

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

MAY 21, 2026

VOLUME 10, NO. 10



IFAPAC

INSURANCE & FINANCIAL ADVISORS
POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE

Maine Senate: Corner of the Country, Center of the Battleground

By Jacob Rubashkin

Maine should be Democrats' best pickup opportunity on a difficult Senate map. The only state to vote for Vice President Kamala Harris in 2024 that is represented by a Republican, Maine is a critical part of the Democratic path back to the majority.

But standing in their way is an immovable force that has beguiled the party for decades: Republican Susan Collins.

Since winning her first race in 1996 and claiming the mantle of trailblazing Maine Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, Collins has bulldozed her way to re-election cycle after cycle, despite Democrats recruiting a variety of well-credentialed and well-funded candidates to run against her.

This year, national Democrats planned to run a ringer against Collins: outgoing Gov. Janet Mills, a political institution and the only Democrat to win a statewide office in Maine in two decades.

But national Democrats didn't count on the sudden arrival of Graham Platner, the gruff Marine and oysterman whose checkered past has thus far been outweighed by an audacious campaign that has taken the Pine Tree State by storm.

Platner is a wildcard in a year where Democrats need an inside straight to take back the Senate. Win or lose, the previously unknown progressive is now a critical player in the fight for the Senate majority this fall.

The Lay of the Land

Maine's Democratic lean belies a strong independent streak that manifests itself up and down the ballot.

Democratic presidential candidates have won every election since 1992: most recently Harris won by 7 points, 52-45 percent, over Donald Trump. But third-party candidates often do well, winning 7 percent of the vote in the 2016 and 2000 elections. Maine was by far Ross Perot's best state in both his 1992 and 1996 independent presidential bids, casting 30 percent and 14 percent of its votes for the Texas businessman.

Maine has an independent senator, Angus King, who previously won two gubernatorial terms as an independent. King now caucuses with the Democratic Party but won his first race in a true three-person contest in 2012.

And of all the states that held Senate races in 2016 or 2020, Maine was the only one to vote for one party for president but the other party for Senate, when it re-elected Collins despite also voting for Joe Biden in 2020.

The oldest and whitest state in the Union, Maine is divided geographically and politically between north and south — or alternatively, between the areas within 10 miles of the water and the

Continued on page 5

2026 Senate Ratings

Toss-up (3)

MI Open (Peters, D)

Ossoff (D-Ga.)

NC Open (Tillis, R)

Tilt Democratic (1)

NH Open (Shaheen, D)

Tilt Republican (2)

Collins (R-Maine)

Husted (R-Ohio)

Lean Democratic

Lean Republican (1)

Sullivan (R-Ak.)

Likely Democratic (1)

MN Open (Smith, DFL)

Likely Republican (5)

IA Open (Ernst, R)

MT Open (Daines, R)

Cornyn (R-Texas)

Graham (R-S.C.)

Ricketts (R-Neb.)

Solid Democratic (9)

IL Open (Durbin, D)

Booker (D-N.J.)

Coons (D-Del.)

Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)

Lujan (D-N.M.)

Markey (D-Mass.)

Merkley (D-Ore.)

Reed (D-R.I.)

Warner (D-Va.)

Solid Republican (13)

AL Open (Tuberville, R)

KY Open (McConnell, R)

LA Open (Cassidy, R)

OK Open (Armstrong, R)

WY Open (Lummis, R)

Capito (R-W.V.)

Cotton (R-Ark.)

Hagerty (R-Tenn.)

Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)

Marshall (R-Kan.)

Moody (R-Fl.)

Risch (R-Idaho)

Rounds (R-S.D.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

CALENDAR

May 26	Texas Primary Runoffs
June 2	California, Iowa, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, South Dakota Primaries
June 3	NBA Finals Begin
June 9	Maine, North Dakota, Nevada, South Carolina Primaries

Report Shorts

New Jersey's 7th District. GOP Rep. Tom Kean Jr. has not been seen in public or private for more than two months as he deals with an unspecified medical condition. Kean's staff insists that the congressman will be back to work shortly and continues to send out communications in his name, but there's no indication of when he will actually return or where he currently is. While Democrats have a competitive primary to sort through, Republicans need their candidate to be present and on the trail in order to hold this swing seat. Move from Tilt Republican to Toss-up.

Pennsylvania's 10th District. In 2024, Republican Rep. Scott Perry narrowly beat Democrat Janelle Stelson, a longtime local news anchor. This cycle, Perry faces a more difficult environment with Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro likely to put up a strong performance at the top of the ticket. Stelson is running again and had a \$1 million cash-on-hand advantage over Perry as of March 31. An April 20-23 poll from Normington Petts for the Stelson campaign found her leading 51-46 percent. Move from Tilt Republican to Toss-up.

