LAFAYETTE, Indiana – Mike Fogleman voted for Democrat Joe Donnelly in the 2012 U.S. Senate race. Then he went for Republican Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential race.

Now, Fogleman is backing Donnelly for a second term in the Senate – but with this proviso: “As long as Donnelly supports the Trump agenda, he will get my vote again, as will Trump in 2020,” said Fogleman, a retiree in Tippecanoe County, one of 21 Indiana counties carried by both Donnelly and Trump.

The 2018 battlegrounds are full of so-called “pivot counties” like Tippecanoe – those that voted “blue” for Senate six years ago and “red” for president four years later. And they will be key in the fight for Senate control this fall.


There are 54 such counties in Michigan, 52 in West Virginia, 50 in Missouri, 24 in Wisconsin, 22 in Indiana, 22 in North Dakota, 21 in Florida, 17 in Ohio, 10 in Montana and six in Pennsylvania.

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All 10 of those states backed Trump in 2016, and all have incumbent Democratic senators seeking re-election this fall. The fates of those incumbents will depend in part on whether they can win over at least some Trump voters and replicate the success they had six years ago on unfavorable turf.

Collectively, those 10 Democratic incumbents won 278 counties in 2012 that went on to vote for Trump. Most of these places are overwhelmingly white. A majority are at least modestly Republican. But all have some history of split-ticket voting.
They include classic bellwethers such as Macomb County in Michigan and Racine County in Wisconsin, as well as scores of smaller, rural, more conservative counties.

The counties represent a prime target for Senate Democrats, who already have won them at least once before. But they pose a major challenge because they helped propel Trump to the White House. Trump’s presidential margins in these counties were on average about 20 points better than GOP nominee Mitt Romney’s in 2012, meaning they swung far harder in a Republican direction than most other places in the country or in their states.

“Trump-state” Democrats such as Donnelly are relying on a blend of re-election strategies to meet that challenge: running on parochial issues, touting local roots, embracing bipartisanship, striking populist themes and claiming common ground on some issues with Trump.

**Counties that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 then pivoted to Trump in 2016**

Percent of total counties in state:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mich.</td>
<td>80-100</td>
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<tr>
<td>W. Va.</td>
<td>60-80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mo.</td>
<td>40-60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wis.</td>
<td>20-40</td>
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<td>Ind.</td>
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<td>N.D.</td>
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<td>Fla.</td>
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<td>Ohio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mont.</td>
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<td>Pa.</td>
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Some, like Donnelly, are centrists in red states. Some, like Wisconsin’s Tammy Baldwin, are liberals in purple states. Some, like Michigan’s Debbie Stabenow, are clear election favorites. And some, like North Dakota’s Heidi Heitkamp, are fighting for their lives.
"They have always been a disparate group in disparate states, but they still win," Democratic pollster Paul Maslin said of these incumbents in his party. “Generally, they’ve been able to communicate some degree of independence, which voters want.”

History suggests they are helped immensely by belonging to the party that doesn’t control the White House, since “out-party” senators rarely lose.

But as Senate races become more nationalized, it gets harder for a Democrat to carry a state that leans Republican.

**July 4:** Who is Matt Rosendale? President Trump to head to Montana to boost GOP Senate candidate (/story/news/politics/2018/07/04/donald-trump-visit-montana-rally-gop-candidate-rosendale/756428002/)

**July 2:** Court vacancy adds to hot-button issues in Florida Senate race between Rick Scott and Bill Nelson (/story/news/politics/2018/07/02/supreme-court-vacancy-adds-hot-button-issues-florida-senate/743755002/)

GOP strategist Brad Todd said he doesn’t think these senators have done enough to separate themselves from the national Democratic Party, especially in the five states that Trump carried by 18 points or more: Indiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota and West Virginia.

“They have been too shy in vocalizing displeasure with their own party,” said Todd.

“I think it is very difficult,” he said of their political challenge, “especially with the Supreme Court seat open and cultural issues in the forefront.”

Non-partisan handicappers generally view half of these Democrats as the favorites in their races: Michigan’s Stabenow, Wisconsin’s Baldwin, Ohio’s Sherrod Brown, Montana’s Jon Tester and Pennsylvania’s Bob Casey. The contests involving the other five Democrats – Indiana’s Donnelly, North Dakota’s Heitkamp, Missouri’s Claire McCaskill, Florida’s Bill Nelson and West Virginia’s Joe Manchin – are currently rated as tossups.

There are a total of 26 Democratic and nine GOP seats in play this fall. With a Republican majority of 51-49, Democrats can scarcely afford to lose any incumbents to have any hope of retaking the Senate.

Here’s a closer look at the challenge the Trump vote poses for these 10 Senate Democrats:

**INDIANA AND MISSOURI**

Indiana’s Donnelly and Missouri’s McCaskill are two of the most endangered senators in this group.

