

Comparing the DCCC and NRCC's Rhetoric to Reality



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These organizations serve as their respective party's main vehicle for defending House incumbents in vulnerable districts as well as winning swing House districts held by the opposing party. And while external forces still play the predominant role in determining who wins the House majority and/or gains seats, the party committees' investments and backing can matter immensely in close races. And a committee's signal of support communicates to outside groups that the party believes certain races and candidates are competitive. To put it in perspective, of the 42 districts that Democrats flipped in 2018, all but two were in the DCCC's designated list of target races.

As of August 2020, formal endorsements are a better guide than actual money spent, as most spending begins in earnest after Labor Day. To date, an outsized share of party committees' spending for the cycle has been on special elections in 2019 and early 2020 like those in CA25 and NC09.

But decisions by the party committees aren't necessarily objective indicators. Sometimes they make their defensive list too small to suggest that their incumbents aren't in danger—and they end up leaving some Members out to dry. Sometimes, they make their offensive lists too big to communicate aggressiveness and momentum, but that can spread resources too thin. And sometimes the decisions involved are just about people and personalities. In 2018, the NRCC put Rep. Ben Ray Lujan's safe Democratic New Mexico district on its list of targets—with the singular goal of trolling him for being the DCCC chair that cycle. Lujan won the election by a two-to-one margin.

So, it pays to compare what the party committees are saying to more objective sources. Comparing a respected, nonpartisan prognosticator like Cook Political Report to the DCCC and NRCC lists, something important emerges: the DCCC is being much more honest with itself, its donors, and its outside allies than the NRCC in 2020.

One obvious example: NRCC Chair Rep. Tom Emmer recently said the NRCC was predicting 25 pickups “at a minimum” this cycle. That was despite Democrats leading the national congressional ballot 49% to 41% as of early-August.

Two key stats make this unlikely as the DCCC is playing a much better game than the NRCC. The first is that the DCCC has 96% of vulnerable incumbents in their incumbent protection plan, compared to the NRCC including just 68% of their vulnerable incumbents in their program. Another is that the DCCC is indicating it will play in three more competitive races than the NRCC, while the NRCC is saying they will play in six more non-competitive races than the DCCC.

Let's go deeper to see just how much the NRCC is deluding itself in its quest to take back the House majority.

Key House Party Committee Lists

The DCCC and NRCC each have two types of lists that mainly follow the formula of defensive and offensive targets.

DCCC Frontline

The DCCC Frontline program includes incumbent House Democrats running for reelection in tough swing districts. The DCCC tends to produce this list early in the cycle, and it doesn't change. There are 42 House Democrats in the 2020 Frontline program.

NRCC Patriot Program

The NRCC Patriot Program is identical to the DCCC Frontline program. There are currently 17 House Republicans in the Patriot Program.

DCCC Red to Blue

The DCCC Red to Blue list includes promising candidates running in districts without a Democratic incumbent (challengers and open R or D seats). The DCCC chooses only one candidate per district, so Red to Blue includes nominees or candidates the DCCC endorsed before the primary. In rare cases, the DCCC does not put a promising candidate on Red to Blue because they are basically assured a win. In 2020, neither Kathy Manning nor Deborah Ross in North Carolina are part of Red to Blue, because redistricting meant that both are in safe Democratic districts. The DCCC currently has 31 candidates on its Red to Blue list.

NRCC Young Guns

While Young Guns serves the same purpose as Red to Blue, it's a larger list. The NRCC includes candidates certain to hold safe Republican seats. And the Young Guns list can include multiple candidates from the same district. The NRCC currently has 78 candidates in their Young Guns program.

An Objective Look: Cook Political Report's Map

Cook Political Report ranks all 435 congressional districts every cycle, rating them 'Solid,' 'Likely,' or 'Lean' for one party, or a 'Toss Up'. As of August 21, 2020, Cook ranked 190 districts as Solid Democratic, 17 as Likely Democratic, 14 as Lean Democratic (221) versus 14 as Lean Republican, 17 as Likely Republican, and 155 as Solid Republican (186). The remaining 28 districts are listed as Toss Up,

One of Cook's chief pundits, Dave Wasserman, won a "No Tossups" ratings challenge in November 2018 against other prominent prognosticators, getting 429 correct answers out of a possible 434.¹ This compares to Kyle Kondik of Sabato's Crystal Ball, who correctly predicted 423, Nate Silver of Five Thirty Eight who got 422, Rachel Bitecofer of Niskanen Center who called 422, and Harry Enten of CNN who nailed 421.

