

Buoyed by Alabama win, Dems eye Tennessee Senate race

The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Democrats eager to take control of the Senate next year are turning to the state of Tennessee, where a popular Democratic former governor is running for the seat being vacated by the retirement of Republican Sen. Bob Corker.

Neither of Tennessee's two top GOP candidates, Rep. Marsha Blackburn and former Rep. Stephen Fincher, has the kind of personal baggage Republican Roy Moore had in the Alabama race won by a Democrat. But both have wholeheartedly embraced President Donald Trump at what Democrats hope is exactly the wrong time.

"Tennessee is clearly in play," said Paul Maslin, a pollster who worked for the campaign of Doug Jones, the first Democrat elected in a quarter-century in Alabama. Jones' rival, Moore, was besieged by decades-old accusations of sexual misconduct involving teenage girls when he was in his 30s. Moore denied the allegations.

Former Democratic Gov. Phil Bredesen, a known quantity in Tennessee, has kicked off his Senate run from a position of strength.

"He starts with credibility among Tennesseans that Doug Jones didn't have or almost no Democratic challenger in any of the other Republican states would have next year," Maslin said.

Voters both in Tennessee and Alabama went for Trump in a big way in 2016: Trump's margin of victory was 28 percentage points in Alabama and 26 points in Tennessee, though his poll numbers have slipped

somewhat since. And while Fincher and Blackburn slug it out to the primary for who can be the more pro-Trump candidate, Bredesen can concentrate on a message of being a problem-solver who can "fix the mess" in Washington.

"The risk is that when you have someone embraced a public official that is fairly unpredictable, that if his numbers start to erode suddenly you're in trouble," said Kent Syler, a political science professor at Middle Tennessee State University and a former Democratic congressional staffer.

With Republicans up 51-49 in the Senate next year, the stakes will be high in November. Much was made of Democrats' 25-year losing streak in Senate races in Alabama until a Dec. 12 special election. In Tennessee, it's been two years longer since Al Gore was the Democrats' last victorious Senate candidate in 1990. Tennessee Democrats have fallen short ever since Gore left the Senate to become Bill Clinton's vice president.

In his campaign launch video, Bredesen didn't even mention Trump. Bredesen told the Associated Press afterward that he's intent on winning back voters who support-

ed him in 2002 and 2006.

"If you just do the basic arithmetic, there's got to be hundreds of thousands of people in this state who voted for me and then turned around and voted for Trump," Bredesen said. "I don't think they've totally changed — political views don't change in that way."

But simply portraying himself as the adult in the room may not be enough if Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander's most recent experience is any guide. A former two-term governor, Alexander suffered a serious primary scare en route to his 2014 re-election.

While depicting himself as the senior statesman staying above the attacks of a little-known tea-party styled opponent, Alexander ended up winning by a too-close-for-comfort 9 percentage points.

Chris Hayden, spokesman for the Democratic Senate Majority PAC, said he expects Bredesen will draw wide support.

"He is a great candidate who will be running against an opponent tied to a deeply unpopular and ineffective Republican Congress," said Hayden.

The National Republican Senate Committee is quick to scoff at such claims.

"If Phil Bredesen thinks Tennesseans want him opposing President Trump and his agenda, he really doesn't have a clue," committee spokesman Michael McAdams said. "Tennesseans made their voices heard loud and clear last election, and they're not about to let a 74-year-old politician block the change they voted for."

Corker declined in a recent interview to weigh in

on what the Alabama race portends for those vying to succeed him. But he noted the recent Virginia governor's race — won by a Democrat — showed Republicans could be losing their grasp on once-reliable GOP voters. And hyper-partisanship in Washington isn't helping.

"The tone of much of the conversation coming out of Washington is a turnoff," said Corker, who has openly feuded with Trump. Corker once charged Trump had turned the White House into an "adult day care center" while Trump has tweeted Corker was a "lightweight" and "couldn't get elected dog catcher in Tennessee."

