Iowa 1: The Party Doesn’t Stop When The Caucuses End

By Leah Askarinam

If it hadn’t been for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s upset over Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary, Iowa Democrat Abby Finkenauer would have been at the center of national attention for being the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. But as she runs for re-election in the 1st District, evading the label as a national Democratic figure could have been a blessing in disguise.

Iowa has dominated the recent news, which will likely become the new normal ahead of the Feb. 3 caucuses. But the Hawkeye State will remain an important piece of the race for the House and Senate majorities long after the Democratic presidential nominee is selected.

All four of Iowa’s House districts will host competitive races in 2020. Democrats could fail to oust GOP Rep. Steve King and still maintain a firm hold on the House majority, but if Finkenauer loses in the 1st District, it’s likely a sign of a GOP comeback.

While Donald Trump narrowly carried Iowa’s 1st District in 2016, there are 22 other Democrats across the country who are defending seats where President Trump received a larger share of the vote. And Republicans need to gain 18 seats to win the majority.

The Lay Of The Land

The northeastern quarter of the state falls into Iowa’s 1st District, with population hubs Cedar Rapids (Linn County), Waterloo (Black Hawk County), and Dubuque (Dubuque County). Manufacturing is a major industry in the district’s cities, including aerospace company Rockwell Collins in Cedar Rapids and John Deere in Dubuque. Outside of the cities, the landscape quickly turns rural, where the major industry is corn and soybean farming.

CityLab’s David Montgomery classified the district as a rural-suburban mix. The district’s population is nearly 90 percent non-Hispanic white, and just over a quarter of residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Overall, the demographic makeup of the district makes it a near-perfect case study for other districts that Barack Obama carried.
Indiana 5: Brooks Retirement Creates Democratic Opportunity

Rep. Susan Brooks of Indiana announced she will not seek re-election, creating a potential open-seat headache for Republicans in Indiana’s 5th District. The congresswoman won re-election to a fourth term in 2018 in the central Indiana district with 57 percent, but the district shifted between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections.

Now-Utah Sen. Mitt Romney won the 5th District 58-41 percent over President Barack Obama in 2012, but Donald Trump carried it more narrowly 53-41 percent over Hillary Clinton in 2016, fueling Democratic optimism even before Brooks’ announcement. Democratic strategists have also been excited about former state Rep. Christina Hale getting into the race. She ran for lieutenant governor on a ticket with John Gregg in 2016, losing by 7 points in the 5th District.

The 5th District is categorized as Sparse Suburban by CityLab, as it stretches from the northern Indianapolis suburbs up to Marion. With 45 percent of residents who have a bachelor’s degree or higher, it’s the fifth highest-educated district represented by a Republican in the country. It’s the type of seat where the president could struggle based on a downturn in GOP performance among suburban and college-educated voters. Democratic Sen. Joe Donnelly carried the district narrowly in 2018, even though he lost statewide to Republican Mike Braun.

Brooks is one of just 13 Republican women in the House, so her exit could bring that number down even more. But it’s too early to know who Republicans will nominate to replace her, how this race will develop, and what the national political environment will look like more than a year from now. We’re changing our rating of Indiana’s 5th from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

Candidate Conversation

Kai Kahele (D)
Hawaii’s 2nd District -- Rating: Solid Democratic

Interview Date: June 10, 2019
Date of Birth: March 28, 1974; Honolulu, Hawaii
Education: Univ. of Hawaii - Manoa (1998); Univ. of Hawaii - Hilo (attended); Hawaii Community College (attended)

Elected Office: State Senate

Current Outlook: Kahele is running for the seat currently held by Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard. The congresswoman is currently focused on running for president but has not ruled out running for re-election. That means Kahele is either the early frontrunner for an open seat or on track for a battle royale in the Democratic primary against Gabbard. In either scenario, the seat remains in Democratic hands in the general election.

