

Battle for Bama: How the Tide Could Turn Against Moore

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As you might have noticed, Alabama has become ground zero for the political universe. Like Montana and Georgia before it, operatives, press and pundits are falling on Alabama, assured that what happens in the Yellowhammer State will tell a greater story about our nation's volatile political climate.

[Anzalone Liszt Grove](#) is proud to have a national footprint with offices in Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Honolulu. However, our home base has always been **Montgomery, Alabama**—currently led by Partners [John Anzalone](#) and [Zac McCrary](#). We are not part of Democratic nominee Doug Jones' campaign team, nor (as of this writing) have we conducted polling between Jones and his Republican opponent Roy Moore. Over the last decade, Alabama has become a virtual one-party state—and, of course, Doug Jones is the underdog in this Senate race, as any Democrat would be.

However, we believe that the December special election features a dynamic with very unique candidates in a volatile political climate—and that Doug Jones has the opportunity to turn this into a genuinely competitive race.

Here's why:

1) Roy Moore is a weak general election candidate. You probably know Moore's story: the twice de-frocked state Chief Justice whose [offensive comments about the 9/11 attacks and against gays, Muslims, African Americans \(just for starters\)](#) have made him something of a folk hero among elements of the political right. While Moore connected with the 15% of voters who turned out in the GOP runoff better than appointed-incumbent Senator Luther Strange, Moore has a history of dramatically underperforming other Alabama Republicans in general elections.

- Most recently, in Moore's 2012 bid to regain a seat on the State Supreme Court, he won with 51.7% of the vote against his Democratic opponent at the same time Mitt Romney was carrying the state with more than 60%.
- Moore ran a full 10 points behind Romney in Jefferson County (the state's largest)—and Moore lost Alabama's second and fourth most populous counties (Mobile and Madison), even though Romney carried both.
- Moore also lost rural counties like Chambers County on the Georgia border and Choctaw and Clarke in Southwest Alabama, as well as swing Tuscaloosa County—while at the same time Mitt Romney was outpacing Barack Obama in all of these counties.
- Perhaps the most striking Moore weakness is found in strongly Republican, suburban counties. In Shelby County (suburban Birmingham), Romney took 77% to just 63% for Moore. In Baldwin County (suburban Mobile), Romney took 77% to just 65% for Moore. Moore's aggressively ideological agenda clearly alienates substantial elements of the traditional GOP base in Alabama.
- The 2012 election represented Moore's second statewide win. He was first elected as Chief Justice in 2000. In that election, he received 54.6%, meaning his 2012

performance (51.7%) represented a nearly three-point drop from his initial statewide win. Between 2000 and 2012, Republicans were on the march in Alabama, turning the state from a genuinely competitive two-party state (if Republican-leaning) to a virtual red wall for Republicans. While this blood red tide was loosed on Alabama, Moore lost ground—his standing clearly eroding after his first removal from office. The 2017 election will test further softening in the Moore brand now that he has been removed from office a second time.

- Election after election, Moore has shown weakness even among Republicans. Despite being a universally known figure in the state for more than 20 years, Moore took less than 55% of the primary vote against appointed Senator Luther Strange. And the two previous times he ran for higher office (Governor in 2006 and 2010), even Republican voters had little interest in him. In the 2006 primary, he lost by a 2:1 margin and finished fourth in the 2010 primary—both times actually losing his home county.

In previous general elections and primary elections, Moore has shown a difficulty fully consolidating Alabama Republicans. With a stand-alone special election ballot, it's very plausible some Alabama Republicans will take a pass on this election and stay home and turn out the next time there is a more acceptable Republican on the ballot or even crossover to support Doug Jones. Without a doubt, Alabamians strongly prefer Republicans on the federal level. But like Todd Akin in Missouri or Richard Mourdock in Indiana, is it possible that Alabama Republicans can nominate a candidate so bad that even the state's core GOP DNA cannot save him? We'll find out in December.

2) Doug Jones just might be a hell of a candidate. While not a political neophyte, this is Doug Jones's first run for political office. Jones was appointed US Attorney by President Clinton and confirmed by a GOP-controlled Senate. He earned high marks for finally bringing justice in the case of the 1963 KKK bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, which resulted in the deaths of four young African American girls. Thirty years after the fact, he ensured justice would no longer be denied and led successful prosecutions of the bombers. Jones also helped prosecute Olympic Park Bomber Eric Rudolph, whose 1998 bombing of a Birmingham abortion clinic killed a police officer. Beyond such high profile cases, Jones presumably has an array of stories to tell of seeking justice for crime victims, taking on big corporations that prey on consumers, and rooting out political corruption. It will be difficult for Republicans to try and brand this tough-on-crime prosecutor as a typical liberal national Democrat.

[Jones also has a quintessentially Alabamian personal narrative.](#) His grandfathers were a steelworker and a coal-miner, and his own father worked at US Steel in Birmingham. He attended Alabama public schools and worked for respected, conservative Alabama Senator Howell Heflin on the Senate Judiciary Committee. He has the right Alabama DNA to tell a values-laden, middle class story that can connect with a Southern electorate.

In short, Jones's Alabama roots go deep and he certainly has the potential to be viewed as the "right" kind of Democrat to earn consideration from Alabamians who might not have voted for a Democratic Senate candidate in a generation.

