The 2020 U.S. Senatorial Race for Maine: A Brief Study

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Abstract

Over the course of 23 years, United States Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) has been able to successfully walk a unique line of non-partisanship. However, following her vote to confirm Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the United States Supreme Court in 2017, and her vote to acquit President Trump of his impeachment charges in early 2020, Susan Collins placed herself in an incredibly precarious situation. Pundits and analysts were convinced that this election would turn into a referendum on Susan Collins (Lyall 2020). Meanwhile, her opponent, the current Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives, Sara Gideon, consistently led in the polls and worked off the momentum gained from the success of the U.S. House Democrats in the 2018 midterms. And yet, Susan Collins stunned the nation by defeating Gideon. This paper evaluates and analyses what possible causes led to this outcome, from negative campaign tactics, to candidate quality and level of partisanship. Ultimately, this paper finds that Collins' victory was primarily due to her ability to adjust and adapt her level of partisanship when needed.

Introduction

One of the most contentious, antagonistic, and expensive campaigns for a seat in the United States Senate came to an end on November 4th, 2020, after Democratic candidate Sara Gideon conceded the race to the incumbent GOP Senator, Susan Collins (McCausland and Gregorian 2020). One of many battleground states in the ultimate race for control of the Senate, Maine was one seat in particular the Democrats believed they could turn blue, based off polling that showed Gideon in the lead since the start of 2020 (FiveThirtyEight 2020). Meanwhile, Senator Collins ranked the least popular U.S. Senator in the country, with disapproval ratings among Mainers at 52 percent (Ohm 2020b). Financially, Gideon more than doubled the amount Collins raised, coming in at nearly $70 million. $120 million was spent between the two candidates on attack ads alone (Sharp and Whittle 2020). However, despite Gideon and the Democrats' best efforts, Collins managed to pull through with 51.2 percent of the vote (Piper 2020b). The purpose of this paper will be to evaluate and understand the evidence that led to this outcome. It will start by briefly examining the rapid political, social, and economic changes over the course of the last six years before identifying what was argued to be at stake for this election. Next, this paper will review relevant academic literature that explores whether negative campaigning, candidate quality, or partisanship had any success in influencing voters. This paper will conclude that ultimately, Collins was able to defeat Gideon primarily because of her unique ability to distance herself from her party, the GOP, as needed.

The Last Six Years

November 2014 was the last time Collins faced re-election as the U.S. Senator for Maine, where she easily defeated her opponent with 67 percent of the vote (Ballotpedia 2014). Under the Obama administration, the next two years would see the national unemployment rate drop to 4.7 percent (Jackson 2020), the United States signing onto the Paris Climate Agreement (Phillips et. al 2016), and successfully negotiate the Iran Nuclear Deal (The New York Times 2015). However, after Donald Trump was elected the 45th president in 2016, the trajectory of America's domestic and foreign policies would take a sharp 180 degrees.

The Trump administration pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement (Johnson 2019) and the Iran Nuclear Deal (Landler 2018). Fear over threats of domestic terrorism dramatically increased after white supremacists and neo-Nazis with tiki torches marched through Charlottesville, Virginia while chanting "white power" (Murphy 2017), which President Trump called "very fine people" (Gray 2017). Police brutality against Black Americans, and discussions of sexual misconduct and assault in the workplace would transform into global movements (Illouz 2020). President Trump would nominate and confirm three Supreme Court Justices in just four years (Kumar 2020). Finally, the outbreak of a novel coronavirus in China would spread into a global pandemic, bringing the world to a halt in March of 2020. It has since claimed the lives of over 485,000 Americans to date (The New York Times 2021).

The Campaign Trail

A lot has changed in six years. And it would be evident to Susan Collins that the stakes of this re-election campaign could not be higher. Collins would end up spending five times what she spent in 2014 (Messenger 2020), because she would be forced to balance her messaging in order to draw support from both Trump Republicans and Biden-voting 'Lincoln Project Republicans.'

Senator Collins made two decisions that would set the foundation for Gideon's campaign against her: she voted to confirm Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, and in addition, voted to acquit former President Trump during his first impeachment trial. (Steinhauer 2020). Gideon shot at Collins' vote for acquittal by tweeting: "The only thing Trump learned from impeachment is that Senator Collins isn't going to hold him accountable" (Gideon 2020). This message set the foundation for the Gideon campaign. By siding with Collins' Republican colleagues on these critical matters, Gideon wanted Mainers to see that Senator Collins would not stand up to President Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, furthering the urgent need for Democrats to take back control of the White House and the Senate (Sharp 2020). This urgency in messaging would be displayed through a "barrage of anti-Collins ads portraying her in the pocket of big business, and timid in the face of President Donald Trump" (Everett 2020b). This was the message: Gideon was not running against Collins; Maine was running against Trump.

However, Collins was not afraid to hit back at Gideon. Her campaign pushed the message that Gideon was not "authentic" and put more simply, "not Susan Collins." Collins, in comparison, was a "Caribou-born politician" and had never missed a single Senate vote (Messenger 2020). On the other hand, Gideon was born and raised in Rhode Island, which caused Collins to believe this created "a big difference in our knowledge of the state [Maine]" (Burgess 2020). Collins even went so far as to accuse Gideon of defamation: "she'll say or do anything to try to win" (Everett 2020b).