Evaluation: Kahele’s political career began when his father, a state senator, suddenly died of a heart attack. Kahele was appointed to fill the remainder of his dad’s term and has since won re-election while he remains active in the National Guard. He’s also a commercial pilot for Hawaiian Airlines. If there’s one thing Kahele highlighted during his interview, it was that he planned to be a voice for the 2nd District, including plans to regularly return to the district while his children remain in school there — a not-so-subtle jab at Gabbard and her focus on running for president. He plans to remain a candidate even if Gabbard chooses to abandon her bid for the White House and run for re-election. His current state Senate seat, which represents about 50,000 people, falls entirely within the district. Kahele started his campaign early but has been slower to put together a full team. His early fundraising could dictate whether other candidates run, and a matchup against Gabbard would be fascinating.

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By Leah Askarinam

New Mexico may not be leading the national political discussion in 2020, but that's not because of a lack of political activity.

As the 2020 election cycle first took shape, it seemed like a handful of states would attract the most political attention: House Democrats are targeting Arizona, Minnesota, and Texas, which are also hosting Senate races. And, in addition to holding competitive Senate and gubernatorial races, North Carolina will likely be a focus in the presidential battleground. New Mexico, on the other hand, fell far down the list, with only a single competitive race: the 2nd congressional district.

But halfway through 2019, New Mexico now needs to fill an open Senate seat, after Democratic Sen. Tom Udall decided not to seek re-election. And Rep. Ben Ray Luján’s decision to seek the Democratic nomination to replace the retiring senator opens up one of New Mexico’s three House seats as well. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump has set his sights on the Land of Enchantment as part of his strategy to win the electoral college and re-election.

To be sure, in terms of political interest, New Mexico is nowhere near North Carolina, Iowa, Texas or Arizona. But it’s only summer of 2019, and there’s plenty of time for the map to evolve. At a minimum, the race will elect a new lawmaker in the Senate.

Republicans believe that New Mexico has the potential to lean their way in the near future. But there’s not much confidence that 2020 will be their year.

The Lay Of The Land

New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the country. The state’s median household income in 2017 was $46,744, the fifth lowest in the country (according to American Community Survey 1-year estimates). About a fifth of the state lives in poverty. Major employers include the state and federal government, along with a significant oil and gas industry.

In 2018, New Mexico Democrats won every statewide elected office. Ahead of the election, Democrats had a Baseline advantage of 52-47 percent. After the 2018 election, Democrats’ Baseline advantage improved to 54-44 percent. Democratic Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham replaced Republican Gov. Susana Martinez, who was term-limited. And Democrat Martin Heinrich held his Senate seat, winning re-election with 54 percent.

Democrats now hold all three U.S. House seats. In the 1st District, Democrat Deb Haaland held Lujan Grisham’s open seat and joined Rep. Sharice Davids as the first two Native American women in Congress. Democrat Xochitl Torres Small flipped the 2nd District, which Trump carried in 2016, when Republican incumbent Steve Pearce left the seat open to run for governor. And 3rd District Rep. Ben Ray Luján easily won re-election in northern New Mexico.

Torres Small is one of the most vulnerable Democrats in the country, and could face a rematch against Republican Yvette Herrell in 2020. But when Udall chose to retire after just one term in the Senate, the calculus of 2020 New Mexico politics shifted. At least one potential 2nd District candidate is instead seeking the Republican nomination for the Senate. And Luján, who has little room left to climb in the House as the fourth-highest-ranking Democrat, is seeking to switch chambers.

Some Democrats are clamoring for minority representation in New Mexico, which is nearly 50 percent Hispanic. But they’ve had opportunities before. In 2008, when Republican Pete Domenici decided not to run, Democrats pushed Albuquerque Mayor Marty Chavez aside for Udall. And in 2012, when Democrat Jeff Bingaman decided not to run, most Democrats preferred Heinrich over state Auditor Hector Balderas.

The Democrats

Luján, 47, grew up on a small farm in Nambé, where his family raises sheep, according to CQ’s Politics in America. His father, who died in 2012, was speaker of the state House of Representatives. After graduating from New Mexico Highlands Univ., the younger Luján entered state government as a deputy state treasurer and later as the New Mexico Cultural Affairs Department’s chief financial officer. In 2004, he was elected to be one of five New Mexico Public Regulation Commissioners.

In 2008, when Udall decided to leave the House to run for Senate, Luján ran for the future Senator’s open seat in the 3rd Congressional District. The primary race determined the new congressmen in the solid Democratic seat, and Luján won the nomination with 42 percent over five other contenders. But, at the time, veteran political analyst Joe Monahan speculated that Luján’s father helped clear the field.