Texas Senate. President Trump endorsed state Attorney General Ken Paxton in the GOP primary, snubbing Sen. John Cornyn and frustrating Senate GOP leadership in Washington, DC. That likely seals Cornyn's fate in the May 26 runoff and will make him the second senator this cycle to lose their primary after Trump endorsed their opponent. Paxton will make holding the seat more expensive for Republicans, though party leaders are still confident in his ability to defeat Democratic nominee state Rep. James Talarico in the fall. Likely Republican.

Virginia's 7th District. Even though the Democratic gerrymander of Virginia was squashed by the state Supreme Court, Rep. Eugene Vindman's 7th District remains difficult for Republicans. National Strategists don't see this as a top tier pickup opportunity. Move from Lean Democratic to Likely Democratic.

Washington's 3rd District. Democratic Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez has ongoing issues with her base. That won't prevent her from getting through the top-two primary, but it could make her race against state Sen. John Braun a little less comfortable in a district where Trump finished ahead of Kamala Harris by 3 points. Move from Tilt Democratic to Toss-up.



2026 House Ratings

Toss-Up (4D, 10R)

AZ 1 (Open; Schweikert, R) IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R) OH 1 (Landsman, D) VA 2 (Kiggans, R)
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R) MI 7 (Barrett, R) PA 7 (Mackenzie, R) WA 3 (Perez, D)*
CO 8 (Evans, R) NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)# PA 10 (Perry, R)#
FL 25 (Wasserman Schultz, D) NY 17 (Lawler, R) TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)

Tilt Democratic (5D, 2R)

CA 13 (Gray, D) TX 28 (Cuellar, D)
CA 45 (Tran, D)
CA 48 (Open; Issa, R)
NE 2 (Open; Bacon, R)
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)
NY 4 (Gillen, D)

Tilt Republican (2D, 4R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)
FL 22 (Open; Frankel, D)
MI 10 (Open; James, R)
OH 9 (Kaptur, D)
PA 8 (Bresnahan, R)
WI 3 (Van Orden, R)

Lean Democratic (8D)

IN 1 (Mrvan, D) NY 19 (Riley, D)
MI 8 (McDonald Rivet, D) NY 3 (Suoizzi, D)
NH 1 (Open; Pappas, D)
NJ 9 (Pou, D)
NV 1 (Titus, D)
NV 3 (Lee, D)

Lean Republican (2D, 4R)

FL 14 (Castor, D) VA 1 (Wittman, R)
IA 3 (Nunn, R)
MI 4 (Huizenga, R)
NC 1 (Davis, D)
PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)

Likely Democratic (8D)

CA 6 (Open; Bera, D) NV 4 (Horsford, D)
CA 21 (Costa, D) PA 17 (Deluzio, D)
NH 2 (Goodlander, D) VA 7 (Vindman, D)#
MI 3 (Scholten, D)
MN 2 (Open; Craig, DFL)

Likely Republican (3D, 12R)

AK AL (Begich, R) MT 1 (Open; Zinke, R)
AZ 2 (Crane, R) NC 11 (Edwards, R)
CO 3 (Hurd, R) TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)
CO 5 (Crank, R) TX 23 (Vacant; Gonzales, R)
FL 7 (Mills, R) TX 35 (Open; Casar, D)
FL 9 (Soto, D)
FL 13 (Luna, R)
FL 27 (Salazar, R)
IA 2 (Open; Hinson, R)
ME 2 (Open; Golden, D)

	GOP	DEM
Solid	188	183
Likely/Lean/Tilt	27	23
Total	215	206
Toss-up	14	
Needed for majority	218	

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

Inside Elections

with Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

609 H Street NE, 4th Floor
Washington, DC, 20002
202-546-2822



Nathan L. Gonzales
Editor & Publisher
nathan@insideelections.com
@nathanlgonzales



Jacob Rubashkin
Deputy Editor
jacob@insideelections.com
@jacobrubashkin



Bradley Wascher
Contributing Data Editor
bradley@insideelections.com
@bradwascher

Nicholas Demba
Intern

Will Taylor
Production Artist
will@insideelections.com

Stuart Rothenberg
Founding Editor
stu@insideelections.com

Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Oregon Primary Results

Alabama Senate. The race to replace Sen. Tommy Tuberville is headed to overtime after no candidate received a majority of the vote. Rep. Barry Moore had Trump's endorsement and backing from the Club for Growth but finished with 39 percent. Former Navy SEAL Jared Hudson narrowly outpaced state Attorney General Steve Marshall for a second spot in the June 16 runoff, 26-25 percent. Democrats Everett Wess and Dakarai Larriett will head to a runoff. Solid Republican.



Jared Hudson

Courtesy Hudson Campaign

Alabama's 1st District. Alabama's congressional map is in a state of flux. The state says it is now using a map drawn in 2023 that includes just one Black-plurality district instead of the map it used in 2024, which contained two such districts. The state voided the primary election in the three affected districts. But the court that previously struck down the 2023 map has said it will still hold a hearing later this week to determine which map the state will ultimately be required to use. The upshot is that tonight's GOP primary results in the open 1st District won't count, but there's a chance that the same candidates will face off against each other in an August special primary — potentially under the same lines as in 2024. Solid Republican.

