

Moderates: The Key to Retaining the Senate



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This report analyzes the competitive Senate races and finds that moderates will be central to determining which party wins the majority. Drawing upon exit poll data, Democrats will need to win more than half of moderates in every one of the competitive eleven Senate races to prevail in those states. In fact, Democrats need to win more than two-thirds of moderates in seven of the eleven races. In this report, we demonstrate that moderates are crucial to keeping the Senate Democratic and provide detailed state-by-state analysis of the role moderates will play in these pivotal Senate elections.

The Overview

There are 36 Senate seats up for election this year, including 33 in-cycle and 3 special elections. Of those, 21 are currently held by Democrats and 15 by Republicans. However, only eleven seats are competitive—Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, and North Carolina. Once we sort the safe and likely seats between the parties, Democrats would have 44 seats—the 34 not in cycle and the 10 they are expected to win—and Republicans would have 45 seats—30 not in cycle and 15 they are expected to win.* Democrats would need to win six of the eleven competitive races to keep a majority—with Vice President Joe Biden serving as the tie breaking vote. Republicans would need to win six of the eleven toss-ups to take a majority. All of this, of course, is complicated by candidates running as Independents, who could caucus with either party.

* Republicans are expected to win Montana, South Dakota, and West Virginia, which are currently Democratic seats. A full list of seats up for election is available in the Appendix.

We calculated the percentage of moderates each candidate would need to win based on 2008 exit polls—the last time

these seats were up for election. A midterm electorate may look slightly different, but if so, it would more likely trend in the conservative direction—meaning if anything, these estimates are generous to Democrats. Conversely, Democrats believe they have the superior “ground game,” and if so, this could make turnout a bit more favorable to Democrats than other mid-term elections. Assuming as is fairly typical that Democratic candidates win 85% of self-described liberals and 15% of self-described conservatives—and vice versa for Republicans—we estimated the proportion of the moderate vote necessary for each candidate to woo in order to get over the finish line. In every one of these eleven races, the Democratic candidate needs a minimum of 52% of moderates—and in most cases even more. This is largely due to the composition of the electorate in these states, which have fewer liberals and more conservatives than the national average.

Estimated Percentage of Moderates Senate Candidates Need to Win in 2014

State	Democratic Candidate Needs Greater Than:	Republican Candidate Needs Greater Than:
Alaska	67.5%	32.5%
Arkansas	72.0%	28.0%
Colorado	64.5%	35.5%
Georgia	68.6%	31.4%
Iowa	64.3%	35.7%
Kansas	66.7%	33.3%
Kentucky	67.1%	32.9%
Louisiana	71.7%	28.3%
Michigan	55.6%	44.4%
New Hampshire	51.5%	48.5%
North Carolina	67.1%	32.9%
Average	65.1%	34.9%

In seven of the eleven states which will likely determine control of the Senate, Democrats need to win more than two-thirds of moderates or more to prevail. In four of the eight seats currently held by a Democratic Senator, that Democratic incumbent needs more than two-thirds of moderates. In every race except Michigan and New Hampshire, the Republican candidate needs to win less than 40% of the moderate vote—demonstrating how much more important

moderates are to assembling winning Democratic coalitions than Republican ones.

Moderates were a plurality of voters in ten of the eleven toss-up states in 2008—meaning they outnumbered both liberals and conservatives. On average, the Senators elected in 2008 won 61% of moderates—although this ranges from a high of 85% for Arkansas Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor (who didn’t have a Republican challenger that year) to a low of 40% for Georgia Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss.

Senate Toss-Ups and Moderate Voters in 2008

	Moderates Won	Moderates in the Electorate
Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK)	57%	46%
Sen. Mark Pryor (D-AR)	85%	43%
Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO)	63%	46%
Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA)	40%	47%
Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA)	74%	44%
Sen. Pat Roberts (R-KS)	53%	46%
Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY)	43%	45%
Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA)	63%	42%
Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI)	71%	44%
Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH)	55%	46%
Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC)	64%	43%
Average	61%	45%

Since midterm electorates do tend to differ from presidential ones, we also compared the 2008 exit poll data to off-year elections in these states to get a range of potential outcomes. Those data are discussed in the individual state snapshots below.*

Alaska

Democratic Sen. Mark Begich won a close election in 2008 to unseat then Sen. Ted Stevens. Sen. Begich is now facing Daniel Sullivan, former state Department of Natural Resources Commissioner and former Alaska Attorney General. Recent polling suggests a close race, with poll averages tilting in Sullivan’s favor over the past month.