Additionally, Jones recently announced he's raised more than \$1M thus far in his campaign. With the national spotlight on this race and an opponent like Roy Moore, a path to a robust Jones campaign budget seems very doable. Campaigns are not necessarily cheap in Alabama, but a week-long statewide television buy would run \$350–400K—a relatively reasonable sum for a statewide campaign. Not only does Doug Jones have a very good story to tell, but also should have the resources necessary to tell it.

3) While there have been no Democratic earthquakes yet in 2017, there have been tremors. The playing field in House special elections has taken place on ground presumably carefully selected by the White House to minimize Democratic opportunities for success. From Kansas to Montana to South Carolina to suburban Georgia, Republicans started as decided favorites in each of the congressional special elections this year. It's true, Jon Ossoff came up tantalizingly short in GA-6, in a district trending Democratic but not yet quite ready to flip. Despite running well ahead of traditional Democratic performance in each of these four special elections, Democrats have not yet caught their white whale.

However, at the legislative level, Democrats have been notching victories in diverse playing fields across the country. ALG Research recently released an [in-depth analysis of trends from these legislative elections](#), but the most important takeaway is that Democrats have flipped Republican legislative seats in several states—including in deeply red turf in Oklahoma and Iowa. While none of these reach Scott Brown in 2009 levels of shock, Democrats have already been winning races in places they “shouldn't”.

4) There is real organic Democratic energy in the electorate. Almost without exception, this year's special elections (and some municipals) have shown Democratic voter energy and enthusiasm outpacing that of Republicans. This can take varied forms in different states and, of course, is molded by the candidates who run and the campaigns they wage. For example, the GA-06 special election showed a surge in turnout of younger, progressive voters and the SC-5 special election featured a higher share of African American voters than in a presidential year. These turnout dynamics have led Democratic candidates in the congressional special elections to over-perform traditional Democratic levels in each of the four districts—in some cases outpacing expected Democratic performance by double digits.

In a December 12th election, turnout will be a big question mark. If the Jones campaign replicates some of the successes of recent Democratic campaigns, there is a real possibility that the electorate can track younger and more diverse than would normally be expected in a special election environment. In the special election for South Carolina's 5th District, the African American share of the electorate was 29.9%—exceeding the African American share even of previous presidential election years of 2016 (26.1%) and 2012 (29.7%). Hypothetically, an Alabama electorate that is 28% African American (closer to a presidential campaign) instead of 25% (closer to mid-term turnout), is part of the equation that could make Doug Jones surprisingly competitive. Alabama can also boast of several strong African American grassroots, GOTV operations, including the Alabama Democratic Conference and the New South Coalition, among others. These groups provide existing infrastructures and experienced foot soldiers ready for a field fight. Further, it's fortuitous for Jones that a very competitive Birmingham mayoral

race takes place in October of 2017, which has recently engaged these organizations, operatives, as well as voters in the state's largest Democratic voter base.

Ultimately, turnout will be incredibly difficult to predict in a special election two weeks before Christmas, but organic Democratic energy, a dispirited Republican base, and a low-turnout election is a recipe for a December surprise.

5) After 2016 (and 2015 in Louisiana), it's foolhardy to guarantee something "can't" happen. It's tempting to cite the skepticism many had to Donald Trump's prospects in both the 2016 primary and the general elections. However, the more germane comparison might be the 2015 Louisiana Governor's Race. The odds that Democrat John Bel Edwards could become the state's Governor in 2015 were considered so long that top state Democrats reportedly asked Edwards to drop out of the race in order to consolidate Democratic support, the argument went, behind a Republican who would have a better shot of defeating presumed frontrunner David Vitter. Most know how that race played out. Edwards not only stayed in the race and acquitted himself well, but also drummed Vitter by 12 points, even winning Vitter's strongly GOP home Jefferson Parish.

Louisiana is not Alabama, a governor's race is not a Senate race, and Roy Moore is not David Vitter. But in the not-too-distant past, a little-known Deep South Democrat slew a Republican titan even though many prognosticators initially believed it to be impossibly uphill. And it was because the Republican nominee was distasteful to enough fellow Republicans and Independents to turn the tide in favor of a qualified Democrat. Enter stage left, Roy Moore and Doug Jones.

To be sure, there are many arguments as to why this race might not be much different from other recent Alabama Senate races when Republicans have easily dispatched Democratic challengers. It's historically tougher to go against a state's partisan grain in a federal race versus a state race. The Democratic infrastructure in the state is largely moribund and a strong Democratic statewide campaign hasn't been waged since 2010. Donald Trump's numbers are likely still above water in Alabama and he has some ability to motivate GOP turnout (although it sure didn't help Luther Strange).

We are not blind to these facts. However, we do earnestly believe that Roy Moore is a uniquely weak Republican, Doug Jones could prove to be a strong Democrat, and turnout dynamics in a December special election open the door for surprisingly favorable Democratic prospects.

Doug Jones is an underdog. That is true. But to Alabamians who wince at the idea of Roy Moore representing our state on the national and world stage—and to Democrats nationally who are looking for a place to fight back—keep a sharp eye on Doug Jones. [Take a look at his site, consider a contribution.](#)

This race ain't over yet.

[Zac McCrary](#) & [John Anzalone](#)