Kentucky Senate. Rep. Andy Barr easily pushed past former state attorney general Daniel Cameron, 61-31 percent, after securing an endorsement from President Donald Trump a few weeks ago. Cameron had entered the race with high name ID and a polling advantage but Barr's fundraising strength and energetic campaign pulled him into a tie with Cameron by springtime. Trump's intervention — endorsing Barr and pushing the third credible candidate, Nate Morris, out of the race — sealed the deal for the Lexington congressman. Democrats nominated former state Rep. Charles Booker for a second time. He lost handily to Sen. Rand Paul four years ago. Solid Republican.

Kentucky's 4th District. Rep. Thomas Massie is no stranger to breaks from party orthodoxy. But his vote against the president's reconciliation bill last year and his push to force the Justice Department to release its documents on Jeffrey Epstein was too much for Trump. The president's team recruited former Navy SEAL Ed Gallrein to run against Massie and directed his political allies to spend tens of millions of dollars on Gallrein's behalf. Massie couldn't hold on, losing to Gallrein, 55-45 percent. The result is the latest flex of Trump's continued hold over the GOP. He's now helped topple two GOP incumbents, Massie and Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, and his refusal to endorse a third, Texas Rep. Dan Crenshaw, likely contributed to his defeat as well. Even as the president's standing among the American people continues to explore new lows, his strength within the GOP is unparalleled. Solid Republican.

Kentucky's 6th District. This district could emerge on the House battleground if the political environment continues to worsen for Republicans. Right now, Ralph Alvarado is the heavy favorite to win the general election after dispatching state Rep. Ryan Dotson in the GOP primary, 57-26 percent. Alvarado was endorsed by Trump. But Democrats are also eager to contest the seat. Former federal prosecutor Zach Dembo emerged victorious in that primary with 40 percent over state Rep. Cherlynn Stevenson (32 percent). Solid Republican.

Oregon Governor. Former state House minority leader Christine Drazan won the GOP primary with 41 percent over Ed Diehl (33 percent) and former Portland Trail Blazer Chris Dudley (17 percent) and others. Drazan lost a competitive race to Kotek by 3 points in 2022 and Dudley lost a gubernatorial race by 1.5 points in 2010. Even though Oregon hasn't elected a Republican governor since 1982, Kotek's unpopularity is giving the GOP some hope.

Pennsylvania's 1st District. Bob Harvie won the Democratic nomination 65-35 percent over Lucia Simonelli and will face GOP Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick in the general election. Fitzpatrick had a whopping \$7.3 million to \$604,000 cash advantage on April 29, but the suburban Philadelphia district voted narrowly for Kamala Harris over Donald Trump in 2024 and the political environment is much worse for the GOP. Lean Republican.

Pennsylvania's 3rd District. Chris Rabb (45 percent) defeated Sharif Street (29 percent) and Dr. Ala Stanford (24 percent) to win the Democratic nomination. That's critical in the race to replace Democratic Rep. Dwight Evans in the Philadelphia seat where Harris received 88 percent. Rabb was the progressive choice in the race and had endorsements from New York Rep.



Chris Rabb

Courtesy Rabb Campaign

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Socialists of America. Solid Democratic.

Pennsylvania's 7th. National Democrats waded into this contentious primary a few weeks ago when the DCCC anointed firefighter Bob Brooks as its preferred candidate over Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure, former federal prosecutor Ryan Crosswell, and former energy executive Carol Obando-Derstine. That ruffled a few feathers but ultimately Brooks prevailed with 41 percent, boosted along the way by endorsements from Gov. Josh Shapiro and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. GOP Rep. Ryan Mackenzie is a top Democratic target this fall. Toss-up.

IE

Georgia Results: Primary Voters Narrow Their Choices

By Nicholas Demba

In battleground Georgia, many marquee races of the night proceeded to runoffs to be decided on June 16. While the Peach State is not set to host any competitive House races this fall and any post-*Callais* redistricting will not take effect until 2028, primary voters selected nominees in a handful of safe open seats as well as a slate of competitive statewide races.

Senate. Jon Ossoff (D), elected 2020/2021 runoff (51%). In the GOP primary, Rep. Mike Collins finished first with 40 percent and will advance to the runoff while former Tennessee Volunteers football coach Derek Dooley (30 percent) notched the second spot over Rep. Buddy Carter (25 percent). The winner will face Ossoff in November in one of the most expensive Senate races in the country. Dooley leaned on the backing of Gov. Brian Kemp and support from the Atlanta metro region to advance. All three candidates have privately lobbied President Donald Trump for his endorsement, though he has declined to endorse in the contest so far. While Republicans started this cycle with high hopes to unseat Ossoff, Kemp's decision not to run combined with a messy primary now set to extend for another four weeks has diminished the GOP's chances. Additionally, Ossoff has amassed a sizable war chest for the general election with more than \$32 million dollars in cash on hand as of April 29. Tossup.