Donnelly has walked a tightrope as a red-state Democrat and tried to steer clear of polarizing, partisan issues – a tightrope that got trickier with Trump’s election.

Rachel Forrester, owner of Rachel’s Hi-Way Café in Alexandria, Indiana, is among Hoosiers who voted for both Donnelly and Trump. Today she’s much happier with Trump than Donnelly, citing the senator’s opposition to the GOP tax cut and saying he “rides the fence” on immigration.

“I really felt like there was a bipartisan (approach) with him. I was wrong,” said Forrester.
Midterms: Senate Democrats fight to retain seats in states Trump won

Rita Littrell, right, of New Castle, Indiana, seen here shopping at a flea market, her mother, Wilma Everman, said she voted for Joe Donnelly in 2012, but describes his performance as "just OK," and that she is considering voting for Mike Braun in this fall's Indiana Senate race. Littrell also voted for Donald Trump in 2016, and citing a desire for a new direction, said she's satisfied with his job. (Photo: Robert Scheer/IndyStar)

Her county, Madison, northeast of Indianapolis, is typical of many Donnelly-Trump counties. It produced a split outcome in 2012, voting Democratic for Senate and Republican for president. But it got considerably redder in 2016. While GOP nominee Mitt Romney won it by just 5 points in 2012, Trump took it by 25 points two years ago.

Donnelly’s campaign trademark is touring the state in his RV. In his re-election bid against the GOP’s Mike Braun, he has touted his support for veteran causes and role in bi-partisan bills praised by Trump, such as the Right to Try legislation, which makes it easier for terminally ill people to receive experimental treatments.

Trump has skewered Donnelly as “Sleepin’ Joe,” but pointedly thanked him in May at the signing ceremony for the Right to Try law.

Missouri voted for Trump by a margin nearly identical to Indiana’s (19 points). Close to half the state’s counties (50 out 114) voted for both McCaskill in 2012 and Trump in 2016. They ranged from the GOP stronghold of Greene County in the Ozarks to the more sparsely populated farm counties in the north. Their shift two years ago was massive: On average, Trump’s margin in these 50 counties was 22 points better than Romney’s.

Bashed by conservatives as too liberal, McCaskill has campaigned heavily outside Missouri’s Democratic strongholds in St. Louis and Kansas City. By her own tally, she held 50 town halls in 2017, about two-fifths of them in Trump counties.

While offering to work with the White House on issues such as border control, McCaskill has generally sided with her party on big contested issues such as the GOP tax bill. Her leading Republican opponent, state Attorney General Josh Hawley, has called her out of touch, while she has accused him of being too easy on former Gov. Eric Greitens, who quit in June amid a storm of scandals.

McCaskill has already survived two chancy elections due to good fortune and her own political skills.

“She’s always had trouble,” said political scientist Steve Smith of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, who said, “this is a great time for her to be running” because of the traditional midterm struggles of the president’s party.

“Her strategy all along has been to conspicuously moderate and whenever possible non-partisan or bipartisan, while keeping her Democratic base happy,” Smith said, calling it a dicey balancing act but one “she is very good at.”

Indiana's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016
OHIO AND PENNSYLVANIA

Ohio Democrat Sherrod Brown's populist politics on trade and other issues seems to be serving him well in a state where Trump made big inroads in 2016.

One example was Appalachia's Scioto County southeast of Cincinnati, which split its Senate and presidential vote in 2012, voting for Brown by seven points and Romney by one. Four years later, Trump carried the county by a remarkable 37 points, as his “America First” message appealed to a region that had hemorrhaged jobs for decades. Scioto has consistently ranked in the top 10 among Ohio's 88 counties for unemployment.

David Liddle, 68, said he voted for Trump in 2016 but planned to support Brown in this year’s Senate race.

"I think I'm a Republican," he said at first when interviewed in the county seat of Portsmouth last month. Then a few minutes later, he added, "No wait, I might be a Democrat."

Brown opposes Trump on most issues, but has praised the president's tariffs on steel, blaming "Chinese cheating" for shuttered Ohio steel plants. Polls give Brown a double-digit lead over GOP congressman Jim Renacci.

June 30: In 50 states, hundreds of thousands protest immigration policy, with focus on midterms (/story/news/2018/06/30/families-belong-together-rallies-hundreds-thousands-protest/747942002/)


Pennsylvania Democrat Bob Casey also is favored in his re-election bid against Republican congressman Lou Barletta.
Midterms: Senate Democrats fight to retain seats in states Trump won

Of the 10 “Trump states” with Democratic senators on the ballot, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin are easily the most favorable for Democrats in their makeup. Each voted for Trump by less than a percentage point, and the president has earned negative job ratings in all three.

