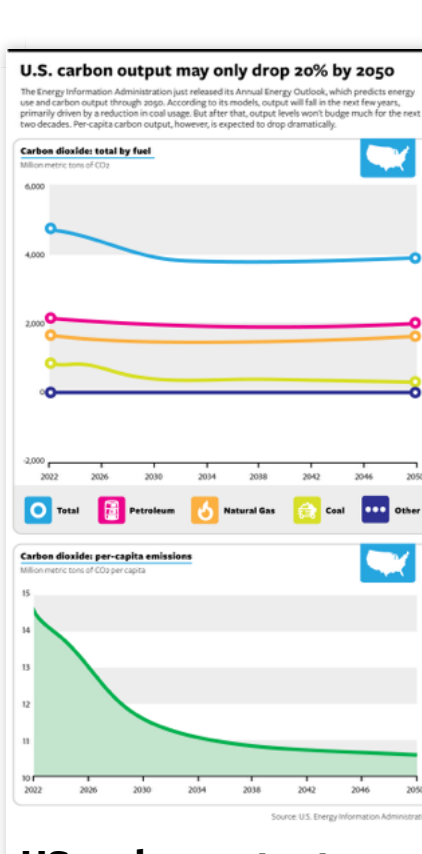
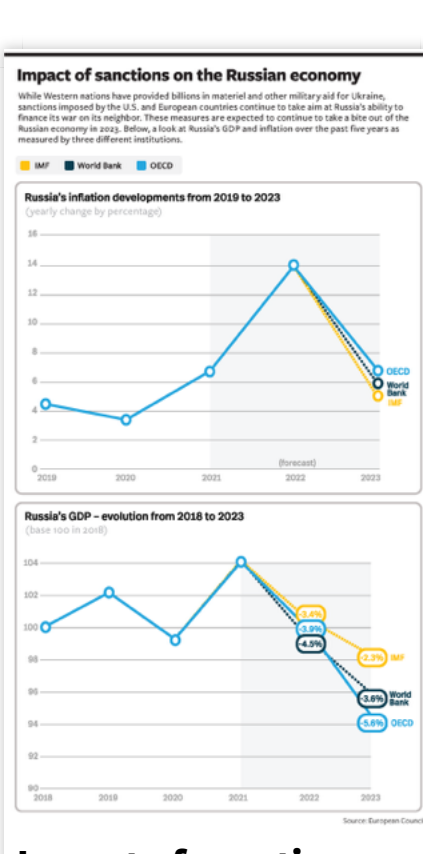
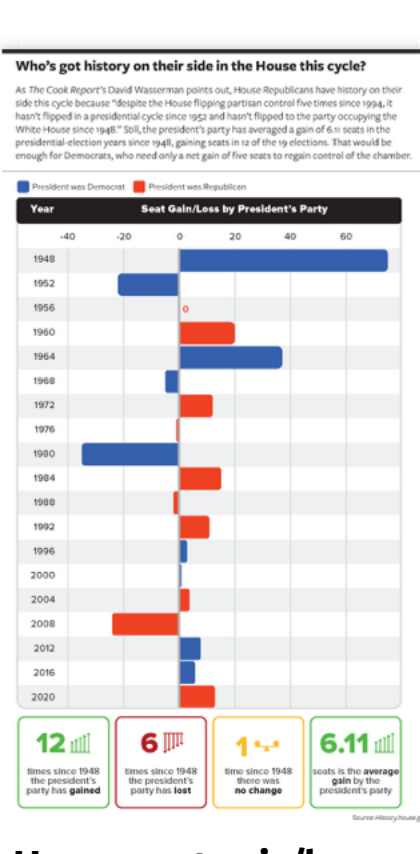
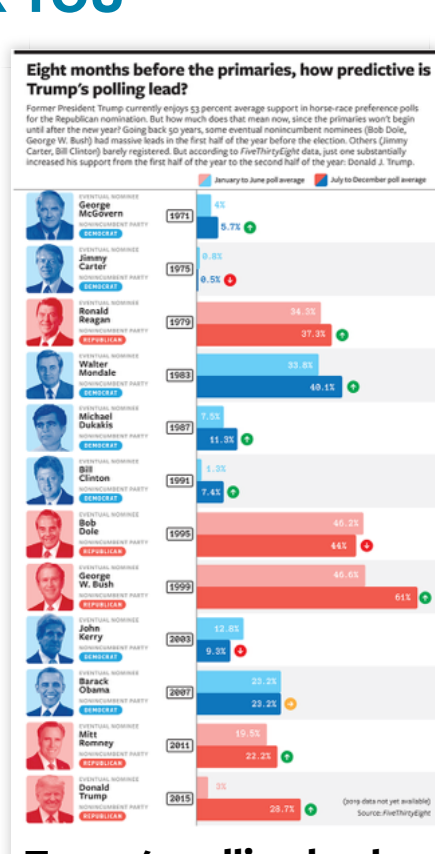
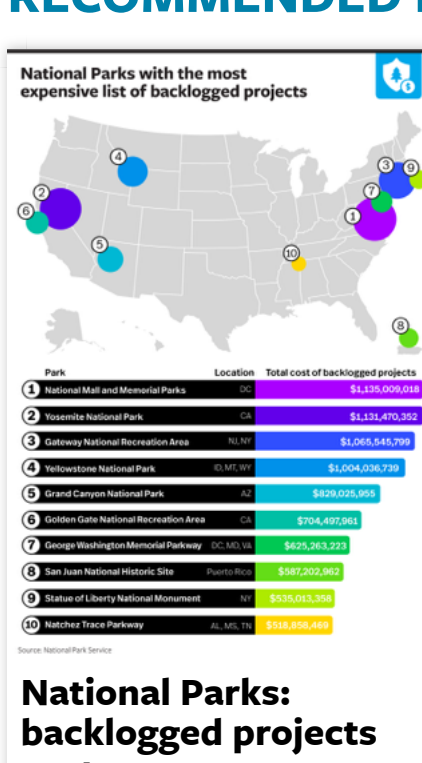
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