As mentioned above, $120 million was spent between the Gideon and Collins campaigns alone, a 3000 percent increase in political ad spending since 2014, according to Bangor Daily News (Messenger 2020). Political groups ended up spending over $135 million on ads in Maine alone (Foran 2020).

Outside of the Gideon and Collins campaigns, political action committees would join in the bombardment of negative campaigning on social media. EMILY'S List (a PAC that supports Democratic women running for office) lambasted Collins for voting to confirm Kavanaugh (2020). The Lincoln Project (a PAC founded by Republicans against Trump) also joined in, tweeting that "Susan Collins could have stood up for us. But she's not with us. She's with them," 'them' in reference to Trump Republicans. (2020). At the other end of the political spectrum, The National Senatorial Republican Committee tweeted accusations against Gideon for wanting to "defund the police" (NRSC 2020), due to the Black Lives Matter movement increasingly calling for lawmakers to do so. The sculpture of a donkey being burned down in Bowdoinham was a symbolic display of how the Maine Senate race was "the most negative in the country," as labelled by the Wesleyan Media Project (Finney Boylan 2020).

Negative Campaigning

Did this extraordinarily high level of campaign negativity affect the outcome? Political scientists took a closer look at a 1998 midterm election in order to understand the implications of negative campaigning on voter mobilization. Jackson and Carsey found that academics previously believed attack advertising and "mud-slinging" depressed voter turnout, particularly amongst Independent voters. This idea is referred to as the "negativity-demobilization hypothesis" (2007, 182). However, a review of academic literature suggests that scholars are increasingly beginning to find that negative campaigns actually *motivate* citizens to vote, creating the "negativity-mobilization hypothesis" (2007, 183). Garramone et al. argue that negative political ads "aid voters in feeling more confident about their voting decisions" (2007, 183), while Sigelman and Kugler further stipulate that "a loud barrage of brutal attacks" are necessary to "break through the public's wall of inattention" (Jackson and Carsey 2007, 183). Finkel and Geer find that negative ads produce stronger emotions, which propel responses in campaigning and voting from citizens instead of positive ads (Jackson and Carsey 2007, 183). This was certainly the case for one Mainer who supported Joe Biden for President but opted to vote for neither Gideon nor Collins for Senator. He explained to Ellen Barry for *The New York Times*, "the approach on the ads and campaigning was disgusting enough that I didn't want to vote for the person anymore, even though I agree with the policy stances" (2020).

Jackson and Carsey's subsequent examination conclude that arguments made supporting the negativity-mobilization hypothesis appear to be more substantial than those opposed (2007, 191). They conclude that negative ads are positive to democracy as an institution at large, because they contributed to voter turnout (2007, 192). Voter turnout in Maine for 2020 was already set to be a historic high, with over 70 percent of eligible voters reportedly said to be casting ballots (Murphy, 2020). In the end, roughly 78 percent of eligible Maine voters participated in the 2020 elections (Piper 2020a). Over 828,000 votes were cast compared to 616,996 total votes cast in the 2014 Senatorial race (Ballotpedia 2020; see also Ballotpedia 2014; Piper 2020a). It cannot

conclusively be said that these numbers were due to the levels of negativity influencing voter turnout. On the other hand, this "over-negativity" may have driven voters to turnout in Collins' defence instead, as one voter told Ellen Barry: "You don't need to tell us who Collins is… We've seen her for 30 years. She's had a relationship that was before Trump, and it's going to last after Trump" (2020). Another voter said, "Mainers reward someone who shows up, and she [Collins] does show up" (Barry 2020).

Candidate Quality

Supplementary to the effectiveness of negative campaigning is the phenomena of 'high-quality candidates' and the 'incumbent-quality advantage.' Pastine et al. further explore why incumbents are typically re-elected to the U.S. Congress (2015, 32). "Superior media exposure, franking privileges, fundraising advantages, and indirect office holder benefits like deterrence of high-quality challengers" are some of the advantages that incumbents enjoy, all of which apply to Collins (2015, 33). Arguably, Gideon was a 'high-quality challenger,' as Duquette et al. simply define a quality candidate as anyone who has had prior success in winning elective office (2015, 194). Gideon served in the Maine House of Representatives for seven years, half of which were as Speaker, which placed her in the role of being "part wheedler, part enforcer, part compromiser" (Lyall 2020). Further, it also takes unique circumstances for a high-quality challenger like Gideon to emerge, as Hall and Snyder allude, "It takes the right mix of incumbent vulnerability and national political climate" (2015, 494).

The only empirical evidence was seen through exit polling which ultimately showed that "strong leadership" in candidate qualities was the most important factor. 81 percent of Collins' voters believed her to be a strong leader, whereas only 12 percent of Gideon's voters sought leadership as her strongest quality. For Democrats, "good judgement" and Gideon's "ability to unite the country," were the most pertinent traits applicable (CNN, n.d.). However, there are always gaps in exit polls, and so the only way to conclusively determine if the phenomena of 'high quality candidates' and 'the incumbency advantage' had actually affected this election would require further research to produce empirical evidence.