Governor. Open; Brian Kemp (R), term-limited. In the race for governor, both sides hosted competitive primaries. On the GOP side, Trump-backed Lt. Gov. Burt Jones (38 percent) and health care executive Rick Jackson (33 percent) advanced to a runoff. Though Jones had been the initial frontrunner, Jackson jolted this race with his unexpected entry in February, and the billionaire has since spent more than \$80 million of his own money on the campaign. The result was the second time in a row Trump has failed to clear the field for his preferred gubernatorial candidate in Georgia, after Kemp soundly defeated former Sen. David Perdue four years ago. With the third and fourth place candidates, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (15 percent) and state Attorney General Chris Carr (12 percent), hailing from the more establishment wing of the party, Jones faces the tough task of cobbling together a winning coalition in June. The next four weeks of this race are likely to be a continued slugfest between the two rivals.

Meanwhile, the Democratic primary saw former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms successfully avoid a runoff, notching 56 percent of the vote, far ahead of her closest competitors. Her win was driven by a strong showing in Atlanta proper and with Black voters. While Bottoms is likely to face attacks around her tenure as mayor and decision not

to run for a second term, Democrats are hoping that infighting on the Republican side and a favorable national environment will allow them to flip the governor's mansion for the first time in 28 years. Tilt Republican.

1st District (Coastal Georgia) Open; Buddy Carter, R, running for Senate. Trump 58%. Insurance executive Jim Kingston avoided a runoff in the Republican primary, clinching 52 percent of the vote. His father, Jack Kingston, represented coastal Georgia for 22 years. The younger Kingston's campaign was buoyed by an endorsement from Trump in April. He will be the heavy favorite in November to replace Carter. Solid Republican.

9th District (Northeastern Georgia and northeastern Atlanta exurbs) Andrew Clyde, R, re-elected 69%. Trump 67%. Republican Rep. Andrew Clyde (76 percent) fended off a challenge from Gainesville mayor Sam Couvillon (12 percent). Hall County Commissioner Greg Poole finished in third with 12 percent. Couvillon had outraised Clyde and targeted him for the lack of money he brought home to the district. Still, Clyde's incumbency and the backing of Trump was more than enough to avoid a runoff. Solid Republican.

10th District (Eastern Atlanta exurbs and Athens) Open; Mike Collins, R, running for Senate. Trump 60%. GOP voters nominated State Rep. Houston Gaines in the race to replace Rep. Mike Collins with 67 percent of the vote. He defeated film executive Ryan Millsap (18 percent), who self-funded his campaign. Gaines was the candidate to beat and further solidified his advantage with an endorsement from President Trump. Solid Republican.

11th District (Northwestern Atlanta suburbs and exurbs) Open; Barry Loudermilk, R, not seeking re-election. Trump 61%. Surgeon John Cowan (43 percent) and former congressional aide Rob Adkerson (22 percent) secured two runoff slots as they vie to succeed outgoing Republican Rep. Barry Loudermilk. Whoever wins the runoff should be a lock to hold this seat in November. Solid Republican.

13th District (Western and southern Atlanta suburbs) Vacant following the death of David Scott, D. Harris 71%. What was set to be one of the Democratic primaries this year centering on generational change was flipped on its head after Rep. David Scott passed away on April 22. Scott had been facing a crowded field of challengers focusing the race on his advanced age and declining health. Now in an open seat race, state Rep. Jasmine Clark finished well ahead with 56 percent. The separate special election to fill the seat for the remainder of the year will be held on July 28. Marcy Scott, the late Representative's daughter, is among those running. Clark is not running in the special election. Solid Democratic. **IE**

Tennessee Redistricting: GOP Seeks 9-0 after SCOTUS goes 6-3

By Jacob Rubashkin

Wasting little time after the Supreme Court defanged what remained of the Voting Rights Act, Tennessee Republicans passed a map designed to elect nine Republican members of Congress this fall. The Volunteer State's delegation is currently split 8-1 in favor of Republicans, with Democrat Steve Cohen of Memphis as the odd man out.

The new map dismantles Cohen's majority-Black 9th District by parceling Democratic voters out into neighboring, GOP-friendly seats.

Under the new map, Tennessee has no majority-Black seats. Expected legal challenges could shed light on just how reduced in power the Voting Rights Act is following the court's 6-3 decision in *Callais vs. Louisiana* last week.

The legislature also re-opened candidate filing until May 15. All nine districts on the new map are rated Solid Republican.

1st District. The 1st remains unchanged under the new map, and Rep.

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4

Diana Harshbarger doesn't have any challengers in the primary, where she received just 19 percent in her initial 2020 election.

2nd District. The 2nd remains unchanged under the new map. Rep. Tim Burchett is running unopposed in the GOP primary.