The only recent exit poll we have for Alaska is from 2008. That year, moderates composed 46% of voters, and Sen. Begich won 57% of the moderate vote. Sen. Begich also won 86% of liberals and 21% of conservatives. That conservative

number is likely inflated slightly for Sen. Begich owing to his last opponent's ethics charges. For comparison, Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain won 85% of conservatives, while Sen. Stevens took only 72% in that race.

2008 Alaska Senate Election by Ideology

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
State Electorate	16%	46%	39%
Sen. Begich won	86%	57%	21%
Sen. Stevens won	14%	37%	72%

If we assume a stable ideological split in the electorate, and that Sen. Begich wins 85% of liberals and 15% of conservatives while Dan Sullivan wins 85% of conservatives and 15% of liberals, Sen. Begich would need to win more than 67.5% of moderates to keep his seat in 2014.

Arkansas

Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor was first elected to the Senate in 2002 after he unseated Republican incumbent Sen. Tim Hutchinson. Former Sen. Hutchinson was dogged by claims by Pryor that he was “too conservative” for Arkansas, but a contributing issue was a divorce and quick marriage to a former staffer in the summer of 1999 after voting to impeach President Bill Clinton. In 2008, Sen. Pryor drew a minor party opponent (Green Party candidate Rebekah Kennedy) and was easily reelected. This year he faces Republican House Rep. Tom Cotton.

Since 2008 was a presidential election year and midterm electorates have tended to differ in some ways, we have supplemented this analysis with data from the 2010 Arkansas Senate race. In 2010, former Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln lost reelection to now Republican Sen. John Boozman. The big difference in the composition of the electorate was that in 2010, there were 3 points fewer liberals, 5 points fewer moderates, and 9 points more conservatives—not surprising as midterm electorates have tended to skew older and more conservative in recent elections (though 2010 may have been a high water mark as it was the wave election that put the Tea Party on the map). Even though Sen. Lincoln won moderates

that year, her 55% was not enough to bring her over the finish line.

Arkansas Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	15%	12%	43%	38%	42%	51%
Democrat Won	87%	84%	85%	55%	69%	12%
Challenger Won*	13%	14%	15%	41%	31%	83%

* In 2008, Sen. Pryor did not have a Republican challenger. His rival was Green Party candidate Rebekah Kennedy. The data for 2010 are for Republican Sen. Boozman.

If we assume that the Sen. Pryor will win 85% of liberal voters and 15% of conservative voters—and vice versa for Rep. Tom Cotton—we can calculate a range of moderates Sen. Pryor would need depending on the electorate. With a 2008 Arkansas electorate, Sen. Pryor would need to win more than 72% of moderates. Under a 2010 scenario, which is less favorable to Democrats, he would need more than 85.9% of the moderate vote. In states with such few liberals, Democrats need to win many more moderates to make up the difference.

Colorado

Democratic Sen. Mark Udall was first elected to the Senate in 2008 after serving a decade in the House. He defeated former Republican Rep. Bob Schaffer in a race for the open Senate seat. His challenger this year is Rep. Cory Gardner, who served in Colorado's state House before winning his current seat in the U.S. House in the Tea Party wave of 2010.

We have supplemented data from Sen. Udall's 2008 election with the 2010 Senate election in Colorado to capture differences between presidential and midterm electorates. In contrast to other states, Colorado voters were actually more liberal in the 2010 midterm election than in the 2008 presidential election. They were also more conservative and boasted fewer moderates.

Colorado Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	17%	22%	46%	38%	36%	40%
Democrat Won	93%	95%	63%	60%	18%	11%
Republican Won	7%	2%	32%	36%	78%	82%

Once again assuming that Sen. Udall receives 85% of liberal votes and 15% of conservative ones—and vice versa for Rep. Gardner—we can calculate the moderate support necessary for either to win. Whether the electorate looks more like 2008 or 2010, Sen. Udall would need about two-thirds (64.5% or 66.6%) of moderates to be reelected.

