

Senate Re-Election Survivors And Presidential Job Approval

Presidential job approval is always a key factor in a midterm, posing challenging headwinds to candidates from the president's party. As polls show President Trump's job approval is becoming more challenging, there are concerns the Senate is in play more than initially expected. However, Senate race history shows that presidential job approval isn't always the sole determinant of incumbent re-election.

In 2022, national exit polls showed Biden job approval at 44-55, a difficult political headwind but not dissimilar from other presidents in their first midterm election (Obama 2010 44-55; Trump 2018, 45-54). But there were Senate Democratic incumbents who successfully weathered re-election despite an unpopular president in their home states: Cortez Masto in NV, Hassan in NH, Kelly in AZ, and Warnock in GA. Republicans attributed their losses to candidate quality, which definitely played a role. Based on exit polls in each state, GOP candidate quality wasn't the only factor in the result.

Except for Nevada, Biden job approval was worse in three of these four states than it was nationally (44-55). The main theme of the GOP attack ads against these incumbents was tying them to Biden and his spending/inflation agenda, but that ad strategy was not enough to defeat them.

2022 Senate Democratic incumbents who won re-election in states with negative presidential job approval <i>Source: Edison Research exit polls</i>	Biden Job Approval	Senate Dem Vote Among Voters Disapproving of Biden	Independent Margin
NV: Cortez Masto (D) vs Laxalt (R)	45-54	11%	-3R
AZ: Kelly (D) vs Masters (R)	43-57	15%	-16R
NH: Hassan (D) vs Bolduc (R)	42-57	19%	-11R
GA: Warnock (D) vs Walker (R)	41-58	11%	-11R

In two of the four states, Republicans had a party ID advantage (+2R in NV, +6R in GA), yet the Democratic incumbent won. In the other two states, independents significantly outnumbered Republican and Democratic voters (AZ: Ind 40 R 33 D 27, and NH: Ind 43 R 28 D 28) — meaning the Democratic incumbent had to have an effective strategy for winning that group, which was key to their success.

- In Nevada, Biden job approval was 45-54, and Republicans had a 2-point party ID advantage. Despite those headwinds for Democrats, Cortez Masto was able to survive by winning independents by 3. She won 11% of voters who disapproved of Biden.
- In Arizona, Biden's job approval was underwater 43-57, but Kelly was able to win independents by 16 and 15% of voters who disapproved of Biden.
- In New Hampshire, Biden job approval was 42-57, but Hassan held on by winning independents by 11 and 19% of voters disapproving of Biden.
- In Georgia, Republicans had a +6 party ID and Biden job approval was -17, but Warnock managed to win independents by 11 and 11% of voters disapproving of Biden.

A Republican example of a Senate incumbent winning re-election in a difficult state was Susan Collins in 2020. Despite the backdrop of Trump job approval at 41-58 in Maine, Collins pulled off a stunning victory with 9-point vote margin. Her success was through building a broad coalition that included independents (+3R), moderates (+7R) and women (+3R). She also won 18% of Biden voters in her state — a remarkable percentage of crossover vote. Collins won 23% of Maine voters who disapproved of President Trump, despite a -17 presidential job approval in her state.

Have a good weekend.

David & Myra