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# Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Battle for Central New York

Luke Perry

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# Palgrave Studies in US Elections

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Palgrave Studies in US Elections

ISBN 978-3-030-13022-0

ISBN 978-3-030-13023-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13023-7>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019933172

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For countless journalists at local media outlets who diligently cover electoral campaigns for the benefit of our democracy. And my daughter who wants to be president and a librarian.*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction to the 2018 Midterm, NY-19, NY-22, and NY-24

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the book and the three districts examined in relation to the 2018 election: NY-19, NY-22, and NY-24.

**Keywords** John Faso • Claudia Tenney • John Katko • Antonio Delgado • Anthony Brindisi • Dana Balter • 2018 Midterm election • Donald Trump • upstate New York • NY-19 • NY-22 • NY-24

The 2018 election was the first after a heavily contested 2016 campaign that witnessed the surprise election of a political novice to the White House. After two years in office, Donald Trump, conservative hero to his fervent supporters and gangster fascist to his fiercest critics, became an even more polarizing and dominant presence in U.S. politics than recent presidents. Trump was the central figure in the 2018 campaign where Democrats had not been as enthusiastic in a midterm election since 2006.

This book examines three neighboring and competitive House races in Central New York, districts 19, 22, and 24, which analysts believed were an important component to Democratic efforts to retake the House. Each district was home to a Republican incumbent seeking to navigate the Trump presidency. The respective campaigns reflected the division and dysfunction that has come to define U.S. politics, including fundamentally different perceptions of healthcare, taxes, and immigration, to animosity

surrounding race and the resistance, to “fake news” and the personal style of politics Trump has popularized.

In the end, the outcome of these races exhibited how closely aligning with President Trump was more hurtful than helpful for Republicans. Trump was a boon for Democratic candidates, even ones who hardly mentioned him. More subtly, Trump’s efforts to remake the Republican Party in his image have not been uniformly embraced in more moderately conservative parts of the country, such as Upstate New York.

## NATIONAL CLIMATE

Open seats are typically closely contested. There were over 50 open seats in 2018, a record amount.<sup>1</sup> There was also little doubt that most incumbents would be reelected, per historical norms. This was the case for nearly 90 percent of House incumbents in 2018, which is slightly lower than historical norms, while illustrating the enduring strength of incumbency advantage. Incumbents typically enjoy several electoral benefits, including increased name recognition, fundraising advantages, franking privileges, and greater ability to deter quality challengers from running.<sup>2</sup> Though certainly advantageous, incumbency does not guarantee electoral success.

House Republicans faced a highly unfavorable national climate in 2018. The president’s party has lost an average of 25 House seats during mid-term elections since 1946. The party of presidents polling under 50 percent, as President Trump did consistently during his first two years in office, loses an average of 37 seats.<sup>3</sup> Only twice has the president’s party gained seats. Both were exceptional situations. In 1998, Bill Clinton was impeached by House Republicans, and in 2002 George W. Bush led the immediate response to the 9/11 attacks. Both had approval ratings over 60 percent, and gains were modest, five and six seats, respectively. There was no doubt that some House GOP incumbents would be vulnerable in 2018. The question was who, and where this vulnerability would emerge.

## SWING DISTRICTS

Swing districts are pivotal in competitive Congressional election cycles similar to how swing states are pivotal to presidential elections.<sup>4</sup> They receive limited scholarly attention because of the power of incumbency advantage and the fact that most House races are uncompetitive, an average

of 70 percent of House races by some estimates, prompting significant focus on gerrymandering.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of swing districts generally focuses on the rare occurrence where control of seats regularly changes between Republicans and Democrats in recent Congressional elections and/or when a district's presidential vote swings back and forth between Republican and Democratic candidates in recent presidential elections. More in-depth factors utilized to identify competitive House districts include:

1. incumbent's previous margin of victory;
2. generic Congressional ballot;
3. fundraising for incumbent compared to challenger;
4. district voting patterns in presidential elections and state legislative elections;
5. Congressional approval ratings;
6. presence or absence of scandal related to incumbent;
7. voting record; and
8. political experience of challenger.<sup>6</sup>

Competitiveness can also be broken down to county-level analysis. One relevant consideration was presidential "pivot counties," counties that voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Donald Trump in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Aggregating this precise geographic measurement helps illustrate larger trends around the country regarding the location of partisan swings. Most pivot counties were located in the Midwest and Northeast. For instance, Iowa (31), Wisconsin (23), Minnesota (19), and New York (18) were home to the most pivot counties.

