

OPINION: HUGIN LOSS WAS ESPECIALLY DEMORALIZING FOR NJ REPUBLICANS

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 8, 2018

It's nearly 50 years since Garden State voters chose a GOP candidate to represent them in the U.S. Senate. It's becoming a distant prospect



Carl Golden

If you live in New Jersey and are 40 years of age or older, your chances of hitting the Mega Millions and Powerball jackpots in the same week are more favorable than the election of a Republican to the United States Senate in your lifetime.

Any doubt about future outcomes was erased and any hope for a Republican victory at any point was dashed with the re-election of Sen. Robert Menendez.

It's closing in on half a century since a Republican was elected to the Senate for New Jersey and with Menendez serving until 2024 and his colleague Sen. Cory Booker until 2020 – when he will surely win if he seeks re-election – Republican futility will be forever sealed.

There existed a glimmer of hope for Republicans that this year the tide would turn as a result of Menendez's federal corruption trial last fall. He was extremely vulnerable, the belief went, with daily revelations for nearly two months of allegations that he had used his office to seek favorable treatment for a Florida physician in return for paid vacations, hotel stays, airline travel and campaign contributions.

The physician, an eye doctor, is currently serving a 17-year prison sentence for defrauding Medicare of some \$73 million.

Ethical baggage, no problem

Menendez went to trial and walked out of the courthouse a free man because the jury failed to reach a unanimous verdict. The government had failed to prove its case and quickly decided to drop all charges rather than re-try the Senator.

This ethical baggage – some of it distressingly sordid – would prove too great a burden for Menendez, Republicans believed, and Democratic Party leaders would persuade him to abandon his re-election effort or, failing that, voters would rise up in righteous indignation and toss the Senator to the curb.

In addition, the Republican nominee, retired biopharmaceutical executive Bob Hugin, appeared to be a high-quality candidate and, just as importantly, was prepared to self-finance his campaign.

Menendez stoutly refused any entreaties for him to step aside and party leaders – Gov. Phil Murphy and Booker – swallowed whatever misgivings they may have had about their ethically-flawed colleague and closed ranks behind him.

Armed with millions of dollars in support from the national party, banking on a voter registration edge of nearly one million more Democrats than Republicans, and hoping the party would construct a well-oiled voter turnout effort, Menendez coasted to a 10-point victory.

The Trump card for Menendez

His most powerful weapon, though, was none of the above. It was the President of the United States.

Hugin was among the largest of contributors to President Trump, served as a Trump delegate to the Republican National Convention, and aligned himself with many – not all – of the President’s policies and agenda.

For Menendez, the target was huge. Distaste for the President ran exceedingly deep in New Jersey, with public approval rankings in the mid-thirties range. (A Stockton Polling Institute survey at the end of October, for instance, showed 52 percent rated Trump’s performance as poor.) And, it wasn’t simply Democrats reflecting partisan biases; Republican “Never Trumpers” were fairly abundant and vocal in calling for election of a Democratically-controlled Congress to curb what they felt were Trump’s excesses.

It inevitably splashed over onto Republican candidates, most notably Hugin because of the high-profile nature of the Senate race, the free spending, and Menendez’s perceived vulnerability.

The Senator embraced a strategy of tying Hugin to Trump and never allowing the Republican to put any significant distance between the two.

Tolerance for misbehavior in office

“If you want to stop Trump, stop Hugin” became the core message of Menendez’s advertising campaign.

It was a clear effort to shift attention away from his record and the admonition issued against him by the Senate Ethics Committee by insisting a vote for Hugin/Trump was a far greater sin than a vote for Menendez and his Florida doctor buddy.

It worked like a charm.

The dislike for Trump was so deeply embedded in the electorate that it was willing to overlook the Senator’s ethical transgressions or, at the very least, exhibit a high level of tolerance for misbehavior in public office.

A peek into the public psyche was provided by a poll in which a majority of respondents viewed Menendez’s persistent advocacy for his doctor friend as something all politicians do. A cheerful disclosure for Menendez, to be sure.

More difficult than ever for GOP

Despite Menendez leading in every pre-election poll, the 10-point margin was somewhat surprising; a single digit edge was widely accepted as the potential outcome.

Even though the New Jersey Republican Party is by now accustomed to falling short in Senate elections, the Hugin loss was a demoralizing one. Ethics and corruption have always been issues in campaigns and Republicans were convinced that the tales of high finance, high living and official favors would prove to be too steep a hill for Menendez to conquer.

His victory made a bleak future even bleaker for the fortunes of the state’s Republicans. Recruiting viable and formidable candidates has been made more difficult, as has the effort to raise the millions of dollars necessary to mount a credible campaign.

The conviction that Republicans hoped would befall Menendez has become a conviction that a Republican Senate campaign is a lost cause.

So, keep buying those lottery tickets.

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