Georgia

The retirement of Republican incumbent Sen. Saxby Chambliss has provided an opening for Democrats to compete in Georgia. Michelle Nunn, the daughter of popular former Sen. Sam Nunn, is the Democratic nominee. The Republican nominee is David Perdue, cousin of former Gov. Sunny Perdue. Both are running as political outsiders.

This Senate seat was last up for election in 2008.

Unfortunately, we do not have 2010 exit poll data to compare with presidential year data. However, there is exit poll data from the 2006 Governor's race in Georgia which can supplement the 2008 numbers. There was not much change in the composition of the electorate in these two years—only a slight shift away from conservatives and towards liberals and moderates in 2008.

Georgia Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2006	2008	2006	2008	2006	2008
State Electorate	13%	14%	45%	47%	42%	39%
Democrat Won	77%	85%	46%	57%	14%	19%
Republican Won	18%	9%	50%	40%	82%	77%

If we were to assume that the Michelle Nunn wins 85% of the liberal vote and 15% of the conservative vote—and vice versa for David Perdue—we can estimate the percent of moderates each needs to win. Nunn would need more than 68.6% (based on a 2008 electorate) and more than 72.6% of moderates

(based on a 2006 electorate), depending on whether the ideology of Georgia voters in 2014 mirrors a presidential year (2008) or a midterm electorate (2006).

Iowa

With the announcement of Democratic incumbent Sen. Tom Harkin's retirement, there is a rare open Senate seat in Iowa for the first time in thirty years. Rep. Bruce Braley, who served in the House since 2006, is the Democratic nominee. State Sen. Joni Ernst is the Republican nominee.

In looking at Iowa exit poll data over successive elections, there is scant difference in the composition of voters by ideology. There is considerable variation in how well candidates perform among these groups, but that is likely driven by the individual candidates themselves. For example, in 2008 Democratic Sen. Harkin won 30% of conservatives on his way to a 26-point victory. In 2010, Republican Terri Branstad captured 41% of moderates on his way to the Governor's mansion. Again we see that Democrats need a bigger proportion of moderates to assemble a winning coalition than do Republican candidates.

Iowa Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	19%	18%	44%	43%	37%	39%
Democrat Won	92%	85%	74%	55%	30%	9%
Republican Won	8%	12%	25%	41%	69%	89%

Once more applying our formula where the Democrat wins 85% of liberals and 15% of conservatives—and vice versa for Republicans—we can estimate that Rep. Braley will need more than 64.3% (based on a 2008 electorate) and more than 67.1% (based on a 2010 electorate) of moderate voters to take the Senate seat in 2014.

Kansas

Clichés aside, the Kansas Senate race has become one of the most intriguing of the cycle. First, Republican incumbent Sen. Roberts drew a primary challenger from the right, who

focused on Sen. Roberts' residency issues. Sen. Roberts defeated Tea Party challenger Milton Wolf, but he failed to receive a majority of Republican primary votes. Shortly after, the Democratic nominee, Chad Taylor, withdrew from the race and threw his support behind Independent candidate Greg Orman. Polls show a tight race between Roberts and Orman. Orman has not stated with which party he would align should he be sent to Washington, and he has both Republican and Democratic staffers on his campaign.

The only recent exit polling we have in Kansas is from 2008, when Sen. Roberts defeated Democratic candidate and former U.S. Rep. Jim Slattery by 24 points. That year Sen. Roberts won 20% of liberals and 53% of moderates.

2008 Kansas Senate Election by Ideology

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
State Electorate	16%	46%	38%
Jim Slattery won	76%	46%	11%
Sen. Roberts won	20%	53%	88%

If we use the 2008 exit poll as our guide to the electorate and assume that Sen. Roberts will win 85% of conservatives and 15% of liberals, while Independent candidate Greg Orman will win 85% of liberals and 15% of conservatives, we can estimate the percent of moderates each would need. Orman would need more than 66.7% of moderates and Sen. Roberts more than 33.3% to win in November.

