

Senate Democrats' hope rests on red-state candidates

Party focuses on cost of living as it campaigns for majority control

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USA TODAY

While Democrats are considered favorites to control the narrowly divided House of Representatives after the November midterm elections, taking over the Senate would give them far more tools to combat what they see as Trump's power grabs. And the party has now recruited Senate candidates who previously won statewide office to vie for key seats Democrats would need to swipe from Republicans to gain control of the upper chamber.

A recent recruitment coup came Jan. 13 with the entry of former U.S. Rep. Mary Peltola of Alaska, who four years ago defeated former Gov. Sarah Palin to become the first Native Alaskan and woman elected to the state's lone House seat.

Peltola joins other proven winners on the Democratic side who are looking to leverage their appeal in states President Donald Trump won during the 2024 contests, such as former Sen. Sherrod Brown in Ohio and former North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper seeking to fill the Tar Heel State seat left open by the retirement of Republican Sen. Thom Tillis. Gov. Janet Mills was successfully courted by Senate Democratic leaders to challenge Republican Sen. Susan Collins in a state presidential candidate and former Vice President Kamala Harris carried in 2024.

"Amazingly and hearteningly there was a common thread through all of those who decided to run, which was patriotism," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, told USA TODAY Jan. 21. "I said to one of them, 'You have a great family, you've had a great career, but if you sit on the sidelines and we lose the Senate by one seat, you won't have a happy retirement.'"

While taking control of the Senate remains an uphill climb — the current 53-47 GOP majority requires Democrats to flip seats in Republican-leaning states, defend Democratic seats in Georgia and Michigan and oust a deeply entrenched moderate in Maine — strong performances in the 2025 off-year contests and Trump's sinking approval ratings have given the party a glimmer of hope.

"There was a lot of pessimism from Democratic partisans as well as outside observers that Democrats would have a snowball's chance in hell of flipping the Senate," said David de la Fuente, a senior analyst at Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank. "But while the map is the most important thing, the second most important thing is candidate recruitment and candidate quality, and Democrats, including Schumer, kind of knocked it out of the park."

However, there is also trouble brewing on Schumer's left flank. He has been pilloried by left-leaning groups and activists for a perceived lack of urgency and effectiveness in blocking Trump's agenda. At 75, he is seen by some as the epitome of an aging cadre of party leaders. Recruiting Cooper, 68, and Brown, 73, will not dispel that notion.

While primary challenges on the left are mostly running in safely Democratic congressional districts, Mills, 78, faces Graham Platner, a 41-year-old insurgent who has excited the party's progressive wing.

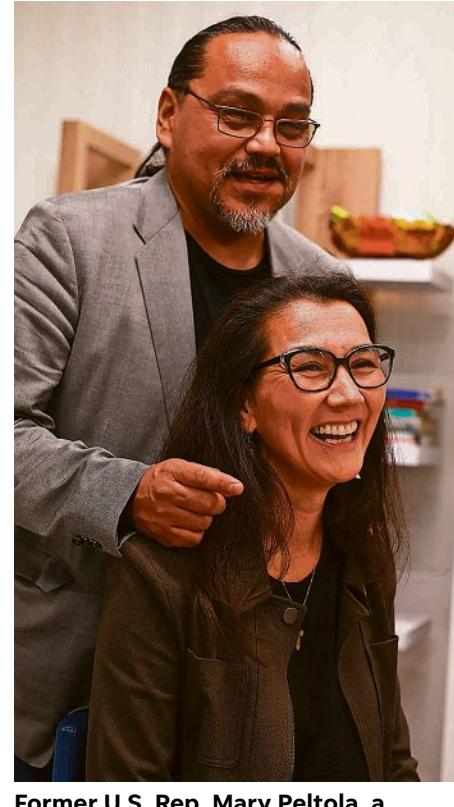
Meet the contenders

Peltola, 52, gained notoriety in 2022 when she won Alaska's at-large House seat in a special election. She eventually lost reelection two years later when Trump brought a red wave through the state, but political observers point out the former tribal judge performed better than Harris on the ballot.

She raked in \$1.5 million within the first day of her 2026 campaign launch, outpacing the \$1.2 million that GOP incumbent Jack Sullivan raised in the third quarter of 2025, according to Federal Election Commission records.

In Ohio, Brown is waging a comeback bid that will lean on his close ties to labor and attempt to appeal to the White working-class voters brought into the Republican fold by Trump. Brown aims to articulate voters' economic frustrations and draw contrasts with GOP Sen. Jon Husted, who was appointed by the governor to fill the seat left vacant when JD Vance became vice president.

"Voters didn't vote to lose their Medicaid," Brown told the Columbus Dispatch, part of the USA TODAY Network, in August. "Voters didn't vote to have drug prices go up. Voters didn't vote for higher grocery prices. I think that it's a very different year in that sense. Voters just think they've been shortchanged and the system's rigged, and it's only gotten worse."



Former U.S. Rep. Mary Peltola, a Democrat, has entered the U.S. Senate contest in Alaska. Democrats hope they can win the seat from the Republican Party in this year's midterm election.

KERRY TASKER/REUTERS FILE

Similar to other red-state Democrats, a Make America Great Again tidal wave toppled Brown in 2024, though he lost by about 4 percentage points whereas Harris lost Ohio by roughly 11 points.

