



# SENATE LEADERSHIP FUND

## MEMORANDUM TO INTERESTED PARTIES

**FROM:** Steven Law

**DATE:** September 26, 2017

**SUBJECT:** Alabama and the New Republican Primary Battlefield

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Although special elections are notoriously idiosyncratic and difficult to extrapolate from, the primary and runoff elections in this year's Alabama U.S. Senate race have provided rich insights into the new battlefield for Republican primaries in 2018 and beyond.

In 2014, mainstream Republicans began engaging successfully in primaries after losing a number of winnable Senate seats due to flawed nominees like Todd Akin and Christine O'Donnell, who self-destructed in the general election. The playbook for defeating spoiler candidates like these (as well as the outside groups that backed them) took shape over the course of the 2014 and 2016 election cycles and helped ensure Senate victories in Alaska (2014), Louisiana (2014), North Carolina (2014) and Indiana (2016). Aggressive engagement in primaries also turned back anti-incumbent challenges in Kansas (2014), Kentucky (2014), Mississippi (2014), Alabama (2016) and Arizona (2016).

However, this year's Alabama Senate special election shows that the 2014-16 playbook for winning Republican primaries needs to be recalibrated and improved. Here are lessons from the Alabama Senate special about engagement in primaries, with an electorate that has dramatically realigned itself with President Trump at the helm.

1. *The Republican primary electorate is still angry.* In 2008, President Obama's presidential victory ushered in giddy feelings of unity and optimism among Democratic voters. We found the opposite to be true among Republican voters in Alabama: while they believe the country is moving in the right direction vs. the wrong track by a 2-to-1 margin (a turnaround since the 2016 election), they remain deeply frustrated by the sluggish rate of change in Washington. To get on the right side of this expectant but restive electorate, candidates can't just mouth positive platitudes; they need to get into the same fighting mood. In the Alabama primary, Sen. Strange's affable demeanor and soft banter were pitch-perfect for Birmingham business audiences but seemed out of tune with more conservative voters.
2. *The Obamacare repeal fiasco is political poison.* Even though only a tiny handful of Republicans blocked the Obamacare repeal effort, the defeat has poisoned the attitude of GOP primary voters toward congressional Republicans in general. It is critical for Republican candidates

in competitive primaries to highlight their support for post-2016 Obamacare repeal efforts and challenge those who stood in the way of delivering on this core GOP promise. Even though Sen. Strange faithfully supported each Obamacare repeal plan, should he fail to win, he will be the first casualty—and probably not the last—of the Obamacare repeal fiasco.

3. *Donald Trump is the dominant factor driving GOP voters.* No other person, group or issue has the gravitational pull on Republican primary voters that Donald Trump commands. In addition, support for President Trump directly correlates with likelihood to vote. In Alabama, 4-of-4 voters were 90%+ favorable toward Trump. Further, Republican voters are becoming more attached to Trump than they are to the party: a recent *NBC* poll found 58% of Republicans consider themselves Trump supporters vs. 38% who see themselves primarily as Republican party supporters.

What does the Trump factor mean in a GOP primary? For Rep. Mo Brooks, it was instantly fatal: a single TV ad documenting Brooks' critical comments about Trump in 2016 delivered a shattering blow from which he never recovered. Regardless of whether Trump's late (and ambivalent) embrace of Sen. Strange tips the outcome of the runoff in his favor, the Trump factor has set the tone for the race, with both Strange and Roy Moore arguing that they are more likely than their opponent to back Trump's agenda in Congress. Trump's provocative style has also impacted what primary voters are looking for, largely to Moore's benefit: our focus groups found enthusiasm for Roy Moore's combative and politically incorrect style—compared to the cautious and genial Strange—because it reminded voters of Trump. The big question is what impact Trump's endorsement carries in GOP primaries. We believe it gave Strange a desperately-needed boost just before the primary and runoff, but its impact was attenuated by Trump's late entry (and reentry) into the race.

4. *The Republican Congress has replaced President Obama as the bogeyman for conservative GOP primary voters.* Opposition to Obama used to be a mainstay of Republican messaging. In Alabama, Strange's litigation against Obama's executive actions would have been political gold a year ago. But with Obama out of the picture, our polling found the issue to be a middling vote-getter. Now the answer to what is wrong in Washington is the Republican Congress. A new *CNN* national poll found 53% of *Republican* voters think the Republican Congress is taking the party in the wrong direction, compared to 79% who prefer Trump's vision for the party. In the *NBC* poll, just 27% of Trump supporters and 51% of Republican party supporters are "satisfied" with Republicans in Washington. This narrative is driven by Trump himself, and it resonates with primary voters who believe the Republican Congress "isn't doing enough" (as we frequently heard in focus groups) to advance the President's agenda.