Based on this stellar performance from 2018, we will rely on the Cook Political Report's 2020 House ratings as a baseline to determine if the DCCC and NRCC are putting their time and money into races that make sense—or using their lists to posture.

The 2020 Battlefield

Competitive Races (Toss Up & Lean)

Toss Up Races

As of August 21, 2020, there are 28 Cook 'Toss Up' races, with 16 held by Democrats and 12 by Republicans. These are the races most likely to be decided at the margins, so a party

committee's investment or direction of resources could make all the difference. Thus, one would expect these seats to show up on both party's House target lists.

It turns out that the DCCC has 14 Frontline members and 13 Red to Blue members in these 28 races, for a total of 27/28. The one exception is Rep. Collin Peterson (MN), who has historically shunned participation in the Frontline program—which means his exclusion from the list is likely his own choice.

The NRCC, for its part, has four Patriot Program members and 20 Young Gun races in these 28 races for a total of 24/28. The four incumbents who aren't part of the program are Reps. David Schweikert (AZ), Ann Wagner (MO), Scott Perry (PA), and Chip Roy (TX). The three men are Freedom Caucus hardliners probably eschewing the NRCC while Wagner is a former state party chair and one-time RNC candidate who probably thinks her team is strong enough on its own (similar to how former NRCC Chair Rep. Pete Sessions never joined Patriot Program in 2018; though he ultimately lost). In Perry's case, mid-decade redistricting shifted his district from safe Republican to more competitive.

So, the DCCC's toss-up list is much more accurate thanks to a willingness of its incumbents to recognize their own vulnerability and participate in such a program. Another possible explanation is that Republicans are attempting to make the cycle look less menacing by leaving out four vulnerable incumbents from their list.

Lean Races

There currently are 28 Cook 'Lean' races, with 14 rated as Lean Democratic and 14 as Lean Republican. These are the next most competitive races.

The DCCC has 12 Frontline members and 12 Red to Blue members in these 28 races for a total of 24/28. The four missing include FL15, where a competitive primary remains and the DCCC appears to be staying neutral, and TX10, where the nominee is a 2018 repeat who ran 4 points behind Beto O'Rourke who still needs to prove himself organizationally and financially. The other two are NY01 and TX03 which are late cycle emerging battlegrounds with first time candidates.

The NRCC has nine Patriot Program members and 15 Young Guns in these 30 races for a total of 24/28. The NRCC leaves off vulnerable Rep. Ross Spano (FL), who is being investigated by the Justice Department for campaign finance violations, as well as freshmen Rep. Van Taylor (TX) who is probably shocked to be a competitive race in his historically conservative district in the Dallas suburbs. And their Young Guns program doesn't include their nominee in VA05, where far right hardliner Bob Good defeated a Republican incumbent and could be ignoring the NRCC unlike two incumbent slayers who are part of Young Guns. And in NY19, the

nominee has seen abysmal fundraising, only garnering \$20K so far, so the NRCC could be punishing him until he gets his act together.

For Cook 'Lean' races, the DCCC and NRCC have each put together an equally realistic picture of the battlefield.

Non-Competitive Races (Likely & Solid)

Likely Races

As of August 21, 2020, there are 34 Cook 'Likely' races, with 17 rated as Likely Democratic and 17 as Likely Republican. Cook defines Likely races as those that are not considered competitive but have the potential to become engaged. Here, the NRCC is investing a lot more in races they may not win.

The DCCC has 10 Frontline members and six Red to Blue members for a total of 16/34. The DCCC excluded five incumbents: Reps. Donna Shalala (FL), Cheri Bustos (IL), Sean Patrick Maloney (NY), Peter DeFazio (OR), and Ron Kind (WI). Bustos represents a swing district, but her personal popularity makes her less vulnerable than a generic Democrat. Indeed, Democrats made her the chair of the DCCC rather than an official Frontline member. Maloney, DeFazio, and Kind are longstanding non-controversial incumbents who can overperform in their districts compared to the generic Democrat.

The Cook Likely districts held by Republicans that the DCCC has not put in Red to Blue are CA04, CA22, CO03, FL18, KY06, NC02, NC06, NC09, NC11, OH12, TX06, TX25, and TX31. As noted, in North Carolina, the party committee is probably rightfully treating those as automatic pickups. The others are probably situations where the DCCC would like the candidates to prove themselves to see if they can make the race more competitive.