3rd District. The 3rd remains largely unchanged under the new map and is still anchored by Chattanooga. Rep. Chuck Fleischmann is the presumptive GOP nominee.

4th District. The new 4th District reaches into Davidson County (Nashville), picking up Democratic voters previously placed in the 5th and 6th districts. As a result, the district gets moderately less friendly to the GOP; its Baseline score decreases from R+39 to R+18. That's more than enough of a cushion for the GOP nominee. Rep. Scott DesJarlais's personal baggage almost always ensures he has a primary challenger, and with 33 percent new constituents he may have to take the primary more seriously. Democrat Mike Cortese has switched from running in the 5th to the 4th.

5th District. Currently on the edge of the House battleground, the 5th District is radically reshaped in the new map. The new seat, which pulls in pieces of the old 5th (17 percent), 7th (28 percent), 8th (22 percent) and 9th (32 percent) districts, begins in Memphis in the state's southwest corner, snakes north along the Mississippi River, and hangs a right turn at the Kentucky border, extending east to Montgomery and Williamson counties. It no longer includes any of Nashville. GOP Rep. Andy Ogles is the biggest beneficiary of any incumbent on the map. Not only does the new 5th pick up a few points of GOP performance, with a Baseline of R+17 compared to R+15 under the old map, but the map kneecaps both of his most worrisome opponents. Former commissioner of agriculture Charlie Hatcher, who is running against Ogles in the GOP primary, sees his home base in Williamson County drawn out of the district. And Ogles' likely general election opponent, Columbia Mayor Chaz Molder, likewise sees half of Columbia and surrounding

Maury County drawn out of the district.

6th District. While the core of the 6th District stays intact, roughly 40 percent of voters under the new map will be new to the district, which reaches further into Nashville than previously. Politically, the most significant change is that state Rep. Johnny Garrett, one of the leading candidates for the GOP nomination, sees his legislative seat excised from the district. That may lead to him dropping out, which he hinted at while expressing support for the new map. Former Rep. Van Hilleary is the other major candidate running in the GOP primary to succeed Rep. John Rose, who is running for governor.

7th District. The new 7th is a more compact seat that includes the western half of Nashville as well as the city's western and northern suburbs. Previously the 7th ran north to south and touched both Kentucky and Alabama, and included the city of Franklin in Williamson County.

Politically, the 7th gains a few points of GOP performance, with its Baseline increasing from R+18 to R+20. Rep. Matt Van Epps, the newest member of the delegation, won a competitive special election late last year but should have an easier time winning a full term this fall.

8th District. The 8th District absorbs much of northeast Memphis, and though the new district contains significantly more Democrats than before, it remains quite friendly to the GOP, with a new Baseline of R+20. That's more than enough for Rep. David Kustoff to win re-election.

9th District. The current 9th District, a compact Solid Democratic seat based in Memphis, is effectively demolished by the new map. In its place is a seat that stretches east in a thin line from South Memphis, 250 miles along the Mississippi and Alabama borders, and then shoots north to take in the eastern half of Williamson County. The new district is just 31 percent Black, compared to 61 percent under the old map. Its Baseline is an uncompetitive R+15 and it would have voted for Donald Trump in 2024 by 21 points. Cohen has decided not to seek re-election. **IE**

Continued from page 1

remainder of the state. Democrats perform best in the more densely populated areas of York and Cumberland counties in the Portland region, and also win in the coastal areas up through Hancock County. Republicans win everywhere else, including the more rural areas in western and northern Maine such as Aroostook (generally known as "The County" thanks to its size), and Penobscot (Bangor).

The split is visible across the state's two congressional districts. Though both are currently held by Democrats, in the 2024 presidential election, the Portland-based 1st District voted for Harris by 21 points while the northern Maine 2nd District voted for Trump by 9 points.

Maine allocates electoral votes by congressional district, so the 2nd District often attracts outsized national attention during presidential years, and will play host to a competitive open seat race this fall.

The Republican Stalwart

Collins, 73, was born a few miles shy of the Canadian border in Caribou, Maine, to a family deeply entrenched in Maine's history and politics. Both of her parents served as Caribou's mayor, her father and uncle served in the state Senate, and her family has operated a lumber mill in Aroostook County for 182 years.

A 1975 St. Lawrence University graduate, Collins worked in Washington, DC for Republican Bill Cohen in the House and later the Senate until 1987, when she returned to Maine to serve as Commissioner of the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation under

Gov. John "Jock" McKernan (the husband of her future colleague Sen. Olympia Snowe).

After brief stints in the Small Business Administration and as deputy state treasurer of Massachusetts, Collins ran for governor of Maine in



Susan Collins

1994. Though she won a crowded primary to become the first woman nominated for governor in the state, she lost a four-way general election to future colleague Angus King, placing third behind former Democratic Gov. Joe Brennan.

