

# POLITICAL PREVIEW

## Surveying the Midterm Election Landscape

By Rebecca Patrick

“When people say Indiana is a Republican state, I always point out, ‘No, it’s a conservative state,’ ” asserts Andrew Downs, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne political science professor and director of the Mike Downs Center for Indiana Politics.

“There have been several Democrats who have been quite successful here who are either moderate or even lean more toward the conservative side.”

That’s a pretty accurate description of our state’s modern election history.

The question is whether that translates into any competitive state and federal races this fall.

To offer their insights and discuss the overall political and election process are:

- Tim Berry, chairman of the Indiana Republican Party, at [tberry@indgop.org](mailto:tberry@indgop.org)
- Downs, at [downsa@ipfw.edu](mailto:downsa@ipfw.edu)
- Kevin Rader, WTHR-TV Statehouse/ political reporter, at [KRader@wthr.com](mailto:KRader@wthr.com)
- John Zody, chairman of the Indiana Democratic Party, at [jzody@indems.org](mailto:jzody@indems.org)

### Quick snapshot

For Berry, who has led the state’s Republican Party for about a year, the outlook is as expected: pretty positive.

“The Governor, Republican policies and the Republican agenda in the Statehouse are

very popular,” he offers. “With new jobs being created every day, more Hoosiers being put back to work, Indiana continues to lead the region in job development and also in the lowest unemployment rate.”

Zody, who has been at the helm since March of last year, admits the Democrats “have our work cut out for us – this year especially. But we see opportunities all over the state and in different places, especially with key legislative races.

“I don’t think rural Indiana has gone Republican so to speak or that there are no opportunities for Democrats there. It’s making sure we’re staying focused on a message that will translate to Hoosiers in Salem, Indiana and up to Auburn, Indiana.”

However, he concedes, “This is not an overnight comeback story for the Indiana Democratic Party. We know it’s a multi-cycle strategy and we’re building toward that.”

Downs concurs. “The Democrats don’t have a silver bullet that’s going to win back the House or a number of statewide offices at the drop of a hat.”

He does, however, believe the internal dynamic at play in the Republican Party – conservatives being challenged by ultra conservatives – is one to watch and may soon start having ripple effects that benefit Democrats.

“We saw on primary election day a couple more conservative members of the party win primaries. That may make things a little more difficult for the county chairs, district chairs or state chairs when those candidates start to talk about more conservative issues or express desire to do things that may be a little more conservative than what the average Hoosier is looking for,” Downs surmises.

“That might contribute to making it

difficult for the Republicans to hold on (to their margins) – not necessarily this session, but certainly in 2016. So probably it's still a good year to be Republican, but depending on how things go, this could certainly set up a significant set of wins in 2016 for the Democrats."

Rader has spent most of the last two decades covering politics for the Indianapolis NBC affiliate. He has found this cycle to be pretty standard, until recently.

"With the issue of same-sex marriage in Indiana popping up, it really has brought an issue to light that will be interesting to see the impacts of in an off-election year."

### Federal wrinkle

Another factor is the effect the goings-on, or lack thereof, in our nation's capital has on Indiana politics.

"(Washington) is a very toxic environment right now and that's not a good thing because it is contributing to the lowering of turnout, it is contributing to the lack of civility between people, and in general, it's not good for democracy," Downs declares.

Berry agrees. "I do think it affects turnout, who chooses to turn out and who is enticed to turn out."

It's quite simple, according to Zody. "National issues are the most prevalent. People who are running for Congress or Senate will frequently run against Washington because they know, as Andy said, it's a toxic environment."



"It's incumbent upon the parties to make sure their recruitment efforts are healthy. And yes, it's tough to get some folks to run when they see the electoral history in a certain county."

– John Zody

"So our challenge it always to get the (state) message out there, to talk about what's happening here."

Rader chimes in: "I hear our Governor now say anti-Washington stuff, yet he was there for how long – 12 years? But everyone reads the polls – nobody likes Washington, so you run against it."

### Primary disinterest

Recently, Indiana has seen some famously competitive primary races at all levels. Unfortunately, Berry notes, that hasn't necessarily translated to making citizens want to participate in those elections.

"While primaries are more important than ever before, fewer Hoosiers are paying attention to them."

"That's a challenge for both political parties to get that turnout, that interest and that participation with the primaries, because, in many communities, elections are oftentimes decided in the primary and by a very few number of participants."

He cites what took place in Fishers in May, where fewer than 16% of voters turned out with the Republican primary winner all but guaranteed to become the new city's first mayor.

"We need to make sure voters understand the importance of the primary and participate in those primary elections," Berry concludes.

Downs contends that having to declare your party affiliation in the Indiana primary is a turnoff for a number of people.

"They don't want that R or D next to their name and be recognized in their community for all to see, especially if it's in the minority."

Rader says for better or worse the current setup is what we have for the primaries, but it seems lacking.

"Some people think, 'We get the person off the ballot (in the primary) and we've won,' he states.

"It is disturbing when you think about how you can win a primary with really a minority of people and get the nomination, and maybe offset something that might have been totally different in a general election."

### Free pass

A striking stat for this midterm election is the number of Indiana General Assembly races that are already over because there is no opponent.

A whopping 50 seats – 10 in the Senate and 40 in the House – have all but officially



"All elected officials know that if you do casework (meeting constituent needs) really well, you will be forgiven on an awful lot of differences of opinion about policy stuff."