As for term-limited Republican Gov. Bill Haslam, the lesson from Alabama should be that GOP candidates need to think about winning both the primary and the general vote.

"Republicans need to elect people who can win two elections," Haslam said, adding the results in Virginia and Alabama have shown that voting patterns might be changing. "For people in my party, it's a heads-up: We need to be thinking about why we're losing some voters we've traditionally gotten."

Maslin, the Democratic pollster, said Bredesen should be able to pick off former Trump supporters around Tennessee, including women and college-educated voters. Said Maslin, "There are frankly lots of suburban white voters in and around Nashville, Memphis and Knoxville that fit the profile of voters who are moving away from Trump and/or the Republicans in Washington."



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

The New Year's celebration begins with the Moon Pie Drop along the RSA Bank Trust Building on Royal Street in Mobile. The 2017 "Moonpie Over Mobile" New Year's Eve celebration in downtown Mobile will feature entertainment by funk musician George Clinton.

In the South, giant peach, massive moonpie to ring in 2018

The Associated Press

ATLANTA — There will be a new site this year for Atlanta's New Year's Eve Peach Drop, one of several large events planned across the South, organizers say.

For the first time, the peach will drop from the 120-year-old Flatiron Building downtown on Dec. 31, the Atlanta mayor's office announced. The new site is a few blocks from Underground Atlanta, where the Peach Drop has been held in recent years.

Atlanta's Flatiron Building, which opened in 1897, is Atlanta's oldest standing skyscraper, Mayor Kasim Reed said in announcing the Peach Drop's new site. According to Reed, it was the nation's first flatiron-style high-rise, built before the iconic flatiron building in New York City.

In Alabama, the "Moonpie Over Mobile" New Year's Eve celebration

in downtown Mobile will feature entertainment by funk musician George Clinton. A giant 600-pound electric Moonpie will be lowered as the final seconds of 2017 are counted down, organizers said. A laser light show and fireworks are also planned.

In New Orleans, the "Dick Clark Rockin' New Year's Eve" production will host its Central Time Zone party in the city. New Orleans' festivities will include lowering a large fleur-de-lis emblem from Jax Brewery. The fleur-de-lis is a French symbol that has become synonymous with New Orleans.

Other events planned across the region include the New Year's Eve Oyster Ball Drop at the Maritime and Seafood Museum in Biloxi, Mississippi. That event will feature fireworks, as well as entertainment by the Blackwater Brass Band, organizers said.

Schmitz

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is going to run for governor.

He actually isn't going to run for anything and will pursue a career as a senior triathlete.

Schmitz surprised everyone other than those closest to him in June when he took to Facebook to announce a run for chairman of the Dothan City Board of Education.

Schmitz cited a deep respect for teachers in his announcement and credited his fifth-grade teacher with instilling in him a desire to succeed.

Schmitz said that he wanted to help the city school system build the same partnerships and community

support that helped the city be successful during his terms as mayor.

He won the race easily and began his term with one of the biggest decisions any school board faces — who to hire as superintendent.

Past superintendent Chuck Ledbetter had recently announced that he accepted a job to lead Pike Road Schools.

The school board in place at the time moved forward with the hiring process (state law requires a hire to be made within a certain period of time), and it appeared as if a decision would be made before the new school board was seated.

Instead, the new board was seated and received an extension from the State of Alabama to take more time to hire a superintendent.

After interviewing six candidates, a majority of the board voted to extend an offer to Phyllis Edwards, former superintendent of Decatur City Schools in Georgia.

Schmitz chairs a board that must deal with several issues over the next four years, including maintaining enrollment numbers despite a handful of well-attended private schools, coalescing around a plan that could include career academies, whether to approach the idea of school consolidation for a third time in recent years, and responding to an EEOC complaint filed in May related to Honeysuckle Middle School as well as an apparent state investigation there after authorities confirmed a search warrant was executed at the school in September.



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