

Dem v. Dem House Races Show the Pragmatic Progressive Path Forward



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Democrats will retain control of the U.S. House in the next Congress, but the party fell short of expectations in down-ballot races in 2020. With a handful of races still uncalled, Democrats are on track to lose around a dozen seats. But while House races were disappointing for many who expected Pelosi's majority margin to grow, they were also clarifying for the trajectory of the party into the future. Democrats' coalition is ideologically diverse, and we are stronger for it, but the foundation of our coalition is mainstream, pragmatic progressive voters who support elected officials in this same mold—not the far left that dominates on social media.

No race this cycle exemplified Democrats' pragmatic progressive trajectory more than Washington's 10th Congressional District (WA-10). This is my home district; it is a diverse community. It is home to one of the most liberal colleges in the country, the Evergreen State College, a large active duty and retired military population at Fort Lewis, and thousands of state workers in the capital of Olympia. It isn't a swing district, but it also is not

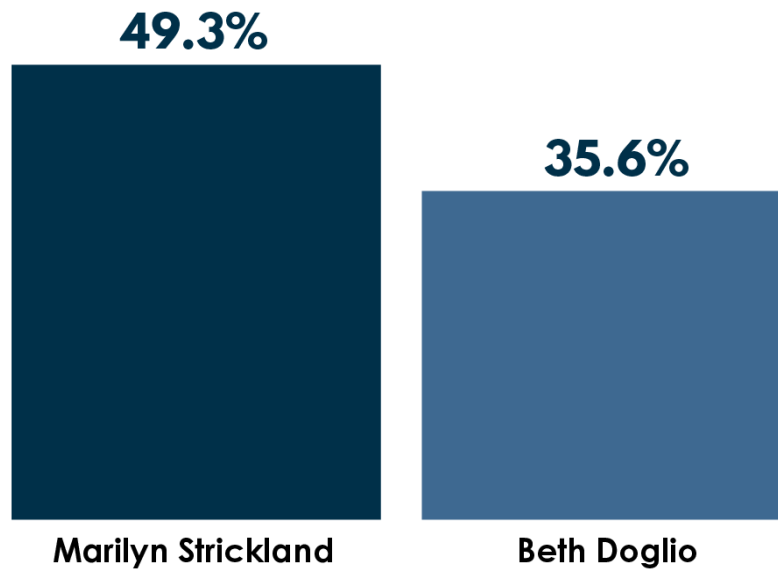
overwhelmingly Democratic. It is five percentage points more Democratic than the nation. So, it's a good barometer for the preferences of mainstream Democratic voters.

What made the race a good test is that two Democrats faced off in the general election, due to Washington's top-two primary system. Former Tacoma mayor Marilyn Strickland positioned herself as a pragmatic progressive and aligned with House Democrats' New Democrat Coalition, while state Rep. Beth Doglio allied with the Bernie Sanders wing of the party. The race was a case study for which ideological path voters want the party to pursue.

Going into the election, it would have been easy to assume that Doglio was favored in the race. She had the support of high-profile progressives like Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. National Democratic and progressive groups spent at least \$1.2 million in support of her campaign. And progressive activists described her as one of the candidates who could shape the future of the party. Strickland carried the endorsement of the New Democrats' Action Fund, but she had been out of elected office for nearly three years and did not garner the same national attention or financial support.

So, what happened? Strickland won, and she won decisively. With most of the vote counted, Strickland has an insurmountable 49.3% to 35.6% lead over Doglio. Strickland won her home county of Pierce County by 21 points, but she also won Doglio's base of Thurston County by over three points. It was a convincing victory for the pragmatic progressive choice in a district that reflects the mainstream of the Democratic Party.

Strickland Defeated Doglio by Double Digits



And how did she do it? Strickland centered her campaign on bold but actionable solutions that resonated with voters' lives. She pledged to support a health care public option, so that more Americans could access Medicare (but not Medicare for All). She called for immediate action on climate change, including by implementing the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis' action plan (but not the Green New Deal). And she supported comprehensive immigration reform and protections for DREAMers, so that immigrant families can join us as Americans. Doglio would have been a dedicated and thoughtful representative for WA-10, but her agenda did not fit this district. Her policies may be a hit on Twitter, but they clearly do not resonate with the lived experience of mainstream Democrats in places like WA-10.

The lesson that Democrats can draw from WA-10 is that as the party works to reinforce its down-ballot power over the next few years, it is the mainstream, pragmatic progressive candidates who are best positioned to deliver victories for Democrats. This is true in the swing districts that ultimately determine majorities, but it is also true in solidly Democratic districts like where I am from in WA-10. Pragmatic progressivism is the future for the party, if we want to sustain and grow majorities.

Democrats did have setbacks in down-ballot races in 2020, but the cycle also made clear the best ideological path forward for the party. The moderate Joe Biden won a resounding victory

in the primary and went on to end the Trump presidency. And WA-10 wasn't the only pragmatic progressive triumph over a more left-wing candidate. In California's 53rd Congressional District, fellow New Democrat-backed candidate Sara Jacobs convincingly defeated Georgette Gómez, who had the support of the far-left Justice Democrats. And candidates endorsed by groups like Justice Democrats and Our Revolution failed yet again to flip a congressional seat from red to blue this election, a distinction reserved for New Democrat-backed candidates. The bottom line is mainstream Democrats who make up the bulk of our coalition prefer mainstream candidates, and that is an essential lesson as we focus on down-ballot power in the years to come.

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