– Andrew Downs

been decided. That's out of 125 total (all of the House and half of the Senate) that are in play this cycle.

This regrettable trend is on the rise too. Just four years ago, the number who ran unopposed in the general election stood at 21. In 2012, it climbed to 31. Now, almost 20 more have been added.

Two main reasons for the apathy: people not wanting to put time and effort into a non-competitive district, plus the unwillingness to deal with the heat, so to speak.

"You're putting your name on the ballot. You are now public. You are now subject to scrutiny by the media, scrutiny by the people in your party and the other party," Zody describes. "We all have to convince people that it is still a noble profession and it's worth it."

Rader adds, "I'm sure there are Hoosiers out there that care about issues, who want to make changes, want to do things. I just wish they would take the initiative and do it (run for office)."

### 2014 races

Berry and Zody are in step that (as of this early July discussion) only one of the congressional races has the potential to be competitive: the 2nd District that pits first-term incumbent Jackie Walorski against Democratic challenger Joe Bock, a University of Notre Dame administrator. It's a district that has seen competitive races for much of the last decade.

"It is viewed as competitive nationally. Our candidate has raised his profile and has raised a good amount of resources," Zody shares.

Downs gives the edge to Walorski, as he would anyone in her place, due to her recent election. "You still have the (political)

machinery in place with these House races. It's hardly stopped."

That's one reason Berry thinks Walorski, ultimately, is in a good position. "She has been within the district, throughout the district as the member of Congress and has had the political organization in place."

On a more sweeping note, Downs is focused on the U.S. Senate.

"I think the most dramatic possibility would be the Republicans taking over the Senate," he begins. "It could happen, but the smarter money might be that it will simply be 51-49 for whichever party."

Returning to the U.S. House, the panel debates the pros and cons of the two-year term, which essentially makes for a constant re-election process.

"I'm not saying it should be longer, but I'm in full agreement it's a slog," Zody utters.

And whether you are in a competitive race or not, Berry maintains, "You still have to be focused on what you're doing at home."

Not doing that, says the group, led to then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor being shockingly ousted in the June primary in Virginia.

"The House was intended to be the one



"If you have a candidate who knows who they are and knows what they want to accomplish, that's it. I can't tell you how many times I've walked into a room and listened to a speech and then thought, 'I don't really know anything (new).'"

— Kevin Rader

that's responsive to the electorate. So if you are on the ballot every two years, you do have to pay attention to what's happening in the district," Downs prefaces.

"The unfortunate thing is that we now rely so heavily on money to run those (campaigns) that being attentive to what's happening in the district means making sure you've raised enough money that you can advertise back to the district what it is you've done that makes you worthy of being re-elected."

While Rader has empathy, he determines, "I think the Founding Fathers had it right and that every two years you should be held accountable. You have to go out and face the music of your constituents. I like that."

### Prediction time

When asked to go out on a limb with an election night result that might surprise, there wasn't actually a battle for who went first — after all, it is a midterm election and the question was being posed four months ahead of Election Day. But Downs got the ball rolling.

"This is a midterm with no U.S. Senate race at the top of the ticket. So we're really talking about secretary of state (Connie Lawson) leading the ticket. I think that race is likely to be a lot more competitive and a lot more exciting than people think because, in part, we have an incumbent who did not run statewide but has been in office for a while (Lawson was appointed in 2012)," he explains.

"And we have a challenger (Beth White, Marion County clerk), who is quite well known within the most populous part of the state. We have two people, truth be told, who may have name recognition that is fairly equal ... certainly not as far apart as you often see when where is a challenger taking on an incumbent. So I think that could actually end up being an exciting race."

Zody likewise believes, "We'll see some increased attention in the statewide races because not one of the candidates has run statewide before — secretary of state, treasurer or auditor. I think that may be an interesting dynamic."

Yet Berry isn't convinced the secretary



"In those river counties (in Southern Indiana), in 2010 and 2012, they voted Republican at a much greater rate than they had. I think that's why this year's election is going to be important to see if that continues."

— Tim Berry

of state race will be a nail-biter, based on past experience of seeing that office atop the ticket.

Instead, he thinks the story in 2014 may be the "gains of Senate Republicans" in the Indiana Legislature.

"You have an open seat where Rep. Mark Messmer is running. You have (Democrat) Richard Young running in his race against a very qualified candidate. I think you could potentially see some Republican pickups."

Downs also mentions that people should keep an eye on a local government reform measure — moving to a single county executive — that is up for a vote in Allen County.

"I know there are a couple other counties watching that because if it happens there, you may see the same thing happen elsewhere."

"It's going to come down to how well the proponents actually tell their story — how good a job they do at telling people it's worth doing," he explains. "It's not just because you say it will be good. We need to see some reason it's going to be good and then we'll consider it."

Rader, meanwhile, stays policy oriented.

"We've heard a lot coming out of the Governor's office about jobs when they're doing ribbon-cuttings, but I still believe that's the No. 1 issue that's percolating underneath everything throughout the entire state," he insists.

"There are still a lot of people out there who are affected; a lot of families who are still struggling due to being underemployed or out of work. I believe that's going to be the undercurrent — if not in this one, then certainly in '16. I think there's a restlessness when it comes to jobs in this state."