Two years later, after Cohen left his seat to become Secretary of Defense, Collins made her comeback bid. She won the primary with 55 percent after the *Boston Globe* reported on allegations that her opponent, John Hathaway, had sex with his family's 12-year-old babysitter in Alabama.

In the general election, Collins again faced Brennan, this time defeating him, 49-45 percent. She ran 19 points ahead of GOP presidential candidate Bob Dole in what is still her closest Senate race to date.

Continued on page 6

Continued from page 5

In 2002, Collins easily dispatched state Senate President Chellie Pingree, 58-42 percent. Pingree would go on to win a House seat in 2008, which she still holds (Pingree's daughter is running for governor this year). In 2008, Democrats rallied behind 2nd District Rep. Tom Allen in the hopes that the moderate, well-credentialed congressman who represented half of the state could capitalize on President George W. Bush's deep unpopularity to give Collins a fight. He couldn't, losing 61-38 percent as Collins carried every county in the state even while Barack Obama won it by 17 points.

Six years later, Democrats did not seriously contest Collins' seat. Former ACLU executive director Shenna Bellows (now Maine's secretary of state and also running for governor this year), was the sole candidate to run, losing 68-31 percent.

In 2020, Collins was a top target for Senate Democrats. The race was the most expensive in Maine history, as former state House Speaker Sara Gideon raised a record \$75 million and outside groups on both sides poured in \$70 million. Despite leading in polling for much of the year, Gideon lost by 9 points, 51-42 percent, in the biggest upset of the cycle as Biden carried the state by 9 points at the top of the ticket.

In the Senate, Collins is the chairwoman of the powerful Appropriations Committee. Her voting record has historically rated among the most moderate of her GOP colleagues; she was one of just a handful of GOP senators to vote to acquit President Bill Clinton in his impeachment trial and to convict Trump following his second impeachment. She also has taken high-profile votes against the repeal of Obamacare and against the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, and is one of just two GOP senators to support abortion rights along with Alaska's Lisa Murkowski.

Her longtime campaign team includes Larry McCarthy of MHW Media and pollster Hans Kaiser of Peak Insights.

The Democratic Upstart

Platner, 41, was born in Blue Hill, Maine, a town of then less than 2,000. His parents were politically active and well-off, and his grandfather was a celebrated architect who helped design Dulles Airport. Platner briefly attended the exclusive private Hotchkiss School but was expelled for truancy and finished high school at a private school in Bangor.

Platner eschewed college to join the Marines in 2004 and deployed to Iraq across three tours of duty. He separated in 2008 and began attending George Washington University, but left disillusioned after a year to re-enlist in the Maryland Army National Guard. That led to another tour in Afghanistan, after which he returned to Washington, DC in 2011. Platner has described the following five years as a particularly dark time for him that included heavy drinking, an inability to complete his degree, and a DUI arrest. It was also then when he began posting the unfiltered thoughts on Reddit that would later become a major campaign issue.

In 2017, Platner moved back to Maine, but briefly returned to Afghanistan in 2018 as a security contractor for the firm once known as

Blackwater. Since 2018, he has operated an oyster farm in Sullivan, 40 minutes from his Blue Hill hometown, that his mother's friend gave him to entice him back to Maine.

One Maine source told *Inside Elections* that the local Democratic Party had tried unsuccessfully to recruit Platner to run for a seat in the state legislature but he had rebuffed those advances. Last year, however, a group of labor leaders and local and national progressive operatives searching for a candidate to run against Collins found a 2020 video Platner had recorded for a local environmental group. Liking what they saw, the strategists recruited Platner to run for Senate.

The resultant campaign launch — complete with a slick video and *New York Times* exclusive — took the political world by storm. Platner raised \$1 million in his first week and quickly secured an important endorsement from Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

But in early October, CNN, the *Bangor Daily News*, and other outlets uncovered Platner's Reddit account and began reporting on the most offensive statements. The list was long: Platner disparaged police officers, called white people "racist and stupid," complained about the tipping habits of Black people, and said rape victims should "take some responsibility for themselves." He also called himself a communist and used slurs against gay people and people with disabilities, and reporters continue to this day to surface more of his explicit and off-color statements.

Platner said the posts — which in total span from 2009 to 2021 — largely came at a low point in his life and don't reflect who he is now. But his campaign appeared in free fall. His campaign manager, political director, finance director and treasurer all quit in quick succession. Then he admitted to having a tattoo of a Nazi "Totenkopf" symbol on his chest for two decades, claiming he believed it was an innocuous skull and crossbones until he was contacted during the campaign about it. He has since covered the tattoo and there's some reporting that he knew of the symbol's meaning earlier than he's admitted to.

But Platner's campaign survived a brutal autumn. Even when Gov. Janet Mills made her long-awaited entrance into the race with backing from national Democrats, Platner was undeterred. He stayed in the race, and Mills struggled to find her footing against him, falling behind in polling and fundraising almost immediately as progressives who had frustrations with her administration flocked to Platner. A brief attempt to litigate Platner's comments about rape victims on TV couldn't help bring her back into contention, and when it became clear that no outside help was coming for her, Mills dropped out at the end of April, leaving Platner as the presumptive nominee.