Partisanship

Throughout her entire career, Collins has been able to pave a unique path of non-partisanship when needed. "Collins built her brand to withstand the winds no matter which way they blew" (Everett 2020b). In previous elections, Collins won due to a distinct voter coalition made of Republicans, Democrats and Independents (Nilsen 2020). To succeed in 2020, she had to find a way to navigate the massive polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Therefore, her campaign's message focused not on partisanship but on Collins' record as an "experienced, proven leader" (Nilsen 2020). Nowhere in the biography section on her campaign website are the words "Republican" or "Conservative" mentioned. Instead, the 'Meet Susan' section reiterates her record in the U.S. Senate: "A proven leader who is respected by colleagues on both sides of the aisle," "consistently ranked the most bipartisan senator," and "recognized by her colleagues as one of the hardest working members of Congress" ("Meet Susan" 2002).

Partisan messaging is critical when it serves in the candidate's best interest. Partisan messaging in campaigns will vary depending on "local partisan leanings, national partisan conditions, and the ad sponsor's identity," (Bergbower et. al 2015, 334). These scholars also find that candidates need to "appeal to the median voter," which has arguably always been Collins' target voters. Bergbower et. al all write that "the important issues and actors on the national scene can set the backdrop," and that "partisan messaging has more purchase in elections where the party is "favoured" by economic trends, presidential approval, and particular events" (2015, 335). In this campaign, 'particular events' included both the Kavanaugh confirmation, President Trump's first acquittal in addition to his plummeting approval ratings both nationally and in Maine. In addition, the economy was also turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Collins' support for an economic stimulus bill from Congress. Therefore, the current political climate did not favour the Republican Party led by Donald Trump. Thus, it was vital for Collins to distance herself from any mention or association with the Republican Party and Donald Trump if she wanted to retain the median voters' trust. In order to win this election, Collins had to gain back the trust of Democrats and 'Lincoln Project Republicans' who previously voted for her but have since favoured Gideon. Evidently, throughout the campaign, Collins refused to reveal who she would personally vote for president; a question Gideon repeatedly attempted to ruse Collins into revealing. Instead, Collins would respond with stating that Mainers didn't need her advice on whom to support (Lyall 2020).

The opportunity to gain back Mainers' trust and further defend Collins' record as a true non-partisan presented itself just weeks before Election Day. Although Collins previously sided with her Republican colleagues on both the Kavanaugh confirmation and President Trump's first impeachment, she strayed once more from the party line on one extraordinarily pertinent and timely issue: the vote to fill late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's' Supreme Court seat. Previously, when a vacancy opened on the Supreme Court in 2016, the Republican-controlled Senate delayed the confirmation hearings for President Obama's nominee, Judge Merrick Garland, arguing that it was too close to Election Day. Instead, they argued that the incoming president should be the one to fill the seat, not outgoing President Obama, (Liptak and Stolberg 2020). Garland was nominated 237 days before Election Day 2016. Just weeks before Election Day, following Justice Ginsburg's death in September of 2020, Republicans in the Senate switched gears. They decided that not only they would go ahead with the confirmation hearings for Trump's Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett, but they would also go on to confirm Barrett one week before Election Day 2020 (Liptak and Stolberg 2020). In the end, Collins and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) stood alone in their dissent against Amy Coney Barrett's confirmation to the Supreme Court during an election year. (Everett 2020a).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to understand how Susan Collins was able to win her bid for re-election. The political, social, and economic landscape over the last six years had drastically changed in America following the change in leadership from President Obama to President Trump. This paper reviewed academic literature to understand whether or not negative campaigning, certain candidate qualities, or partisanship influenced the outcome of the election.

Primarily, it found that Collins' fluidity in her partisanship allowed her to defeat Gideon. As a saving grace, voting to not confirm Judge Amy Coney Barrett provided Collins with one last chance to convince Mainers that she was still their "proven leader" who stepped up when it mattered ("Meet Susan" 2020). Gideon responded to Collin's dissent against Coney Barrett's nomination as "nothing more than a political calculation" (Ohm 2020a). Ultimately, this vote proved to be a political resurrection for Susan Collins. Although Collins did not enjoy the advantage typically given to incumbents, the benefit of distancing herself from her own party paid off.

The implications of Collins' fluidity in partisanship were directly seen over a month and a half later on January 6, 2021, where five people; including one police officer were killed during an insurrection led by Trump supporters at the United States Capitol. The outgoing President was impeached for the second time on January 13, by the U.S. House of Representatives, for the charge of "Incitement of Insurrection" (Fandos 2021). By February 13, 2021, the former President was acquitted with seven Republican's voting to convict: Collins among them (Hughes and Ballhaus 2021). Going forward, if Collins is to maintain favourability within the Senate, and if she should seek re-election in 2026, her "country over party" attitude must continue to guide her decisions.

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