Kentucky

Incumbent Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell is defending his seat from Democratic challenger and current Kentucky Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes. Sen. McConnell has been in office for thirty years, but he has faced tough races in the past and survived.

We have supplemented the 2008 Senate exit poll data with that of 2010—although the changes were quite minimal with only one point fewer liberals, three points fewer moderates, and three points more conservatives. In both years, the

Democratic candidate won 57% of moderates—but that was not enough.

Kentucky Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	17%	16%	45%	42%	39%	42%
Democrat Won	80%	83%	57%	57%	21%	16%
Republican Won	20%	16%	43%	43%	79%	83%

We can estimate the range of moderate votes Grimes needs to win in November based on the same 85%-15% formula for liberals and conservatives used in the above examples. Grimes would need more than 67.1% (based on a 2008 electorate) and 71.7% (based on a 2010 electorate) of moderate voters to prevail in November.

Louisiana

Democratic incumbent Sen. Mary Landrieu was first elected to the Senate in 1996. In 2008, she defeated Democrat-turned-Republican state Treasurer John Kennedy. This year, her main rival is Rep. Bill Cassidy. However, in Louisiana's election process, all candidates are listed on the general election ballot, and if no one receives 50% plus one vote, then there is a run-off between the top two candidates. Currently, no one is breaking 50% in the publicly available polling, suggesting this one is heading for a redo in December.

The last time Sen. Landrieu was up for reelection in 2008, moderates were a plurality of the electorate, outnumbering even conservatives. But in 2010, the electorate was five points more conservative, and less moderate and liberal, than the presidential electorate.

Louisiana Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	16%	14%	42%	39%	42%	47%
Democrat Won	83%	82%	63%	48%	30%	15%
Republican Won	15%	16%	35%	45%	69%	80%

Based on these two different election year turnouts, we can construct a range of likely scenarios. Assuming the 85%-15% performance among liberals and conservatives respectively by

Sen. Landrieu—and vice versa for Rep. Cassidy—Sen. Landrieu would need more than 71.7% (based on a 2008 electorate) and more than 79.6% (based on a 2010 electorate) of the moderate vote to retain her seat. There is one caveat. Sen. Landrieu took 30% of the conservative vote in 2008. If she can make inroads among conservative voters, she may be able to win reelection with fewer moderates.

Michigan

Democratic incumbent Sen. Carl Levin’s retirement announcement left an open contest in Michigan. The Democratic nominee is current Rep. Gary Peters. The Republican candidate is Terri Lynn Land, a former Michigan Secretary of State who was elected to the RNC in 2012.

We don’t have 2010 exit polling from Michigan. But we can use 2006 to compare midterm and presidential year turnouts. The presidential electorate was four points more liberal and three points less moderate than the midterm electorate that preceded it. The number of conservative voters was relatively stable.

Michigan Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2006	2008	2006	2008	2006	2008
State Electorate	21%	25%	47%	44%	31%	32%
Democrat Won	85%	90%	64%	71%	24%	27%
Republican Won	13%	8%	34%	26%	74%	70%

Using the 85%-15% liberal-conservative performance guide for Peters—and the reverse for Land—we can estimate the range of moderates needed for victory by comparing the 2006 and 2008 electorates. Rep. Peters would need more than 55.6% (based on a 2008 electorate) and more than 57.4% (based on a 2006 electorate) of moderates to win. He is one of two Senate Democratic candidates in a competitive election this year projected to win with fewer than 60% of moderate support.

New Hampshire

Former Governor and one-term Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen is running for reelection this year against former Sen. Scott Brown (R-MA). Sen. Shaheen first ran for the U.S. Senate in 2002, when she lost election to Sen. John Sununu. Six years later she defeated him by seven points.

There are big differences in the two most recent New Hampshire U.S. Senate elections. Between 2008 and 2010, the share of liberals fell six points, the share of moderates fell four points, and the share of conservatives rose ten points. Sen. Shaheen would need to win many more moderates if the 2014 electorate resembles the more conservative midterm electorate of 2010 over the friendlier presidential one when she was first elected.