Platner's campaign team includes media consultant Morris Katz of Fight Agency and pollster Jane Rayburn of Workbench Strategy, both of whom also worked for New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

The General Election

Collins is preparing to run a similar playbook to her previous campaigns, with a relentless focus on the federal dollars she's brought back to the state. Early GOP ads highlight Collins' work securing funding for cancer research and for repairs after the Eastport breakwater pier collapse in 2014. Collins' work securing contracts for Maine businesses such as Bath Ironworks may also feature heavily in her ads.

"It's enormously helpful to have a candidate, a senator, with a long list of accomplishments," said one Collins ally, and even Democrats working to defeat her acknowledge that she's done a strong job on that front.

"Her whole campaign seems to be very old school," said one local

Continued on page 7



Graham Platner

Courtesy Platner Campaign

Continued from page 6

Maine source not involved in the race. “She delivers for the state and has amazing constituent services.”

The race between her and Platner is “a real test of two completely different governing styles,” the source said.

That’s because Platner is running a more aggressive, populist and outspokenly progressive campaign than Maine is used to. He launched his campaign with a shot at “the oligarchy” and billionaires; he supports Medicare for All; he has said Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

And he has barnstormed the state, holding dozens of town halls and campaign events that showcase his greatest strengths: his charisma and speaking ability. Democrats still reeling from Gideon’s loss in 2020 take comfort in Platner’s ability and willingness to draw crowds across the state — in contrast to Gideon’s more hesitant campaign, which was constrained by the Covid-19 pandemic but also because the Rhode Island-born candidate came across as a wealthy woman “from away.”

Collins also keeps a busy schedule but doesn’t hold town halls, a contrast Platner and his allies have leaned into as well. And the Democratic theory of the case rests on voters’ immediate economic concerns, such as the cost of groceries, gasoline, and heating oil, outweighing their appreciation for the federal resources Collins brings back to the state.

But some Democrats are worried about how Platner makes that case, especially after he made a poorly received remark that perhaps he could serve on Appropriations as well if elected. “Platner isn’t going to be an appropriations powerhouse, so he can’t get sucked into that because he’s not going to be able to beat it,” said one Democratic source who’s worked in Maine. “He’s gotta talk about the fact that Collins has not been able to deliver because of Donald Trump.”

How It Plays Out

The race remains volatile given the uncertainty surrounding Platner’s personal baggage, which Republicans have already begun to litigate on TV. So far, GOP strategists see Platner’s past comments about rape victims, rural Americans and police officers as the most damaging among the independent (“unenrolled,” in local parlance) voters who will determine the election.

Platner’s Reddit posts didn’t prevent him from running away with the primary, but it’s an open question how they’ll play in a general electorate. “He beat Mills with a fundamentally different type of voter than you need to win a general election in Maine,” said one longtime Maine Democratic strategist, “college educated, southern Maine, very progressive primary voters who don’t share the same independent streak that general election voters do.”

The GOP hope is that with enough money behind specific comments, voters will internalize the hits against Platner in a way that they haven’t yet, because the coverage surrounding him has been muddled. “They don’t actually know what he’s said,” said one GOP strategist, who also pointed to the possibility that Collins could peel off some disaffected Mills voters in the general election.

Some Democrats welcome that strategy. “If they’re spending that money to relitigate the Reddit comments,” said one state Democratic operative, “it’s going to be a critical mistake on their part if that’s the race they’re making and he’s out there talking about the political establishment and big pacs and money.”

Another operative agreed, saying “his baggage is so attractive and distracting that Collins and Republicans may never be able to land the hit that he’s a ‘national Democrat,’ and that’s what kills Democrats in Maine.”

For now, Platner has navigated the damaging stories by apologizing for some of his comments and portraying himself as a man who was broken by war, reformed, and then assailed by establishment forces after he spoke out against them.

That has assuaged Democratic primary voter concerns, and his image in the state remains better than Collins’.

But from now until Election Day, Democrats will be wary of additional stories (there was yet another one earlier this week) breaking on Platner’s past comments or actions, while Republicans will continue to drip out salacious bits of his history as they uncover them. Whether those stories have a major impact on the race remains to be seen. For months, operatives and journalists covering the race have been awash with rumors about damaging stories supposedly in the works that don’t ultimately materialize or have minimal impact. But unlike with other Democratic Senate candidates, largely longtime officeholders with heavily vetted records, the unknown unknowns will keep Democratic strategists up at night.

Both parties see the race as highly competitive heading into the summer. Public polling is extremely limited. The one survey taken since Platner became the presumptive nominee, from Pan Atlantic Research, showed Platner with a 7 point lead over Collins, 48-41 percent. Private polling from both parties has shown a closer race, with Platner running ahead of Collins by a few points. The shadow of 2020’s polling miss makes strategists skeptical of their own numbers, let alone publicly released surveys from outlets that often had Gideon winning by the widest margins (Pan Atlantic’s October 2020 survey similarly found Gideon ahead of Collins by 7 points).