Wyoming Street in Hazleton in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, on Sept. 8, 2016. (Photo: Kate Penn, York Daily Record)

Only six counties carried by Casey in 2012 voted for Trump four years later, though many others shifted in a GOP direction.

Like Brown, Casey is aligned with Trump on trade, an intriguing wild-card issue in the fight for the Senate, with some Democratic incumbents largely backing the Trump tariffs and others opposing them. But Casey has been a fierce critic on other issues, including immigration. The contrast is stark with Barletta, an outspoken supporter of the president's immigration curbs and his policy of separating migrant parents and children at the border.

“In America, we have laws,” Barletta said recently.

Casey called it a “policy straight from the pit of hell.”

Immigration could be a "cutting-edge issue" in this race, said G. Terry Madonna, a political analyst and longtime pollster at Franklin & Marshall College. Madonna called the fight between Casey and Barletta “in many ways a perfect referendum on the president.”

Ohio's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016
Pennsylvania's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

MONTANA AND NORTH DAKOTA

While having Trump in the White House puts considerable pressure on red-state Democrats, it also creates opportunities for Democrats such as Montana's Jon Tester to show bipartisanship.

“There are certain issues where he can rise above looking like a partisan politician,” said Jeremy Johnson, an associate political science professor at Carroll College in Helena, Montana.

Tester drew Trump’s wrath when he helped derail the president’s pick to head the Department of Veterans Affairs.


Trump attacked Tester at a rally in Montana last week: “I see Jon Tester saying such nice things about me. I say, ‘Yeah, but he never votes (with) me.’”

Defending his seat against GOP state auditor Matt Rosendale, Tester has run re-election ads aimed at Trump voters, saying “Washington’s a mess. But that’s not stopping me from getting bills to help Montana signed into law by President Trump.”
Both Tester and North Dakota’s Heitkamp are among the Senate Democrats who face heavy pressure to back Trump’s new Supreme Court nominee because of the conservatism of their home states. Trump carried Montana by 20 points, North Dakota by 36. The president announced Monday night his selection of Brett Kavanaugh, a federal appeals court judge, for the high court.

Heitkamp, a top GOP target this year, has been on both sides of Trump’s rhetoric, with the president praising her at times and bashing her at times. About 40 percent of the counties she won in 2012 later voted for Trump. She is opposed by the state’s at-large Republican U.S. House member, Kevin Cramer.

The president taunted Heitkamp over the high court vacancy at a recent rally in North Dakota, predicting, “Heidi will vote no” because “she will be told to do so” by her party. But, Trump added, “maybe” public opinion in her state would force her to vote yes.

After meeting with Trump on June 28 to talk about the court vacancy, Heitkamp touted the encounter on Twitter: “If the president wants to meet with me, I’m ready to participate and advocate for North Dakota. And that’s exactly what happened today.”
Montana's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

North Dakota's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

MICHIGAN AND WISCONSIN
The math suggests Michigan’s Stabenow should be facing an uphill battle for her fourth term in office: 54 of the 62 counties that voted for her six years ago backed Trump in 2016, including older industrial areas along the Interstate 75 corridor north and south of Detroit, agricultural regions in Michigan’s Thumb and along Lake Huron, and most of the Upper Peninsula.

Blue-collar Macomb County, known as the home of the Reagan Democrat, voted for Stabenow by 23 points in 2012, then for Trump by 12 points in 2016.

But hardly anyone seems to believe she’s imperiled. Instead, some pundits are predicting a romp for the Democrat.

“It looks like a hopeless cause for Republicans,” said Bill Ballenger, founder of the Ballenger Report, which analyzes political races in the state. “She doesn’t make mistakes, she doesn’t make unforced errors (and) she’s very shrewd.”

Stabenow, 68, has long stressed her rural roots, as “Debbie from Clare,” the tiny mid-Michigan city where her family ran the local Oldsmobile dealership. She’s positioned herself as an advocate for Michigan business, including the state’s auto industry, and – like Trump – called for cracking down on trade practices that many voters in these Stabenow-Trump counties believe have cost Michigan jobs.

Her GOP opponent will be determined in an Aug. 7 primary.

In Wisconsin, Baldwin won 24 counties in 2012 that voted for Trump in 2016, the vast majority of them in the state’s more rural western half. What sets Wisconsin apart from most of the other states Trump carried is that almost all of these Baldwin-Trump counties also voted for Obama in 2012.

In other words, these are not red-leaning areas that got redder in 2016 – they are some of the swingiest parts of rural and small-town America.

That makes Baldwin’s challenge less daunting than the ones facing Donnelly or Heitkamp, where the math requires them to win a sizeable number of Trump voters on Republican turf.

