

Opinion

2020 will be a political year like no other | Opinion

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With four first-term New Jersey members in the House of Representatives, President Trump's impact in the state will be especially significant as Democrats seek to protect their 10-2 Congressional delegation majority. Above from left to right, U.S. Reps. Andy Kim (D-3rd Dist.), Jeff Van Drew (R- 2nd Dist.), Trump, U.S. Reps. Tom Malinowski (D-7th Dist.) and Mikie Sherrill (D-11th Dist.).

By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

By Carl Golden

Politically, the year 2020 will be unlike any the nation has ever experienced, principally because it will be dominated by a president unlike any the nation has ever experienced.

President Trump will be a constant presence in every state, exerting victory or defeat influence and in all probability deciding control of the U. S. Congress.

He's already at the center of a dramatic political upheaval in New Jersey -- the apparent decision by Rep. Jeff Van Drew, the freshman 2nd Congressional District Democrat, to change his party affiliation to Republican after the state's Democratic leadership banished him from its big tent for failing its litmus test -- a commitment to support Trump's impeachment.

He's on the verge of another historic first -- a president seeking re-election after having been impeached by the House and acquitted in the Senate.

He stands astride the nation's political process, a dominant and overwhelming figure revered or reviled with equal intensity by a deeply polarized nation.

In his three years in office, Trump has produced more controversy and drama than the body politic can safely digest. From promoting wacky conspiracy theories to heaping praise on himself and vilifying his critics, Trump has driven the daily news cycle.

His supporters cheer his every sally while his critics are aghast and enraged at his behavior. He campaigned on a promise to administer a long overdue and well-deserved kick in the shins to the establishment elites and the media and -- to the delight of his base -- he's delivered.

With four first-term New Jersey members in the House of Representatives, Trump's impact in the state will be especially significant and potentially decisive as Democrats seek to protect their lopsided 10-2 congressional delegation majority while Republicans strive to recover from the blowout losses of 2018.

With a profoundly unpopular Trump leading the ticket and a voter registration edge of nearly 1 million, Democrats are understandably optimistic. The party controls the governor's office, holds both U. S. Senate seats and enjoys a cumulative 77-43 margin in the Legislature.

The state hasn't elected a Republican to the U. S. Senate since 1972 and a Republican presidential candidate last carried the state in 1988. New Jersey is a deeper hue of blue than the waters of the Atlantic Ocean washing its coast.

In the face of such partisan near-monopoly and Trump's dismal job approval standing, the challenge for the Republican Party is monumental, not merely for its Federal candidates but for mitigating the down ballot impact.

The party has pinned its hopes for a comeback on the 3rd Congressional District where Rep. Andy Kim was elected by just over 1% (a 4,000-vote plurality), and the 7th Congressional District where Rep. Tom Malinowski won by 5% (16,000 vote plurality).

In the Seventh, it is anticipated Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. will turn aside a primary challenge and mount a vigorous, well-financed campaign in a district where, he will argue, Malinowski's left-wing ideology isn't shared.

Kim's thin victory margin and the fact he's a Democrat in a Republican-tilting district puts his seat in play.

First term Rep. Mikie Sherril is in a far more favorable position, having surged to victory by 14% -- a 50,000 vote plurality -- in the 11th Congressional District.

Van Drew won by a surprisingly close 6% (20,000 plurality) and was one of two House Democrats to oppose an impeachment inquiry. His continued assertions that he will vote against any impeachment resolutions led to state party chairman John Currie's refusal to endorse his re-election and county chairs in the district declining to sign a statement of support. Gov. Phil Murphy, a host of legislators and various private interest groups with political agendas have all castigated Van Drew and pledged to use their resources to defeat him no matter which party he chooses.

The line of potential challengers -- Democrat and Republican -- resembles that of the line at the nickel slots.

The Second District is decidedly more conservative than those of the other first termers (Republican Frank LoBiondo represented it for 24 years before retiring) and Van Drew's anti-impeachment stance reflects district sentiment.

It was a short-sighted decision by the Democratic establishment to expel Van Drew, who, should he seek re-election as a Republican, stands a better than even chance of fending off a primary challenge and winning in November.

It is, though, the shadow of Trump that looms over all like the midtown Manhattan tower that bears his name. To be sure, he will not carry New Jersey and the state's Democratic leaders will use his unpopularity to drive a massive voter turnout effort to preserve their Congressional majority and make inroads locally.

Republican optimism may be a case of hope over reality.

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