New Hampshire Senate Exit Poll by Ideology

	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
State Electorate	26%	20%	46%	42%	28%	38%
Democrat Won	89%	86%	55%	43%	15%	5%
Republican Won	9%	12%	42%	54%	83%	92%

Assuming that Sen. Shaheen would take 85% of liberal voters and 15% of conservative ones—and former Sen. Scott Brown the reverse—she would need more than 51.5% of moderates to win in 2014.

North Carolina

In 2008, Democrat Sen. Kay Hagan defeated incumbent Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole. That same year President Obama won North Carolina. By 2012, Pres. Obama didn't even actively campaign in North Carolina. Republican Pat McCrory won the gubernatorial election, and Republicans in the state legislature established super majorities. Democratic triumphs in 2008 seemed like an aberration at that point. But recent polling suggests that Sen. Hagan is resilient. And Republican overreach at the state level has dogged her opponent—State House Speaker Thom Tillis.

Unfortunately, there isn't recent midterm election polling for North Carolina. However, turning to the 2008 exit poll when Sen. Hagan defeated Sen. Dole, we can see that moderates

were the plurality of voters. Assuming that Sen. Hagan wins 85% of liberals and 15% of conservatives—and vice versa for state House Speaker Tillis—Sen. Hagan would need more than 67.1% of moderate voters in 2014.

2008 North Carolina Senate Election by Ideology

	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
State Electorate	18%	43%	39%
Sen. Hagan won	89%	64%	19%
Sen. Dole won	6%	33%	78%

Conclusion

This year's Senate map is tough for Democrats. Seven of the eleven states with competitive Senate races voted for Mitt Romney in 2012. The other four are swing states in presidential elections. As ideology has become increasingly sorted onto party identification—whereby most liberals support Democrats and most conservatives support Republicans—moderates hold the key for Democratic victories in red and purple states. Without capturing greater than an average of 65.1% of moderates, the Democratic majority in the Senate could be in trouble. In November 2014, there is no question that control of the Senate will be decided by voters in the middle.

Appendix

Cook Political Report Race Ratings as of October 10, 2014

Name	State	Party	Cook Rating
Jeff Sessions	Alabama	Republican	Solid R
Mark Begich	Alaska	Democratic	Toss-Up
Mark Pryor	Arkansas	Democratic	Toss-Up
Mark Udall	Colorado	Democratic	Toss-Up
Chris Coons	Delaware	Democratic	Solid D
Saxby Chambliss*	Georgia	Republican	Toss-Up
Brian Schatz	Hawaii	Democratic	Solid D
Jim Risch	Idaho	Republican	Solid R
Richard Durbin	Illinois	Democratic	Solid D
Tom Harkin*	Iowa	Democratic	Toss-Up
Pat Roberts	Kansas	Republican	Toss-Up
Mitch McConnell	Kentucky	Republican	Toss-Up
Mary Landrieu	Louisiana	Democratic	Toss-Up
Susan Collins	Maine	Republican	Solid R
Carl Levin*	Michigan	Democratic	Lean D
Al Franken	Minnesota	Democratic	Likely D
Thad Cochran	Mississippi	Republican	Likely R
John Walsh*	Montana	Democratic	Solid R
Mike Johanns*	Nebraska	Republican	Solid R
Jeanne Shaheen	New Hampshire	Democratic	Lean D
Cory Booker	New Jersey	Democratic	Solid D
Tom Udall	New Mexico	Democratic	Solid D
Kay Hagan	North Carolina	Democratic	Toss-Up
Jim Inhofe	Oklahoma	Republican	Solid R
Tom Coburn*	Oklahoma	Republican	Solid R
Jeff Merkley	Oregon	Democratic	Likely D
Jack Reed	Rhode Island	Democratic	Solid D
Lindsey Graham	South Carolina	Republican	Solid R
Tim Scott	South Carolina	Republican	Solid R
Tim Johnson*	South Dakota	Democratic	Likely R
Lamar Alexander	Tennessee	Republican	Solid R
John Cornyn	Texas	Republican	Solid R
Mark Warner	Virginia	Democratic	Likely D
Jay Rockefeller*	West Virginia	Democratic	Likely R
Mike Enzi	Wyoming	Republican	Solid R

* Indicates incumbent is retiring.

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