



With Trump stirring the pot, the 2018 election is returning to 2016 themes

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On issues, tactics and rhetoric, the 2018 elections for the U.S. Senate in Missouri and key congressional races in the St. Louis region have a strong feeling of déjà vu.

President Donald Trump will be front and center, as he was in 2016 and as he continues to be, day to day, tweet to tweet, as president.

The mix of issues this time around also is familiar: health care, tax cuts, immigration, the economy, the Supreme Court, trade.

But Republicans are defending on some issues that Trump and fellow GOP candidates attacked on two years ago.

Expect Trump or top surrogates, especially Vice President Mike Pence and the president's daughter, Ivanka, to campaign often in the region.

Democrats will portray Trump as unworthy of the job and congressional Republicans as enablers of his worst instincts. Democrats will tout themselves as a check on Trump until the 2020 elections.

Republicans will defend Trump as deliverer of a new day and a new style in the White House, a president who fits no previous mold as chief executive. They will stress that Trump has presided over a robust economy, rolled back government regulations and populated the judiciary with conservative judges, including Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch.

In the middle of this, Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., will try to thread a needle, mindful of Trump's appeal to a hard core of supporters, especially in rural Missouri. But she is also a member of a party in which liberals and moderates are in an uneasy "resistance" dance, impatient to get back at Trump in 2020, but not always agreeing on what their party stands for.

If she survives nominal opposition in her own primary as expected, McCaskill will face the winner of an Aug. 6 Republican primary in which Attorney General Josh Hawley is the front-runner in a crowded field.

One of the premier races in the country, the contest not only will help decide which party controls Congress in 2019, but it will also serve as a testing ground for messages in pivotal states heading into the 2020 presidential campaign.

Trump "is going to be very active in the midterms, very active," White House counselor Kellyanne Conway told reporters at a breakfast sponsored by the Christian Science Monitor last

week. He's already attacked Democratic Senate incumbents, including Jon Tester of Montana and Joe Donnelly of Indiana, as poseurs.

"You've got a lot of red-state Democrats trying to hug the president from afar, and pretend that they support many things, when it was their party that shut down the government earlier this year, and all voted in unison against the tax cuts-jobs act," she said.

Polls, votes tilt toward Democrats

While Trump and Republicans are getting more credit for the robust economy than they were a year ago, a new NBC-Wall Street Journal poll showed that Democrats still have a decisive 10-point advantage when voters are asked which party they want to control Congress.

Democrats have been on a run in flipping more than 40 state legislative seats from Republicans in special elections, including one in suburban Kansas City last week. They have won high-profile state and federal elections from Alabama to western Pennsylvania.

Women are winning Democratic primaries in record numbers, and analysts say that suburban women, who nominally tilted toward the GOP in recent elections, are anxious about Trump and turned off by his style. They are expected to be a key voting bloc in Missouri this fall.

The Cook Political Report's Dave Wasserman said that after the June 5 primaries around the country, women have been the top vote-getters in 59 of 84 primaries that included at least one woman and one man. "I've never seen anything quite like it," he tweeted.

How that tilt toward female candidates affects Missouri's U.S. Senate race is unclear because McCaskill is the incumbent. Meanwhile, Democrat Betsy Dirksen Londrigan is one of the 59 women top primary vote-getters; she faces incumbent Rep. Rodney Davis, R-Taylorville, Ill., in November.

Republicans think the appointments of Gorsuch and 21 U.S. District Court justices approved so far, making up about one-eighth of the federal judiciary, will motivate their supporters to come out and vote. Controversial rollbacks in former President Barack Obama's regulations protecting the environment or overseeing the financial industry energize both Trump's base and the resistance against him.

The political fallout of Trump's meeting this week with North Korean President Kim Jong Un is a huge unknown.

It's the economy, voter

In states such as Missouri, where Trump won and Democratic senators are up for re-election, "you've got major industries and employers" who are giving raises or bonuses or expanding businesses, Conway said. "All of that owing to the tax cuts and jobs act that (Democrats) voted in unison against."

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., said that it took time for the economic impact of the tax cuts to show up in workers' paychecks, but that its benefits — plus greater confidence in business and industry from regulatory relief — give GOP candidates something to tout.

"There is a lot for members of Congress to talk about, and that is really beginning to sink in," Blunt said.