In 2013, Luján was appointed Chief Deputy Whip. He also led the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee as chairman for the 2016 and 2018 election cycles, as Democrats gained a total of 46 seats and recaptured the majority. He is a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and is assistant Democratic leader/deputy speaker.

Luján’s campaign team includes media/strategy consultants Dan Sena and Scott Kozar of Sena Kozar Strategies, Moore Campaigns for direct mail, and pollster Michael Bocian of GBAO Strategies. Sena was executive director of the DCCC in 2018.

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Maggie Toulouse Oliver is also running for the Democratic nomination. Her introductory video highlights her past, when she was a 24-year-old single mom who lacked health care and whose son was on Medicaid. She grew up in Albuquerque, studied political science at Univ. of New Mexico (earning her bachelor’s degree in 2001 and her master’s in 2005), and now lives in Santa Fe.

When Toulouse Oliver took office as Bernalillo County Clerk in 2007, she was the youngest female elected official in New Mexico. In 2014, she challenged Republican Secretary of State Dianna Duran, coming up short 52-48 percent. But Duran resigned less than a year later, pleading guilty to felony embezzlement. Toulouse Oliver won a special election, 56-44 percent, to replace her in 2016. In 2018, she won re-election 58-37 percent against Gavin Clarkson, who entered the race in July after the June GOP primary winner withdrew from the race.

In 2016, Toulouse Oliver was one of six nominees for the EMILY’s List Rising Star Award (Colorado state Rep. Crisanta Duran ultimately won). A year prior, she founded MaggiePAC to help pro-choice women seeking elected office.

Toulouse Oliver’s campaign team includes media consultant Ben Nuckels of Strother Nuckels Strategies, direct mail consultant Adnaan Muslim of Deliver Strategies, and pollster Lisa Grove of ALG Research.

The Republicans

So far, Gavin Clarkson is the only Republican to announce a Senate bid. Clarkson had previously considered running for the 2nd District seat against Torres Small. In 2018, Clarkson placed third in the GOP primary (he received 12 percent) for that House seat. The Republican central committee then selected him as the new Republican nominee for Secretary of State after the primary winner dropped out.

Prior to entering politics, Clarkson was a fellow at Harvard’s law and business schools, and taught various subjects at Univ of Michigan and New Mexico State University. Former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke appointed Clarkson, who is a citizen of Oklahoma’s Choctaw Nation, as deputy assistant secretary for policy and economic development under the Bureau of Indian Affairs in June 2017. Clarkson said he resigned later that year to run for Congress, though national news outlets reported that he resigned after a report criticized a loan program he directed.

Clarkson’s campaign team includes PinPoint Action. Republican strategists largely dismiss Clarkson as a credible candidate and expect the field to expand. But it’s not yet clear who is open to running in New Mexico in 2020. Commercial contractor Mick Rich, who lost the 2018 Senate race against Democrat Martin Heinrich, has been mentioned as a likely contender. Lt. Gov John Sanchez told New Mexico political analyst Joe Monahan that he was considering running. Former GOP Rep. Steve Pearce, who lost the 2018 gubernatorial race, could decide to enter the race if no other credible candidate comes to light. Pearce, who is now chairman of the state Republican Party, has three statewide losses on his resume.

And, according to Monohan, a live telephone poll by an unknown potential GOP candidate surveyed support for Nella Domenici (daughter of the late Senator Pete), former Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry (who is likely too unpopular to run or win), former state Rep. Conrad James, and TV weatherman Mark Ronchetti. The poll also included former GOP Gov. Susana Martinez, who said last year that she was not interested in the Senate, along with Sanchez and Pearce.

The New Mexico Political Report also mentioned former state Sen. Rod Adair, though he doesn’t seem likely to become a top-tier candidate either.

There’s been talk about Claire Chase, a former aide to Pearce who heads government affairs for Mack Energy Corp., running for elected office at some point, including some chatter previously that she could enter the 2nd District GOP primary. But, should she choose to transition from the oil/gas industry to politics, it’s unlikely to happen this year.

