

POLITICS

After Georgia's Close Race, Montana Democrats Demand Party's Attention

By JONATHAN MARTIN APRIL 19, 2017

BOZEMAN, Mont. — Rob Quist surveyed his audience last week at an annual powwow of Montana's Native American tribes, a kaleidoscope of feathers, moccasins and beads, before turning his thoughts to a very different audience, far to the east: the national Democratic Party.

“They’ve been on the sidelines a little too long, and it’s time for them to get in the game,” said Mr. Quist, the banjo-playing Democratic nominee in a special May election to fill Montana’s at-large House seat.

But, he predicted, “they’re coming in.”

They may have little choice. After a hard-fought campaign to fill a House seat in the Atlanta suburbs fell just short of outright victory on Tuesday, the House seat in Montana vacated by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is up next, and a groundswell of new activism on the left is demanding attention.

Democrats have now chalked up a closer-than-expected loss in a House special election in Kansas this month and a near miss in Georgia, leading logically to discussions of how hard to play going forward — not only in the June 20 runoff

between their first-time candidate Jon Ossoff and the Republican Karen Handel in Georgia, but also in looming House races in Montana and South Carolina.

But grass-roots liberals are not about to let party leaders lapse back into traditional red state, blue state assumptions. Instead, the Democrats' enthusiastic base is demanding to compete on terrain that once seemed forbidding, a formula for disputes now and in 2018 about where to put the party's money and field operations.

"The party clearly has no clue how to build and nurture a movement," said Markos Moulitsas, the founder of the liberal website Daily Kos, which has taken the lead in raising money for Democratic candidates first in Georgia, then Kansas and now Montana. "We're going to lose, so stay out' is not a winning message, ever, and it certainly doesn't work in these times, when we have a national resistance energized and looking for ways to engage."

Mr. Ossoff's taking 48.1 percent of the vote on Tuesday in the reliably Republican district in Georgia vacated by Tom Price, the health and human services secretary, means a long, expensive campaign to the runoff. Republicans are already rolling in the negative advertising to stop Mr. Ossoff's improbable rise.

And President Trump continues to prove that he cannot keep himself away from Georgia's Sixth District campaign.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

Dems failed in Kansas and are now failing in Georgia. Great job Karen Handel! It is now Hollywood vs. Georgia on June 20th.

8:43 AM - 19 Apr 2017

14,247
63,691

But to liberal activists, those moves are only a call to arms. Hillary Clinton and the Democrats waged a campaign that was overly cautious and insufficiently populist, they say, resulting in the election of perhaps the most detested candidate in the left's modern history. Now the left wants to go for broke.

The internecine dispute over where to play could last well beyond this season of special elections and into the 2018 midterm elections. At issue is whether the campaign arm of the House Democrats and the Democratic National Committee should dedicate money and staff to campaigns that may appear to be a reach but that could still galvanize small-dollar donors and activists hungry to compete.

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont says they should, expressing regret that the party did not help its nominee in Kansas and vowing to campaign for Mr. Quist. Senior union officials have also urged party leaders to lean in to this series of special elections, which will continue in South Carolina in June and potentially in Pennsylvania should Representative Tom Marino become drug czar, according to Democratic sources briefed on the conversations who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Democratic officials make no apology for their decision to stay away from the Kansas race, where their nominee lost by less than seven percentage points in a Wichita-based district that Mr. Trump carried by 27 points in November. They say their money has been better spent helping Mr. Ossoff.

“I don’t know that it makes a lot of sense to spend resources where you don’t have a shot at winning,” Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, the third-ranking House Democrat, said. “People tend to get disappointed.”

Mr. Clyburn noted that few leading Kansas Democrats said they “thought they were headed to a victory” rather than just a “closer than expected” finish.

But that is not the case in Montana, where a preference for Republican presidential candidates belies the state’s enduring Democratic tradition. Its governor, Steve Bullock, is a Democrat. One of its senators, Jon Tester, is a Democrat. And now its one House seat is vacant.

“National folks should be coming in here,” Governor Bullock said. “It is a winnable race.”

Mr. Bullock should know. His re-election last year, by four percentage points against the Republican Greg Gianforte, was the fourth consecutive gubernatorial

race that Democrats have won in Big Sky country. The state has also not sent two Republican senators to Washington at the same time since the Constitution was amended to require the popular election of senators.