Democrats believe that Collins’ image rating has deteriorated significantly from where she was in 2020. The senator’s allies acknowledge the same, though they say positive spending has improved her position. And Trump’s position is worse than in 2020, when he lost the state by 9 points.

Stories about Collins’ essential tremor, which causes her to shake and speak in a halting style, have circulated in Washington, DC in recent weeks, but Maine sources say her condition is largely old news to voters in-state, even if it’s more noticeable than in previous years. Instead, the hit to Collins’ image is a sign that she has begun to lose the benefit of the doubt as a moderating force within the GOP.

The ultimate question may be if she retains enough moderate credibility to win over the independents and soft Democrats who have voted for her in years past — like Platner, who posted on Reddit in 2019 that he voted for her numerous times because he saw her as a moderate. While Collins may no longer secure endorsements from progressive groups such as Giffords and the Human Rights Campaign as she once did, her reputation remains a potent weapon in her arsenal. Her personal

Continued on page 8

Inside Elections Podcast

Episode 71: Nathan, Jacob and Aaron Sanderford of Nebraska Examiner analyze the Nebraska Senate race and fight for Nebraska’s 2nd District.

Episode 70: Nathan, Jacob and Henry J. Gomez of NBC News take a fresh look at the hottest primaries and races in Ohio.

Episode 69: Nathan, Jacob and Randi B. Hagi of WMRA Public Radio focused on the new congressional map in Virginia.

Continued from page 7

network throughout the state is extensive, and GOP sources say she relishes the rough and tumble nature of campaigning.

“She brings a level of political sophistication and energy to this,” said one Democrat, who praised her as a “knife wielding killer” on the trail.

In 2020, Collins won thanks to her ability to win crossover votes from older women and college educated voters — not because, as Platner himself asserted days after that election on Reddit, Gideon was a “terrible candidate” who “does well with the southern Maine liberal types who run the party” but left the more conservative 2nd District for Collins’ taking. “Just the thought of [Gideon] connecting with a lobsterman is laughable,” said Platner at the time.

But Collins actually performed equivalently across both districts, winning 7 percent more of the vote than Trump in each. And exit polling showed that rather than Gideon falling flat among “Downeast/Upcountry” men or blue collar workers, those were among the few demographics where she hit her marks.

That means Platner, for all his public focus on disaffected voters and emphasis on expanding his coalition beyond traditional Democratic constituencies, has to make sure he can claw back enough of those crossover voters to prevent Collins from reassembling her 2020 coalition.

If Trump’s national approval rating remains underwater by 20 points, that problem becomes easier for Platner to solve. Collins is running for the first time as a member of the governing party — she’s never had to seek re-election while serving in the majority. If Democratic groups can tie her to voters’ larger dissatisfactions surrounding Washington, DC, she may face the same fate as many of her colleagues who held onto states of opposite partisanship, such as Montana’s Jon Tester and Ohio’s Sherrod Brown.

Through March 31 Platner had raised \$12 million, nearly as much as the \$13 million Collins raised over the last five and a half years. But he’s also burned through much of it, and had just \$2.7 million in the

bank at the end of March compared to her \$10 million. The looming test for Platner, now that he’s the de facto nominee, is if he can activate the national donor network that has powered other top-tier Senate candidates to smashing sums in recent years. His pre-primary filing, due May 28, will capture some of that time.

Money won’t be the key to winning the race — just ask Gideon, who raised so much money she ended her campaign with \$15 million unspent — but Platner will need enough to keep pace with the crush of outside spending headed his way.

The main GOP super PAC, Senate Leadership Fund, has said it will spend at least \$42 million to boost Collins this fall. Its Democratic counterpart, Senate Majority PAC, has said it will spend \$33 million.

But the GOP advantage doesn’t end there. A constellation of pro-Collins groups — super PACs Pine Tree Results and Winning for Women Action Fund, and the dark money group Stronger America — has already spent \$26 million on pro-Collins and anti-Platner advertising since the beginning of last fall, with reservations to spend another \$37 million before the end of the year.

“It’ll be a long, tough, nasty race,” said one GOP consultant.

The Bottom Line

If Democrats want to win back the Senate, they probably have to beat Susan Collins. The alternative is winning in more difficult states such as Alaska, Ohio, and either Iowa or Texas.

The party is taking a gamble on Platner, an unproven candidate with a high ceiling but a low floor. If Collins wins and Democrats fall one seat short of a majority in November, the recriminations surrounding this race will be numerous and noisy, but if Platner topples the longtime incumbent, it could be another sign that voters are more willing to overlook personal foibles in the era of Trump — and could encourage Democrats to look further afield when recruiting candidates in the future.

IE

Statewide Election Results for Maine

