



The Big Casino

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“Remember that Senate leadership elections are conducted by secret ballot, and that senators lie.”

--former Sen. Jim Bunning

Sen. McConnell's announcement that he would step down as Republican Leader at the end of the 118th Congress signaled the start of the public phase of the campaign to succeed him. Candidates have been maneuvering behind the scenes for some time, but they will now be more overt in their efforts and much, if not all, of what they do will be scrutinized through the lens of their ambitions to become the next Leader.

The campaign for Republican Leader in the 119th Congress will be the first bona fide contest for a party Leader in years. As far as back the mid-1990s, contests for Republican or Democratic Leader have largely been faits accomplis. Combined with the fact that of the 49 sitting Republicans only seven have worked with a Leader besides McConnell, the contest could be novel and unpredictable.

Here are some initial observations about the race and some things to watch for in the coming months.

- The vote for Leader will be conducted by secret ballot in private. The voting and surrounding discussion is usually held in the Old Senate Chamber, meaning there will not be a public spectacle akin to the recent elections for Speaker. This should reduce, but not eliminate, the hubbub surrounding the actual selection of the next top Republican.
- Only senators elected to the next Congress can vote, so we will not know the full “electorate” until November. Likewise, senators will not know if they are voting for a Majority or Minority Leader. Sen. McConnell likes to differentiate between them by likening them to the offensive and defensive coordinators on a football team, and the roles of course have their differences. Senators will in part base their decisions on which party will control the body in 2025. Similarly, senators will base some of their thinking on who wins the White House. Who would work better as a Leader with President Trump or against President Biden?

- Speaking of Trump, what will be the effect of Trump on the selection of the next Leader? Just a few days ago it leaked that he had urged Sen. Daines to seek the Leader post, and because of his sway with Republicans he is likely to be a factor at least to some degree. But, when it comes to the Republican Leader election, the question will be to what extent he can influence voting on a secret ballot. Senators, Republicans and Democrats, often bristle at “outsiders” (read: non-senators) who interfere or even pretend to be involved. Trump's influence, or lack thereof, could be the biggest unknown of the contest.
- The campaign for Leader is usually conducted one-on-one between senators. Depending on the candidates, spouses can become involved in the persuasion, too. Candidates usually tap an ally to be their surrogate or “campaign manager”, not only to act as eyes and ears but also as confidant(s) who can have sensitive conversations the candidates do not want to hold. It can be easier to make or to renege or to obfuscate on a commitment via a surrogate.
- Senators have likened the race to running for high school class president in a room full of high school class presidents, often turning on personality, popularity and slights or favors from years past. It is intensely personal and, to outsiders, byzantine. A race for a leadership post is an instance where only the members of the “world's most exclusive club” can fully understand the forces at work.
- As with running for public office, sometimes candidates float their name for the Leader post only to later drop down a rung. At least one candidate, Sen. Barrasso, has hinted in recent days he may run instead for Whip. Do not be surprised if others besides the “Three Johns” enter the race, or at least send up trial balloons, in the coming weeks. Some of the conservative, pro-Trump senators have public discussed trying to band together as a voting bloc to influence the race. Again, as with the impact of any Trump involvement, how much effect can this sort of effort have in a secret ballot contest?
- Money and fundraising for colleagues are important, and Sen. McConnell via the Senate Leadership Fund/One Nation apparatus has set the bar high. On that count, Sen. Cornyn has been particularly effective, especially via holding events for colleagues in Texas for years. As one senator recently put it in an article, when Cornyn stepped down as Whip in 2018 “he kept on running” for Leader. Sen. Thune has also ramped up efforts, with allies recently forming a 501(c)(4) to assist with third-party campaigning. Money is of course not determinative (e.g., see Speaker McCarthy), but it can help a candidate make the case. Watching developments on this front in coming months is worthwhile.

- Finally, senators care very much that their Leader is just that – a Senate Leader – and not planning to use the post to run for higher office. We should view very skeptically any senator who has previously run for president or whose name has been floated for the White House as a potential candidate for Leader.

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