Yet to the frustration of Democrats here, Mr. Quist has received no defense from national third-party groups — and he's running against Mr. Gianforte, who was just beaten statewide. Mr. Gianforte and three Washington-based conservative organizations have spent more than \$1.4 million on television and radio since February, much of it attacking Mr. Quist.

Democratic officials, contributors and activists in Montana, which Mr. Sanders carried in the presidential primary, are clearly agitated over their Washington-based party. They say the top-down leadership never misses an opportunity to play it safe.

Echoing the demands that progressives made just over a decade ago when another Republican president ignited the liberal rank-and-file, Montana Democrats express irritation that they must persuade their party to contest red-tinged seats. And in some cases, they are even borrowing the animating language from the backlash to President George W. Bush's second term.

"This is the time for the 50-state strategy. What are they waiting for?" said Julia Shaida, a 60-year-old Bozeman yoga teacher who recently moved here from New York. "The energy is here. I read that they didn't support the Kansas candidate. That's very upsetting to me."

Standing outside Mr. Quist's new Bozeman headquarters on Saturday, a few hours after a spring snow shower and before she was to begin canvassing, Ms. Shaida made a plea: "Don't be afraid of a populist message."

The irony of that message may have been lost on a crowd heavier on Patagonia and North Face outerwear than well-worn Carhartt trousers, packed into an old labor hall still replete with Teamsters logos.

But the combination of old and new — Montana's enduring union tradition alongside its new, liberal transplants — is keeping the state competitive for Democrats.

Mr. Quist, 69, is an unmistakable product of the older Montana, quick to note the depth of his roots (third-generation Montanan) and to explain how his ancestors made their way to Cut Bank, not far from the Canadian border. In his cowboy hat, boots and black jeans, the mustachioed Mr. Quist could be mistaken for the Marlboro Man, if that icon of Western grit had spent much of the last few decades playing gigs in fraternity house basements as frontman for the Mission Mountain Wood Band.

His Republican opponent reflects the changing nature of the state, although he is more conservative than many of the new arrivals. A New Jersey native, Mr. Gianforte, 56, became a billionaire when he sold the software company he founded, RightNow Technologies, to Oracle.

Some Democrats here complain that no money has been spent focusing attention on the same issues that sank Mr. Gianforte's run for governor last year, like his lawsuit to stop access to a river near his Bozeman home. Access to public lands is a perennial hot-button issue in vast Western states, particularly in pristine Montana.

"They need to come in and rip the scab off the message that hurt Gianforte last year," said Evan Barrett, a nearly 50-year veteran of Montana Democratic politics, alluding to the ad assault Democrats unleashed over Mr. Gianforte's lawsuit. "Those wounds are still very fresh."

In his address at the headquarters opening, Mr. Quist invoked "Texas oil tycoons" funding national conservative groups who, he charged, would like to have their way with the state.

And little is being done by Democrats to prop up the Libertarian nominee on the ballot, who could siphon votes from the Republican. Usually, Democrats are not shy about such political mischief-making.

Mr. Gianforte is leading the race, according to private surveys that both parties have conducted, although a Democratic group, House Majority PAC, was to gauge the race with a new poll this week. While Mr. Trump remains more popular here than in most states, there is ample anti-Trump energy on the left: Organizers estimated that as many as 10,000 people turned out in 20-degree weather for the

January Women's March in Helena, a gathering Mr. Bullock said was the largest crowd ever to rally in front of the state capitol.

Becky Weed, a sheep rancher from Belgrade, Mont., said after an agriculture-focused event for Mr. Quist that her party needed to open its eyes to what such a turnout meant.

"The first thing they could start doing is listening to campaigns like this," said Ms. Weed. ("Bad name for a farmer," she joked.) "We got into trouble because they weren't really listening to people at a grass-roots level. They were trying to direct things from on high, and it's reparable — but we got to do it fast."

Nancy Keenan, the Montana Democratic chairwoman, said the seeds for an upset had been sown.

"Get in the game, get in the game," she said in an interview at the state party office in Helena, "because you're not going to take credit for it after we've won it."

Get politics and Washington news updates via Facebook, Twitter and in the Morning Briefing newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on April 20, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Moved by Georgia, Democrats In Montana Say, It's Our Turn.

© 2017 The New York Times Company