Republicans are still recruiting additional candidates, aiming to find someone without a career in politics. But some potential candidates are likely waiting until 2022 to run for state-level offices, in what’s expected to be a better political environment. Democrats had a successful cycle in 2018 in New Mexico, and Republicans predict that some of the new progressive policies could prompt a backlash—but admit that 2020 could be too soon for voters to become disillusioned with the state’s new Democratic leadership.

The Democratic Primary

In the Democratic primary, Luján has institutional advantages that will make him a formidable opponent. But it would be foolish to rule out

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a well-enough funded statewide office holder — and a self-proclaimed progressive woman — after the 2018 midterms.

Luján has an endorsement from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and his campaign commissioned a poll that showed him leading a Democratic primary 64-25 percent over Toulouse Oliver. (GBAO conducted the poll of likely voters April 15-18.) It’s too early to know whether Toulouse Oliver will end up being a credible threat — and her second fundraising quarter (detailing activity through the end of June) will illuminate her prospects.

**The (Green) Path to Victory**

Luján has more experience raising the kind of money that will be necessary for a Senate campaign. Despite facing little competition for his seat, Luján has regularly raised between $1-$2 million each cycle since he was first elected (not including the millions he helped raise for the DCCC). Luján’s name carries weight in New Mexico too, including the congressman’s father (the former state House speaker) and his distant cousin, Michelle Lujan Grisham, who represented the 1st District until she was elected governor in 2018.

Of the three congressional districts, the 3rd offers the largest Democratic base. In 2018, Luján ran uncontested in the primary and received 64,000 votes.

While Luján brings several key assets — his fundraising connections, 3rd District base, and last name — Toulouse Oliver has some built-in advantages too.

Toulouse Oliver has run in three statewide races and has won two of them, which could have boosted her name ID. When she last ran for Secretary of State, she ran uncontested in the primary and received 173,000 votes. Plus, Toulouse Oliver was county clerk in Albuquerque, the biggest city in New Mexico, where she could be primed to form a base of progressive voters.

But when it comes to money, Luján will likely be in a stronger position. While Luján has raised millions in his House career, Toulouse Oliver has raised in the hundreds of thousands. Prominent outside groups that have previously supported her, including EMILY’s List and Democracy for America have yet to enter the fray. But there’s still time for them to get involved, depending on the campaign Toulouse Oliver builds, including the next fundraising quarter. For now, her fundraising will likely rely on donations from local progressive and women’s groups across the country.

**Progressive Profiles**

Toulouse Oliver’s campaign will highlight her experience as a single mom who lives in New Mexico and contrast that image with Luján’s career in Washington. Luján, on the other hand, will point to his achievements in Washington — including winning back the House for Democrats — along with state-specific issues such as access to water, broadband and health care in rural areas. The campaign could also point to his support of HR1 and helping to lead the opposition against Trump.

Toulouse Oliver is positioned to campaign as the anti-establishment progressive candidate, arguing that Luján only supported progressive causes after it became clear that he would face a competitive primary. He endorsed the Green New Deal in April, pledged to reject corporate PAC money in May, and announced he would co-sponsor Medicare for All legislation in early June.

But before serving as chairman of the DCCC in 2015, Luján had been part of the Congressional Progressive Caucus since 2008. Luján just finished his second term as chairman of the DCCC, a position that could have limited how vocal he could be about progressive policy initiatives.

**The Case for Republicans**

Given recent history and the current pool of candidates, the most likely outcome of the 2020 New Mexico Senate race is Luján winning the Senate seat and Trump losing the state’s electoral college votes. But given the uncertainty that surrounds an open seat in the Senate, there’s no need to be definitive 18 months from the election.

Unless a strong Republican candidate emerges, the Democratic primary will determine the winner of the general election. Republicans haven’t won a Senate race in New Mexico since Domenici’s re-election in 1996.

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**2020 Senate Ratings**

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

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**2020 Senate Ratings**

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**June 14, 2019**

INSIDELECTIONS.COM
2002. But it’s not impossible that Republicans end up targeting the state in either the Senate or presidential race. Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale recently said that New Mexico is in play in 2020, along with New Hampshire, Nevada, and Colorado.

Given that most of the state falls into a single media market (Albuquerque), Republicans could invest in the state with as little as $10 million, according to one strategist. If nothing else, Republicans could choose to spend some money in voter turnout in order to force Democrats to spread their resources nationally.

