

Analysts: Dems face challenges for 2018, House could be in reach

Posted on Friday, Apr 7, 2017

Dems hoping for major electoral victories in 2018 will likely only get them if President Trump's base begins to pull away from him, according to pollster Charles Franklin.

So far, there's little sign that's happening, the Marquette Law School Poll director says, with Trump's national approval rating hovering around 42 percent but at 80 percent among Republicans.

If that changes, though, Franklin said that could lead to "massively different ramifications for what's going on" in the midterms.

Franklin spoke at a WisPolitics.com event April 6 previewing the 2018 election cycle, also saying that U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Madison, is in a "decent position" as she seeks a second term in the Senate next year.

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When looking at Baldwin's polling data by party affiliation, Franklin said while she was "quite unfavorable" among Republicans, members of her own party viewed her more favorably than the GOP did unfavorably.

"That's a candidate who's in a decent position, about evenly balanced between favorable and unfavorable," Franklin said, adding the party balance looks like "what you'd expect."

But even if Baldwin is re-elected, Dems will have a tough time flipping the chamber and returning to the majority, said Jennifer Duffy, senior editor for The Cook Political Report.

Dems currently hold 48 Senate seats (including the two Independents who caucus with them), and would need to win three more seats in 2018 to claim the majority. There's a good chance they could pick up Nevada, she said, but Dems also need to defend 25 of the 34 Senate seats up for re-election — and some of those are vulnerable.

Still, she predicted Dems would largely be able to hold their seats, and she could see either party pick up one. She could even see Democrats picking up two, leading to a 50-50 split in the chamber.

"I bet that this is not a big cycle of gains and losses to either party," Duffy added.

Duffy also said Democrats have lots of energy early on in the Trump administration, saying the party "despise[s] Trump with a greater intensity" than the GOP "ever despised Obama." But she questioned whether Dems will be able to keep that energy going to overcome the built-in Republican advantage in the midterms.

Meanwhile, in the House, Duffy said it would be difficult for Dems to get the needed 24 seats to claim the majority, although she conceded the House "is more susceptible to waves" than the Senate.

"We don't doubt that there is a chance that Democrats could actually take the majority [in the House]," she said.

Franklin said based on past presidents' approval ratings and analyses of losses the president's party sustains in the midterms, and Trump's current rating of about 42 percent, Republicans could lose some 35 House seats. When looking at past presidencies, their approval rating on average drops 7 percentage points between the first two months of their term and the two months before midterms, although Franklin said he isn't certain Trump's already historically low approval rating would drop that much further before that election.

At the gubernatorial level, Duffy stressed the importance of the upcoming gov races, as those elected in 2018 will oversee redistricting in 2021. She said staff have been devoted to those races since the beginning of 2015.

While the GOP currently holds 33 state governorships, she said the party will face some tough battles, including potentially in Wisconsin, although she thinks the race will lean toward Walker.

"I think any governor running for a third term is challenged. I think that it is a rarity that any governor seeking a third term goes into that in great shape," she said.

Walker has been dogged by a low favorability rating since his failed presidential run in 2015, coupled with an unpopular 2015-17 budget that drew criticism from his own party, Franklin said.

And Franklin said Walker is weakest in the Madison market, while the Milwaukee market outside of the city remains strong. Franklin also flagged the southwestern part of the state as an "interesting area" to watch heading into the gubernatorial race because it swung for Trump in November 2016. He said, though, it was too soon to tell if that was a "one off affair" or could increase Walker's standing in the area come 2018.

He also pointed to Green Bay, an area that saw an unexpected boost for Trump last fall, as another potential market for all Republicans going statewide in 2018.

Meanwhile, no clear Dem frontrunner has emerged to vie for governor against likely candidate Walker, "Rewind" show analysts Steve Walters and JR Ross pointed out earlier in the evening, adding that Dems lack a bench in the state.

In the state's gubernatorial race, former Sen. Tim Cullen recently passed on a bid, and earlier this year, U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, also opted out.

But Duffy said the lack of a bench "plagues Democrats nationally," not just in Wisconsin. That's something she said gets in the party's way of "major, major electoral gains," including in statewide races.

Listen to the event:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/2018-election-cycle-preview-event>

See Franklin's slides:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/-20170406FranklinSlides.pdf>