North Carolina is a swing state that Trump won by approximately 3 percentage points over Harris, and one that Democrats showcase as a potential pickup in every Senate election cycle. They've come up short since 2008, but Cooper, who was first elected governor in 2016 and served two terms, is considered a moderate who can compete with Michael Whatley, a close Trump ally and former chair of the Republican National Committee.

Map favors GOP, but Dems confident in environment

Historically the midterms provide the president's party with a cold shower, and Trump's redistricting attempts launched in various states last year foretold how worried Republicans are about anticipated losses in the House.

The Senate, however, doesn't always follow suit.

In Trump's 2018 midterm cycle during his first term, for example, Republicans lost 40 House seats but gained two in the Senate.

Similarly, when former President Joe Biden faced voter backlash in 2022, Democrats coughed up nine House seats while gaining one in the Senate.

This year Republicans are defending 22 Senate seats in total that are mostly in states Trump won by more than 10 percentage points when he was on the ballot in 2024. Two — Alaska and Ohio, which Trump carried by roughly 13 and 12 percentage points, respectively — are among those that Schumer and Democratic officials are trotting out as their best chances to flip.

That means liberals will need an almost perfect outcome in November given the uphill electoral reality. Ohio and Alaska have moved decisively to the right in recent years; North Carolina is a tight swing state, but Republicans have won every presidential and Senate election since 2008. In Maine, Collins is a five-term incumbent who has successfully walked a tightrope down the center and survived previous wave elections.

Michigan and Georgia, where Democrats must win seats in states Trump won in 2024, are rated toss-up contests by prognosticators such as the Cook Political Report.

Joanna Rodriguez, a spokesperson for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, said in a statement that Schumer's map is "littered with failed career politicians no longer aligned with the values of their states," including contenders such as Cooper, who GOP strategists plan to jab on immigration and a host of other issues.

"After four years of Democrat failure, Republican Senators are fulfilling their promise of safer communities, more money in voters' pockets, and more opportunities for working families," Rodriguez said.

Despite the structural advantages for the GOP, Schumer believes this year's Democratic candidates can pull off victory by focusing on the perceived failures of Republicans in power — especially on the economy and Trump's promise to lower the cost of living.

Trump has won three consecutive presidential elections in Ohio. But a Bowling Green State University poll showed he is underwater with Buckeye State voters, holding a 51% disapproval job rating.

Similarly in North Carolina, where Cooper's moderate positions helped him win the governor's office, a survey conducted by the conservative John Locke Foundation found the president had a roughly 53% disapproval rating.

"We had to make sure people knew how bad Trump was and the Republicans going along with them, and the issue we chose to focus on above all is costs," Schumer said.

Peltola's entry immediately changed Alaska's rating from a "safe" Republican seat to one that merely "leans Republican" according to Larry Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia.

In her campaign announcement video, Peltola said Alaska used to be a "place of abundance" but now "we have scarcity" because of higher grocery prices.

Schumer is promising a relentless focus on different costs throughout the year, from higher food prices because of monopolies to the current housing market, where studies show the average first-time buyer is now roughly age 40, the oldest on record.

"It's not only better Democratic candidates, but letting the whole country know — not just the blue states or the purple states — why Trump is causing them such anguish and such trouble," he said.

Divisive ME primary could spoil Dems' hopes

In no place has the animosity between the party's establishment and progressive base shown up more than in Maine, where Schumer is backing Mills in the Democratic primary over Platner, a political newcomer who is supported by independent Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and a constellation of more liberal groups.

The same lines have been drawn in Michigan, where a Sanders-backed contender, Abdul El-Sayed, a doctor, is running for the Democratic nomination against Rep. Haley Stevens, who has praised Schumer's leadership.

Platner, an oyster farmer, told USA TODAY late last year that opposing Schumer's leadership is "fairly paramount" for those wanting to take the party in a more progressive direction on issues such as Medicare for All.

Groups supporting Platner and El-

Sayed say Senate Democratic leaders caved on the shutdown and are ducking other fights, too. They point out that Schumer wasn't whipping votes, for instance, on opposing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency's budget ahead of a critical Senate vote, a move that recent surveys show 93% of Democratic voters favor.

Groups such as the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, an influential activist organization supporting Platner, point out that Schumer doesn't have the best track record leveraging the Pine Tree State. In 2020, the Democratic leader put significant resources behind Maine House Speaker Sara Gideon, who ultimately lost to Collins by about 8 percentage points.

"Schumer's hand-picked candidates have famously lost swing race after swing race," Adam Green, the organization's co-founder, said. "That's because he's a creature of the system voters despise, spends his time with big corporate donors and is not equipped to recognize the shake-up-the-system economic populists who voters want to elect."

Third Way and other centrist-aligned Democratic groups warn against going too far left on ICE and other issues, however. In a Jan. 13 memo, the group said calls to abolish the immigration agency risk "squandering one of the clearest opportunities in years" for meaningful reforms to the agency and give Republicans the fight on their terms.

Maine and Michigan "are the two states that I think Democrats have the most to worry about through the primaries that poor nominee choices could endanger those seats," said de la Fuente, the Third Way analyst. "Democrats would be wise to look at the people running in their primaries and try to choose a commonsense moderate."

Asked if these messy primary campaigns could alienate the base and benefit the GOP down the line, Schumer said Democrats are united, particularly on the issue of cost, "from one end of the party to the other." He avoided weighing in when pressed on intraparty challenges.

"We have to keep our Democratic states. We're doing a good job of that, and we have to win the four battleground states," Schumer said. "I believe we will win Maine."

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