Demography and Destiny

Only 27 percent of New Mexico’s population has a bachelor’s degree or higher, and more than 80 percent identifies as white. (Although the non-Hispanic white population is a lower 38 percent.) And New Mexico is largely rural. That demographic profile — white, rural voters without a college degree — is enticing for some Republicans, and could explain why Trump said he would target New Mexico in 2020.

Some Republicans argue that the beneficiaries of the 2018 Democratic wave are going too far left for the state, including Lujan Grisham withdrawing the National Guard from the southern border and implementing a salary increase for state Cabinet secretaries. One GOP source argued that talk of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings and Trump’s warning of an immigrant caravan late in the 2018 campaign gave Republicans a temporary bump, evidence that there are some conservative instincts in New Mexico despite the 2018 blue wave.

Beyond the non-college educated white voters in the state, Republicans believe there’s room to grow among Hispanic voters, who some Republicans believe are more culturally conservative. Clarkson, for example, who helped lead a pro-life pregnancy center, would likely make abortion a major part of campaign messaging.

But there might not be much room for Trump to grow Republican turnout in the current economy, according to one Republican. The area of the population that’s feeling the benefits of economic growth largely work in oil and gas, and those voters already tend to support Republicans. And a Democratic strategist argued that a significant portion of the non-college educated, white portion of New Mexico works for the state government, which means they would be more likely to support Democratic efforts to increase government funding.

The Bottom Line

At the moment, Democrats have a frontrunner in Luján, who has institutional backing and seems likely to have the necessary financial support for a statewide run. And he’s unlikely to make a significant campaign misstep.

Some of the elements are in place for a competitive primary challenge from Toulouse Oliver: She’s a statewide elected official who’s previously received support from EMILY’s List, and she may be able to create a narrative of an outsider taking on the establishment. Plus, her message could resonate in a national environment that has forced Democrats to take firm positions on progressive issues. But those pieces of a competitive primary are all theoretical until Toulouse Oliver can prove that she has the infrastructure, support, and money to become a credible threat.

Luján’s position as frontrunner extends to the general election, as Republicans search for a star candidate or attempt to convince a known quantity to run for the GOP nomination. The Republicans’ struggle in finding their candidate isn’t promising, suggesting that potential candidates don’t see a clear path to victory in 2020.

Trump’s interest in New Mexico could end up being one of many key factors that eventually pushes the race into a more competitive category. But, after Democrats swept the state in 2018, the onus is on the GOP to prove that New Mexico isn’t as blue as it looks.

New Mexico Election Results
in 2012 and Trump carried in 2016. Between 2010-14, the district straddled party lines. In 2010, GOP Sen. Chuck Grassley won re-election by 28 points. In 2012, Democratic Rep. Bruce Braley won re-election by 15 points while Obama carried the district by 14 points. In 2014, Republican Joni Ernst carried the district by less than half a point (48.3-47.8 percent) and GOP Gov. Terry Branstad carried the district by 15 points (56-41 percent). That same year, Republican Rod Blum won the open seat for the House by 2 points. But 2016 was a markedly strong year for Republicans in the 1st District. Trump carried the district with a 3.5-point margin (48.1-44.6 percent), Grassley carried it by 20 points (58-38), and Blum won re-election by 8 points (54-46 percent).

Two years later, it was Democrats’ turn for a strong year. Blum lost his seat to Finkenauer, 51-46 percent. And, according to Daily Kos Elections, Democratic gubernatorial nominee Fred Hubbell carried the district 49-48 percent (while losing statewide) and the Democratic candidate for state auditor (who defeated the GOP incumbent statewide) carried the district 55-43 percent.

The Democratic Incumbent
Finkenauer grew up in Dubuque County and represented Dubuque in the state legislature, first elected at age 25, before being elected to Congress at age 29. She attended Drake Univ. in Des Moines, but returned to Dubuque after graduation.

The daughter of a welder, Finkenauer was outspoken as the Republican-dominated state legislature scaled back collective bargaining laws. She raised and spent $4.6 million for her 2018 congressional campaign to oust Blum. House Majority PAC, the go-to Democratic outside group for House races, spent $498,000 to defeat Blum, and Women’s Vote! spent $170,000 to oppose him. In Congress, Finkenauer serves on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, including the subcommittees on Highways and Transit, and Water Resources and Environment. She also chairs the Rural Development, Agriculture, Trade and Entrepreneurship Subcommittee under the Small Business Committee.

