



## How to Win in Hostile Territory

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Tuesday night's surprise win by Doug Jones in the Alabama Senate special election will be pored over for years to come for lessons that can be taken on board by the major political parties as they continue to vie for dominance on the national stage.

[OPINION: [Don't Read Too Much Into Roy Moore's Loss](#)]

Here's the most basic thing both Republicans and Democrats should take away from Tuesday, however: Howard Dean was right. Run a candidate in every race, and if you're in hostile territory, don't compromise on quality, especially where personal ethics and a record of properly representing a state's people are concerned.

Over the last 10 or so years, Democrats have seemed to take this rule to heart more than Republicans, probably thanks to Dean's advocacy for a 50-state strategy. Dean, the biggest-name Democratic champion of the idea that you fight in every state, and every district, attempted to implement that vision to the maximum as chairman of the Democratic National Committee from early 2005 through early 2009.

In that role, while pursuing that strategy, he just so happened to see gains by Democrats in swing districts and some more traditionally red ones, notably during the 2006 midterm elections, and in 2008 when red districts like Idaho's 1st district, North Carolina's 8th district, and perhaps most especially Alabama's 2nd district shifted blue.

Dean knew, from his tenure as governor, that you've got to look like, and be, a true public servant adhering to the peculiarities of a state (in Vermont's case, being way more pro-gun rights than, say, New York City, and more fiscally conservative than, say, California) in order to win and keep office. He knew that the Democratic Party was not going to be successful running Nancy Pelosi clones in every congressional district, for every Senate seat, and every statehouse contest. And he knew that for a political party to be successful, it needed to contest seats, even those that looked unwinnable, a lesson also taught by former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who helped usher in a wave of Democratic governors in the Mountain West during the 2000s and probably laid much of the groundwork for Republican decline in that part of the country.

Jones, and his campaign team, evidently knew it, too. Perhaps we should not be surprised that his senior strategist was Joe Trippi, formerly Dean's campaign manager.

Jones entered the Alabama race after former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore had made clear that he would run.

In doing so, Jones probably had a sneaking suspicion that Moore would fare well in a Republican primary, and that he would make for a far riskier candidate for Republicans than some other contenders and prospects.

Jones certainly knew that the Alabama GOP was in a real mess, with the Republican governor, Robert Bentley, having resigned from office, and pleaded guilty to criminal charges amid a corruption scandal and the initiation of impeachment proceedings, events that played out almost exactly a month to the day before Jones announced his candidacy.

Indeed, Jones appears to have been plotting his run for Senate, and getting his chess pieces in place for some time. As Alex Burns of The New York Times noted, on Tuesday night, in his victory speech, Jones thanked a network of fellow current and former U.S. attorneys for helping him to run, the kind of network it takes time and significant attention to build.

But build it he did, over a longer-than-you-might-suspect period, and he did it, taking a gamble that someday, a race like that for Sessions' former seat would present itself, and that when that day came, he would run, evidently as a fairly liberal Democrat, certainly by Alabama standards, but one who cultivated (enough of) an image as a gun owner and gun rights supporter by talking about his use of guns for duck hunting, as opposed to as a political prop. Think about how American politics would look today if Democrats had taken a punt. Then, think more specifically about how Jones' profile, and not being quite a standard cookie cutter Democrat, benefited him.

Clearly, the contrast between Jones and Moore on ethics advantaged Jones, not just insofar as it won him votes from women with children under the age of 18 at home, but probably also because running as a prosecutor tends to engender more trust and prove less politically toxic than running as, say, a long-time politician with a partisan letter behind one's name. This is a specific and narrow lesson that both parties should take away from the Jones victory, too: If you're going to field candidates on hostile turf (and you should), recruit a prosecutor, or perhaps a sheriff – or, yes, a judge, just preferably not one with Moore's issues.

As Cato Institute senior fellow and Maryland resident and opiner Walter Olson has observed, the model for Republicans winning office in the (mostly) liberal Northeast seems to be "run a prosecutor" (or a businessman, as has notably worked in Massachusetts and Maryland). Running a prosecutor worked for Chris Christie and Bill Weld; it perhaps most famously worked for Rudy Giuliani when he first ran for New York City mayor. It has also worked for Republicans in other liberal environs; Rep. Dave Reichert for a long time occupied a district that by rights should have been blue, but arguably a good portion of why it never was was his reputation as the guy who finally nailed the Green River Killer as King County sheriff.

Where it works for Republicans in blue states or districts, it can work for Democrats in red states or districts. Jones just proved the point.

Moore voters probably thought their guy would benefit from a preference for candidates who appear, by virtue of their resumes, to prioritize law, order and justice, too. The problem for them

was that their candidate looked like his personal credo was "law and order for thee, but not for me," and that was the case well before the "chasing teenage tail" allegations ever emerged. One of the reasons that 35 percent of Alabama voters said in early exit polling that the sexual misconduct allegations against Moore were "not a factor at all" in their vote was probably because Moore had so galvanized opinion against him in the minds of many voters with his various "kicked off the bench" dramas, and apparent lack of respect for aspects of American public law, even if many Alabamans at their core share many of Moore's professed values.

The bottom line was this: Democrats made it a race, because they bothered to field a candidate, he and they took it seriously, and they did not compromise on candidate quality – and probably picked the candidate who, despite being a bit to the left of the state's voters on various issues, was as close to the cookie cutter ideal of who you run in hostile territory as humanly possible. And yes, like Dean in 2006 and 2008, they also got lucky.

But fundamentally, voters in Alabama this week did what voters tend to do, just as they did in 2016, when enough of them in the right places wound up favoring the "racist businessman" over the "experienced liar." They voted for the candidate who appeared to have the better ethics, overall. And Democrats, and Democratic-aligned or –leaning organizations, did their job by fielding and supporting him in the first place. The Republican Party, and would-be Republican candidates, should take note.