Sen. Strange did all he could to position himself as a critic of the Washington establishment and emphasized his record as state attorney general to "drain the swamp" of corruption in Montgomery. Strange also became a champion of Trump's border wall, even introducing his own bill to get it funded. But even with that disciplined messaging campaign—and Trump's endorsement—it was difficult for Strange, as the incumbent in Washington, to completely escape being associated with the dysfunction in Washington.

5. *The power of talk radio.* In Alabama, we found that conservative primary voters receive a lot of political information from talk radio, far more than from online blogs like *Breitbart*. In focus groups, voters were keenly aware of the Freedom Caucus but had never heard of the Senate

Conservatives Fund or other entities and personalities that are promoted online. Local radio hosts wield almost as much influence as national names like Hannity and Ingraham, and they are more receptive to cultivation. We worked hard to build relationships with a handful of local talk radio hosts who were open to our perspective and deployed some of our research. Rep. Brooks was ubiquitous on talk radio throughout the primary (he had once been a talk radio host himself), whereas both Moore and Strange seemed more wary of the medium. In an environment where Republican incumbents could be challenged from the right, talk radio must be a top priority for earned media outreach.

6. *The relative impact of outside groups.* The most impactful outside player in the Alabama Senate special was neither the Senate Leadership Fund nor Steve Bannon. It was the National Rifle Association. Boasting a sterling brand and membership list that most conservative groups only dream about, the NRA has the gravitas and muscle to turn out hundreds of thousands of registered voters for its candidates and causes—and it exercised that clout on behalf of Sen. Strange with a massive pre-election barrage of mail, radio, TV and in-person media. Press coverage of elections often distorts reality; and the largest distortion of the Alabama Senate special has been the hyper-magnification of Steve Bannon's role. Bannon did order his *Breitbart* site to generate lots of anti-Strange/pro-Moore content, and he did recruit mini-celebrities like Sebastian Gorka and Nigel Farage to appear at small gatherings in Alabama. But the only significant expenditure by any far-right group on Roy Moore's behalf was a late \$300,000 advertising blitz by the Senate Conservatives Fund. The rest was dribbled out by micro-PACs that used the race to raise money for themselves.

If Moore prevails, Bannon will try to grab the credit, and the press will likely give it to him. But candidates who are worried about Bannon's role (or counting on his support) in future races should note that nearly all of Bannon's engagement in Alabama was for the cameras and for promoting his own brand—all at the very end—not the kind of sustained political engagement that moves voters in the long slog of regular elections.

7. *Candidate quality is still the ultimate determinant of success.* The massive resources that independent groups can deploy in races tend to obscure the paramount importance of candidate quality. The relative strengths of candidates and their campaigns are even more critical in primaries, where voters are generally more attentive and engaged, and where voter turnout has a larger impact on the outcome than persuasion. In the Alabama Senate special, both Luther Strange and Roy Moore are political veterans who are well-known and generally well-liked. Moore is a folk hero with rural religious voters who admire Moore's intransigent stands on displaying the Ten Commandments and bucking the U.S. Supreme Court on gay marriage—incidents that got him thrown off the state Supreme Court twice. Moore's appeal is hardly uniform: business-oriented Republicans recoil at Moore's grandstanding and were impacted by our messaging on Moore taking more than a million dollars out of a charity.

Unlike Moore, the affable Luther Strange was consistently viewed favorably by all GOP constituencies: business conservatives, Tea Party conservatives and religious conservatives. However, he is not fervently loved by any of them—a handicap in a low-turnout race where voter intensity is decisive. Most critically, Strange was dogged by his appointment to the Senate by disgraced former Gov. Robert Bentley, whom Strange's office was investigating at the time. Strange's campaign correctly tackled both of these problems by focusing on his

conservative credentials and trying to capture GOP voters' enthusiasm for Trump. But the Bentley shadow still hangs over the state and has hung over Strange's candidacy as well.

### **Implications for Future Primaries**

While we were able to easily dispatch a bevy of largely unknown competitors in the Alabama Senate primary, the runoff has featured two heavyweights: one with a thirty-year public career and a fervent base, and the other with a broadly-admired record of service and a functional (though underfunded) campaign. None of the insurgency primaries of 2014 or 2016 involved such equally established and well-known candidates. Most primaries that feature insurgent candidates are highly asymmetric: a lackluster incumbent backed by a professional campaign vs. an untested outsider with undiscovered vulnerabilities and a wobbly political operation. In such contests, the most important variable is the comparative quality of the two candidates, the campaigns they run, and the independent efforts that amplify their activities. In Alabama, we have faced the unique circumstance of two evenly matched opponents, with different assets and liabilities but comparable political heft. That could make this Senate special an outlier relative to future primaries involving more deeply flawed, less established candidates like Danny Tarkanian in Nevada and Chris McDaniel in Mississippi, among others.

Nevertheless, the larger themes that have played out in this race—the dominant presence of Trump and the unpopularity of the Republican Congress among primary voters—will continue to influence primary elections in 2018 and beyond, and will require effective strategies to deal with them.