The Finkenauer campaign is working with the same consultants as last cycle, which includes pollster Jason McGrath of GBA Strategies, direct mail consultant Emily Parcell of Wildfire, and media consultants Delacey Skinner and David Eichenbaum of ESK Strategies.

The Republican Challengers
GOP strategists are excited about state Rep. Ashley Hinson, 35, a former morning and midday news anchor for KCGR-TV9 in Cedar Rapids. She grew up in West Des Moines and graduated from Univ. of Southern California with a degree in journalism. She now lives in Marion.

Hinson was elected to the state House in 2016, winning an open seat with 61 percent. That year, Hillary Clinton carried her district too, 47-46 percent, according to Daily Kos Elections. In 2018, she won re-election more narrowly with 52 percent. She represents Marion, Hiawatha, Robins and Cedar Rapids, and approximately 5 percent of the 1st Congressional District.

Hinson’s campaign team includes general consultant Annie Kelly Kuhle of FP1 Strategies.

Blum has been mentioned as a potential candidate but Republican strategists are expecting Hinson to be the nominee. Blum, a former Dubuque County Republican chairman and software company CEO, was a member of the Freedom Caucus and served on the House Budget Committee.

He tried to distance himself from the establishment when first elected by making his first vote as a congressman one to replace House Speaker John Boehner. That move created some tension with the NRCC after Boehner campaigned for Blum in 2014. Blum remained a flawed candidate ahead of 2018, making news for walking out of an interview with a local reporter while surrounded by school kids. Blum raised and spent $2.8 million for his 2018 race, and the Congressional Leadership Fund spent $872,000 to oppose Finkenauer. Toward the end of the cycle, it appeared that Finkenauer’s edge might have receded, before she won by 5 points.

How It Plays Out
Republicans tend to blame Blum for losing the 1st District in 2018. In addition to some personal strife with DC leadership, Blum may have been perceived as too conservative for the district. When the Freedom Caucus Member lost re-election in 2018, Republicans’ Baseline advantage was just over 1 point (49.5-48 percent).

But now that the incumbent is a Democrat, it could take a strong year for the GOP to win the 1st District back. And Republicans are not united in their belief that 2020 will be that year.

Republicans are largely united, however, in their belief that Hinson will be a stronger candidate than Blum. Still, she has yet to prove herself on a bigger stage. While there’s clearly appeal in recruiting TV news personalities to run for elected office, since they bring existing name ID and tend to be telegenic, they don’t always run strong campaigns. Last year, for example, Las Vegas TV reporter Michelle Mortensen lost the GOP primary for Nevada’s 3rd District after raising less than $150,000, leaving Republicans with Danny Tarkanian as their nominee. In the end, Tarkanian received just 43 percent against Democrat Susie Lee. In Florida’s 27th District, Republican Maria Elvira Salazar was more successful in her fundraising, raising more than $2 million to fill GOP Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen’s open seat in a district that Hillary Clinton carried. But Salazar ultimately lost to Democrat Donna Shalala in 2018, 52-46 percent.

But Hinson isn’t solely known as a local news anchor. She is an elected official with a voting record, which Democrats will mine for opposition research. Republicans argue that Hinson is more moderate than Blum and better fits the district. Plus, she could prove to be a stronger fundraiser, which would make it more likely for outside groups to enter the race to provide an extra financial lift.

And while Hinson’s state House district makes up a small portion of the district, her past success in a state house district that Clinton carried could indicate future success in the 1st Congressional District.

First, Hinson is known for her 10 years on local television as a morning news anchor, which could give her higher-than-normal name ID for a first-Continued on page 8
time congressional candidate. And, given that she’s a mom who’s worked in a nonpartisan field, her profile could distance Hinson from Trump among suburban women. Her state House district includes Cedar Rapids, which means suburban women — a key group for the 1st Congressional District — have supported her before. Even if Hinson doesn’t carry Linn County (Cedar Rapids), she could overperform there and still carry the district.