The NRCC has four Patriot Program members and 16 Young Guns races in Cook Likely races, for a total of 20/34. The NRCC has not included incumbent Reps. French Hill (AR), Tom McClintock (CA), Devin Nunes (CA), Vern Buchanan (FL), Dan Bishop (NC), Mike Turner (OH), Troy Balderson (OH), Dan Crenshaw (TX), Ron Wright (TX), and Roger Williams (TX). They also didn't include their Republican nominees in California's 10th, Kansas' 2nd, North Carolina's 2nd, North Carolina's 6th. The California nominee was removed after controversial and offensive statements came out, while in Kansas, the nominee knocked off an incumbent, and inclusion could be imminent.

The race in Cook's 'Likely' category where neither party has indicated involvement include CA04, CA22, NC02, NC06, NC09, OH12, TX06, and TX25 which means that at least one party has indicated they are contesting 26/34 districts in this category. Six of the eight not being contested are seats Republicans have that will probably be just out of reach for Democrats

unless a massive Democratic wave forms while two North Carolina districts are almost assuredly Democratic pickups.

Solid Races

There are 345 'Solid' races according to Cook, including 190 Solid Democratic ones and 155 Solid Republican ones. In order to avoid wasting resources, national parties try to keep their investment in these races low, so the appearance of a significant number of these seats on DCCC or NRCC lists could raise eyebrows.

The DCCC has six Frontline incumbents in Solid Democratic races—Reps. Katie Porter (CA), Mike Levin (CA), Jason Crow (CO), Jahana Hayes (CT), Sean Casten (IL), and Mikie Sherrill (NJ). They have zero Red to Blue candidates in Solid Republican races. This means the DCCC has only designated 6/345 Solid races as competitive.

The NRCC has zero Patriot Program incumbents in a Solid Republican race, but they have eight Young Guns in races that are listed as Solid Democratic. This includes CA49, CO06, FL07, FL13, IL06, MN03, NJ11, and VA10. That means the NRCC has designated 8/345 Solid races as potentially competitive.

The NRCC Young Gun program also includes candidates in safe Republican open seats in AL01, AL02, CA08, CA50, FL19, IA04, IL15, MI10, OR02, TX11, TX13, TX17, UT01, WI05. Because of the unique nature of the NRCC Young Guns program, we are not counting these incoming freshmen against the NRCC.

The only races that appears on both lists is are CA49, CO06, IL06, and NJ11 which are Solid Democratic races with incumbents looking much better today than they did at the beginning of the cycle thanks to Trump's continued poor ratings in the suburbs.

One important note is that the NRCC has more races in the Cook Solid category due to undue optimism, promoting candidates who have no shot of knocking off a Democratic incumbent. By contrast, the DCCC is being extra cautious by including some freshmen incumbents in Frontline who flipped districts in 2018 but now appear safe.

The Bottom Line

As noted, the two biggest differences between House party committee rhetoric and reality at this point are (1) the DCCC is doing a better job identifying and supporting willing incumbents, and (2) the DCCC appears to be ready to better compete in competitive races than Republicans, who are more involved in non-competitive races, especially Likely or Solid Democratic ones.

The DCCC Frontline list is a fairly accurate portrayal of their incumbents' vulnerabilities. Cook lists 27 Democratic incumbents in the competitive categories of Toss Up or Lean Democratic.

Of those, 26 are part of Frontline, meaning that 96% of vulnerable incumbents are included.

On the other hand, the NRCC Patriot Program is an unrealistically rosy picture of this cycle for Republicans. Cook lists 19 Republican incumbents in the competitive categories of Toss Up or Lean Republican. However, only 13 are part of the Patriot Program, for a 68% inclusion rate—about two-thirds the rate of the DCCC.

DCCC Targeting Advantage

When you look at the whole playing field, it becomes clear that the DCCC is spending its time and resources in mainly Toss Up and Lean races, while the NRCC is investing in more races that are either already likely wins (with or without their support) or huge longshots. The DCCC is indicating play in three more Toss Up / Lean races than the NRCC, while the NRCC is targeting six more Likely and Solid races than the DCCC.

Lean Dem	Toss Up	Lean GOP	Likely GOP	Solid GOP
14/14	27/28	10/14	6/17	0/155
13/14	24/28	11/14	6/17	0/155
DCCC + 1	DCCC + 3	NRCC + 1	Tied	Tied

Conclusion

When compared to objective analysis, the DCCC is doing a better job of targeting than the NRCC is this cycle. This will serve Democratic donors, activists, and outside groups well, since the DCCC appears to be creating a realistic path forward to protect and expand Democrats’ majority.

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ENDNOTES

1. The 435th contest was in North Carolina’s 9th district, which was declared void due after Republican Mark Harris’ campaign was found to have conducted mass election fraud. This race is not counted for or against anyone.