McCaskill said she voted against the tax cuts because they overwhelmingly favor the wealthy. She said that while Republicans tout regulatory rollbacks — including some she voted for — they have done little to ease what she called families’ “macaroni and cheese” concerns, especially on health care costs.

“Congress has a duty to tackle the issues that matter most to people and their families, and we have not done that,” she said. “Health care costs, higher co-pays, higher deductibles, pharmaceuticals costs — we are totally ignoring that issue.”

Jim Kessler, a co-founder of the centrist think tank Third Way, said that health care is atop voter concerns in polling.

“A lot of the issues are the same as 2016, but the flavor of them could be a bit different,” Kessler said. “On health care, the tables have turned. This is now a liability for Republicans and it is not even close, because they broke their promise to repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act.

The GOP’s elimination of the individual mandate, he said, “sabotaged” Obamacare without giving people a replacement.

“Health care is a deeply personal issue to people,” Kessler added. “This past year and a half, health care has gotten a lot more insecure for a lot of people.”

Democrats will point to what they say are broken Republican promises in other areas.

“We have done nothing on infrastructure,” McCaskill said. “We have got roads and bridges and electrical grids and locks and dams that are falling apart without the investment that we need.... We’ve done nothing to bring down the cost of education. We have done nothing to make retirement more secure for people.”

Trump Party vs. Republican Party

Former House Speaker John Boehner, three years removed from office, last week said he believed that the Republican Party that existed before Trump has essentially taken a “nap” while the followers of the president have created their own Trump Party.

That split, a factor in the retirement of Boehner’s successor, Paul Ryan, is another election wild card.

Conway pooh-poohed Boehner’s observation, saying that “much of what has passed” Congress — including a military budget that surpasses \$700 billion — is “classic peace-through-strength, classic traditional if not conventional Republican issues.”

Trump’s trade policies have shaken free-trading Republicans and created friction with allies such as Canada and the European Union. His policies have rattled some American industries, including agriculture, which are heavily dependent on exports and overly represented in many of the states, including Missouri, with close Senate races.

McCaskill pounced on that, pointing out the damage in areas such as soybean prices. Blunt said he also has talked to worried constituents.

“Frankly, I think there is a lot of belief out there that the president will negotiate a better deal,” Blunt said. But, he added: “I am certainly, as you know, very concerned about the trend of trade.”

David Boaz is executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, which has been critical of Trump’s trade policies and their impact on the American economy and in isolating the U.S. from the rest of the world.

“That is a big problem, and the modest deregulation that has happened so far will be swamped in economic impact by these trade provisions,” he said.

Conway, one of Trump’s longest-tenured advisers, said that Trump was simply fulfilling a campaign promise to end trade deals that “screwed” American workers.

“The president ... has made clear from the beginning as a candidate promising that the United States would no longer be on the receiving end of bad trade deals,” she said.

Pivot around key issues

Trade is a wild card because it has moved from a geopolitical tone in 2016 to pocketbook economics in 2018. Trump’s critics saw his trade talks as saber-rattling against China, but now that he has imposed tariffs and trading partners have handed down countertariffs, the debate gets down to dollars and cents.

“We are still in the middle of whatever moves Trump is making on trade,” Third Way’s Kessler said. “If it ends up being a series of tariffs going back and forth, it is going to hurt jobs.”

Conway called those kinds of responses old thinking, arguing that press and public accustomed to “swamp speed” are adjusting to “Trump-Pence pace.”

Trump, she said, “has been told so many times over the last three years ... that, ‘You can’t do that, you can’t say that, actually go through with that, or the world would fall apart, the mountains will crater.’”

Some Republicans are running on Trump’s trade policies. Rep. Mike Bost, R-Murphysboro, Ill., who is in a tight race with Democrat Brendan Kelly, touted an announcement last week that a steelmaker in his district was hiring back an additional 300 workers, on top of 500 already hired after Trump threatened China with anti-dumping tariffs.

Bost told the Post-Dispatch he’d welcome the president to campaign for him.

“People who voted for him are very happy with the job he is doing, and if he hasn’t gotten something done it’s not his fault, it’s mine,” Bost said, referring to Congress.

He said a Trump appearance in his district would “stir the left base really bad,” but that it would also energize supporters.