Democrats argue that while Hinson attempts to portray herself as a moderate, her voting record doesn’t match that image. For example, Democrats point to Hinson telling voters that she personally has used Planned Parenthood’s services, but that she voted to essentially defund Planned Parenthood in Iowa. Democrats also plan to highlight Hinson’s record on labor issues such as collective bargaining and wage increases, especially after Finkenauer ran a campaign with support from local unions in 2018.

In her introductory video, Hinson discussed her experience as a journalist, which allowed her to get to know Iowa families and issues. She goes on to discuss her record in the state House, arguing that she has balanced budgets, improved schools and grown the economy.

The video also ties Finkenauer to national Democratic figures in what’s likely a preview of what will happen in races around the country. The Hinson video included a montage featuring Democratic Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Sen. Bernie Sanders—and Finkenauer. “Socialism isn’t the answer,” Hinson says to the camera.

Finkenauer overperformed Hubble in the 1st District, offering some evidence that voters differentiate the freshman congresswoman from the rest of the Democratic Party. And Finkenauer’s committee assignments could help her localize the race. In the first three months of 2019, she raised $391,000.

Both candidates will argue that they’re able to get things done in Congress. Hinson argued in her video that she’ll bring new leadership to build consensus. Democrats argue that Finkenauer was the first Democratic member to pass a bill. And both candidates will vie to be the more accessible candidate who’s more in tune with Iowa.

Iowa’s Busy Political Cycle

The 1st District on its own is a good example of the type of district Democrats will need to protect in order to keep their majority. But it’s impossible to isolate the events in this individual rural/suburban Trump district from the political activity that will flood the state over the next year and a half. In addition to hosting the first race in a crowded Democratic presidential primary, the state is also expected to host competitive elections for the Senate and all four of the state’s House seats.

Iowa’s farmers were a central theme in Iowa this week, as Trump and Vice President Joe Biden delivered competing speeches to win over support from rural Iowans. Democrats point to tariffs on China as an added burden on Iowa farmers that could cost Trump and the Republican Party rural support. And those tariffs could affect John Deere, a major local manufacturer.

Of course, the conversation surrounding tariffs could evolve or disappear over the next year and a half. But one Republican argued that Democrats have overstated the impact that tariffs will have on farmers, who are hoping for a fairer trade agreement. And some Iowa Democrats also note that the burden on farmers has been heavy for years for a variety of reasons, including recent flooding, and that tariffs might not be the magic bullet that national Democrats believe it is. But Democrats could use the issue of tariffs in order to open up a broader conversation about whether Iowa’s farmers feel their condition has improved under Trump’s leadership.

Outside the 4th District, Iowa Democrats don’t necessarily need to win small towns and rural areas in Iowa in order to win the most competitive races. In the 3rd District, for example, Democrat Cindy Axne won just one of 16 counties and still ousted GOP Rep. David Young in 2018. But if Democrats can receive about 35-40 percent outside the urban and suburban areas, according to one Democrat, they could be successful in most of Iowa.

A crowded Democratic presidential primary could help increase Democratic voter registration. But Democrats could also generate some national enthusiasm with a state ticket that’s dominated by women. At the moment, it’s likely that Finkenauer will appear on the ballot in the 1st, with Rita Hart in the 2nd District, Axne in the 3rd District, and Theresa Greenfield for Senate. (However, Greenfield could still face a primary from former 4th District nominee JD Scholten or Linn County Supervisor Stacey Walker. If Scholten doesn’t run for Senate, he could run against King again in the 4th.)

And even though President Trump won Iowa comfortably in 2016 (9 points), it’s probable that the Democratic presidential nominee challenges for the state’s six electoral votes.

The Bottom Line

Democrats can afford to lose some districts that Trump carried in 2016 and maintain the majority. But if Democrats are losing districts that Trump only narrowly carried, Republicans are likely within striking distance of recapturing the majority.

This year, Republicans are excited that they have a young, female candidate in Hinson to face Finkenauer. But it will take more than a strong profile to defeat Finkenauer. Republicans likely need a boost from a favorable political environment and for Hinson to prove herself as a strong candidate in a federal election.

There are lots of unknowns ahead of 2020, but it’s certain that Iowa will remain a major part of the conversation for the next year and a half — and not just because of the presidential election.