Instead, Baldwin needs to replicate her 2012 success in historically purple counties that two years ago swung unusually hard from Obama to Trump.

Her formula for doing that: focus on parochial issues such as dairy, nonpartisan problems such as the opioid crisis and populist themes that appeal to some Trump voters, like trade and “Buy America” provisions.

While the state is deeply polarized, a reporter encountered two Trump voters in northeast Wisconsin last month who said they supported Baldwin. Both cited the opioid issue, which Baldwin has featured in her ads.

The first-term Democrat has criticized Trump on many issues. But the slogan across her campaign website – “Putting Wisconsin First” – carries an echo of Trump’s famous mantra of “Put America First.” Two Republicans face off in an Aug. 14 primary to determine Baldwin’s opponent.
Baldwin needs to replicate her 2012 success in purple counties that two years ago swung unusually hard from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. (Photo: Manuel Balce Ceneta, AP)

Michigan's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

Percentage point difference

0  5  10  15  20  25  30  35  40  45  50  55  60
WEST VIRGINIA

Almost every county in West Virginia is a Manchin-Trump county.

Senate Democrat Joe Manchin carried 52 of the state’s 55 counties in 2012, while Trump carried them all in 2016.

Manchin has a long track record of winning on red turf. But Trump won West Virginia by 42 points, the biggest margin of any of these states and much bigger than Romney’s in 2012. This time around, Republicans believe they have a better chance than ever to knock off Manchin because of the state’s partisan trajectory and a GOP nominee they think can deliver in state Attorney General Patrick Morrisey.

One recent poll gave Manchin a nine-point edge.
Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., has a long track record of winning on red turf. However, Republicans believe they have a better chance than ever to knock off Manchin because of the state's partisan trajectory and a GOP nominee they think can win. (Photo: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds, AFP/Getty Images)

“You’re looking at a very successful politician who finds himself at odds with the sentiments of the majority (of the state),” said Robert Rupp, a political science professor at West Virginia Wesleyan College. “This campaign is going to be Manchin’s retail campaigning skills – which are the best since Gov. Arch Moore in the 1960s – versus the ideology of the majority of voters in the state. And then the question becomes, can you be pro-Manchin and pro-Trump at the same time?”

One Manchin campaign ad distills the former governor’s approach to re-election, driving home his roots in the state while sidestepping the national war between the parties.

“As West Virginians, we’ve all faced hardships … People here have been screwed by both political parties. Yes, Washington sucks. But West Virginians don’t give up,” Manchin said in the spot, which invoked a mine explosion in his hometown that killed 78 people in 1968, including his uncle.
West Virginia's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

FLORIDA

The last time a Democrat not named Bill Nelson won a statewide race in Florida was in 2006.

Nelson also was re-elected (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/07/05/midterm-elections-bill-nelson-donald-trump-counties-florida/760224002/) to the U.S. Senate that year in his first run as an incumbent.

If he is going to win a fourth-term this year – his likely GOP opponent will be current Sunshine State Gov. Rick Scott – he must continue his streak of winning parts of the state that otherwise tilt Republican.
One fiercely contested battleground will be Brevard County, on the state’s Atlantic coast, where Nelson grew up and where he also served as a congressman for 12 years. He carried it by 5 points in 2012.

“That ends this November,” said Rick Lacey, head of the county’s GOP committee, vowing that Scott would carry Brevard, which is home to the Kennedy Space Center and among the 21 Nelson-Trump counties in Florida.

Stacey Patel, chair of the county Democrats, predicted Nelson would make GOP inroads in Brevard this time around, from “moderate Republicans who currently feel disenfranchised by the radical direction of their party.”


June 7: Poll: Senators in key races have steady approval ratings — and voters still want them out (/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/06/07/steady-approval-ratings-among-incumbents-dont-mean-re-election/680742002/)

In Scott, Nelson would be facing a more formidable challenger than some other Democratic incumbents in this group.

But Trump won by merely one point in Florida, which saw a far smaller GOP shift between the last two presidential elections than the other nine “Trump states” where Senate Democrats face re-election.

In Florida and other battlegrounds this fall, both parties have a balancing act with respect to Trump, said Todd, the GOP consultant who co-authored a book about the populist Trump coalition called “The Great Revolt.”

Senate Democrats in Trump states need to mobilize the anti-Trump resistance while appealing to voting groups where Trump over-performed in 2016, including rural and conservative Democrats and independents.

Their GOP opponents need to mobilize traditional suburban Republicans who liked Romney better than Trump, while energizing Trump supporters who haven’t been consistent voters or reliable backers of the party.

“I think the Republican job is a little bit easier,” Todd said, “but I am not certain of that.”
Florida's pivot counties: Areas that voted for a Democratic senator in 2012 and then voted for Trump in 2016

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