There is a large range with the number of counties per state. Delaware has 3 counties, while Texas has 254. Another way to analyze this data is by the percentage of counties within a state that are pivot counties. The Midwest and Northeast were similarly prevalent among states with the highest percentage of pivot counties: Maine (50 percent), Delaware (33 percent), Wisconsin (32 percent), Iowa (31 percent), New Hampshire (30 percent), and New York (29 percent).<sup>8</sup> New York was clearly home to a nationally significant amount of pivot counties in 2018. These were nearly uniformly located upstate. Suffolk County was the only one of 18 pivot counties in New York to be located within New York City.

## UPSTATE NEW YORK POLITICS

“Upstate New York” can be a broad and all-encompassing term, particularly to non-New Yorkers. This typically refers to all of New York State north of New York City and its immediate suburbs in Rockland County and Westchester County. Within upstate are several distinct regions, such as the North Country, Capital District, Central New York, the Southern Tier, the Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley, and Western New York.

A sizable cluster of pivot counties are found in the middle of New York State, encompassing several of these regions and various counties, including Sullivan County, Otsego County, Broome County, Madison County, Cortland County, Cayuga County, and Oswego County. These seven counties span three Congressional districts: NY-19, NY-22, and NY-24. All three of these districts have also swung this century between Democratic and Republican House representatives, making them a prime target for Congressional Campaign Committees.<sup>9</sup> This was particularly the case for Democrats, who have unsuccessfully targeted these seats in recent election cycles. As a result, Central New York, and NY-19, NY-22, and NY-24, in particular, have been an interesting and important focus in the realm of swing districts and competitive House elections.

The fact that Republicans have held all three of these seats since 2014, when John Katko was elected in NY-24, and even longer in NY-22 and NY-19, may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with the nuances of New York State politics. New York State has voted Democratic in presidential elections every cycle since 1988. Every U.S. Senator from New York this century has been a Democrat and each governor since 2006 has been a Democrat. At the same time, an “upstate/downstate divide” is common parlance in New York State politics. Over 9 million New Yorkers reside in 468 square miles of New York City, the most populated city in the country, exceeding the population of 40 of the country’s 50 states.<sup>10</sup> New York City residents, coupled with suburban residents in Westchester County and Rockland County, account for the majority of the state’s population. Upstate New Yorkers reside in the remaining 55,000 square miles of the state.

Upstate New Yorkers commonly feel marginalized and underrepresented in state government generally, and positions of leadership, in particular. These feelings are exacerbated by subcultural variance, most prominently, the contrast of rural norms with urban/suburban norms,

and demographic factors, including identity and class differences. In many ways, Upstate New York is as comparable to Midwestern culture as the Northeast.

Partisan politics is also a powerful consideration. Upstate is predominately Republican, except for rustbelt cities, such as Utica and Syracuse, while downstate is extraordinarily Democratic. As a result, there are ongoing political tensions between upstate Republicans, who equate Democratic control of state governance with the representation of downstate interests, and prominent Downstate Democrats, such as Governor Andrew Cuomo. For instance, Governor Cuomo professed his love for Upstate New York following the 2018 election. “I’m upstate’s voice,” Cuomo stated in addressing concerns about adequately representing upstate interests, “They have a very loud voice in the (negotiating) room. It’s my voice.”<sup>11</sup> This sentiment is not shared by many upstate, Republicans or Democrats, where the governor is much less popular than downstate.

Upstate Republicans tend to be fiscally conservative and socially more liberal than their national counterparts. For instance, tax cuts and deregulation are generally well received, while there is less resistance to more progressive approaches to social issues, such as LGBTQ rights, criminal justice reform, and healthcare, than the GOP at large. One consideration is how New York is more secular than the Southeast, the geographic base of the Republican Party. Another consideration is the value placed on independence and bipartisanship upstate. Citizens generally embrace the notion that upstate representatives of both parties need to work together to address lasting systematic problems stemming from postindustrialism, including economic underdevelopment, population loss, a shrinking tax base, deteriorating infrastructure, and medically underserved communities, to name a few.

The ascendance of New Yorkers to prominent positions of national political power makes this backdrop of state politics all the more interesting. The 2016 presidential elections pitted two nominees from New York against one another. The outcome not only elevated a New Yorker to the White House for the first time since Franklin Roosevelt, but included Chuck Schumer becoming Senate Minority Leader. Two years later, New York’s Governor and senior Senator had become two major antagonists of the president.