

# Return of the party boss: How Montana's Daines took charge of GOP Senate primaries

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Republicans, from leader Mitch McConnell on down, feel bullish on their chances to take back control of the upper chamber this year after two cycles of stinging disappointment

By [Michael Scherer](#) and [Liz Goodwin](#) February 27, 2024 at 8:34 p.m. ESTs Washington Post

A former Navy SEAL sneaked into the [Trump International Hotel](#) in Las Vegas this month for a clandestine meeting with [Donald Trump](#) aimed at reshaping the U.S. Senate battleground.

As Trump watched [President Biden](#) on television — stumbling through a Feb. 8 news conference over concerns about his age — Montana Senate candidate Tim Sheehy, an Afghan war veteran with a Bronze Star and Purple Heart, gave the former president his best pitch for an endorsement over Rep. Matt Rosendale (R-Mont.), according to people familiar with the meeting. Sheehy's hole card was the benefactor who got him through the door, Sen Steve Daines (R-Mont.), head of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. Daines had been maneuvering behind the scenes for months to avoid any bloody intraparty primaries like the one potentially brewing in his home state. Twice previously, Daines brought Sheehy to meet with Trump — at Trump's Bedminster, N.J., golf club and at a rally in South Dakota. Countless times, Daines had texted or spoken with Trump about the importance of a Sheehy endorsement.

Rosendale formally announced his Montana Senate campaign to unseat Sen. Jon Tester (D) the next day — only to be blindsided hours later by Trump's endorsement of Sheehy. Mike Berg, the NRSC's communications director, promptly posted a meme of [dancing pallbearers carrying a coffin](#) inscribed with Rosendale's campaign logo and the words, "Feb. 9, 2024-February 9, 2024."

The moment capped a banner year for Daines and his revitalized NRSC, effectively reviving the power of party bosses to shape Republican primary battles long before voters ever get a say.

Daines's predecessor, former NRSC chair Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) liked to say that voters didn't want "Washington to pick who the candidates are." Daines

has bet the 2024 cycle on the opposite proposition. Rosendale abandoned his Senate campaign after only a week.

“People are sick and tired of losing,” Daines said Tuesday, in an interview with The Washington Post explaining the strategy. “I have always said filing day is more important than Election Day.”

Just over a year in the job, Daines has all but cleared Republican fields in Indiana, Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania and Montana for his chosen candidates. He has recruited former Maryland governor Larry Hogan (R) to put that state in play. He has discouraged multiple candidates, including former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels (R), from getting involved in primary contests, while appealing for muted infighting states like Michigan and Ohio. Most importantly, he has formed a close relationship with Trump, bridging the still-festering divide between the former president and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.).

Brutal primary battles and problematic candidates have been the bane of Republican Senate leaders since the first inklings of the tea party in 2010 and 2012, when Missouri Republicans nominated a Senate candidate who said “legitimate rape” rarely leads to pregnancy and Delaware got a nominee who campaigns with the slogan, “I am not a witch.”

The 2022 elections proved a spectacular continuation of that losing theme — with a hapless Georgia candidate, Herschel Walker, who had held a gun to his wife’s head; a struggling Pennsylvania TV doctor nominee in Mehmet Oz; and a mysterious Arizona contender, Blake Masters, who praised the Unabomber as an underrated “subversive thinker.” Even before Election Day, McConnell warned, “candidate quality has a lot to do with the outcome.”

McConnell now proudly praises Daines’s accomplishments. “I think we’ve got a good shot at having the majority,” McConnell said in a recent interview.

“Daines is very much in my group of people who feel that you need a quality candidate.”

Democrats still argue that the 2024 Republican field remains problematic. Several of the GOP candidates — in Wisconsin, Montana and Pennsylvania, to name three — are vulnerable to attack because they have lived and worked out of state.

“Senate Republicans have recruited a roster of unvetted, carpetbagging losers with enough baggage to sink a ship,” said David Bergstein, communications director for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. “By the time voters learn the truth about their disqualifying flaws, they won’t be able to get elected dogcatcher.”

Voter concern about new abortion restrictions remains a Republican problem as well. Daines has also embraced some candidates who lost in 2022, including Kari Lake, who ran for governor in Arizona while denying the legitimacy of the 2020 election and is still appealing her 2022 loss in court. “There is not a single candidate that we don’t have lock, stock and barrel on abortion,” said J.B. Poersch, president of the Senate Majority PAC, the top Democratic funder of television ads. “You can give them credit to trying to avoid records that they already have. But Daines and McConnell weren’t able to recruit candidates who didn’t already have a record on this stuff.”

Daines has responded by issuing clear marching orders to his own candidates on the issue of abortion — insisting that they all embrace exceptions for rape, incest and life of the mother to any legal limits on the procedure — and calling on the party to collectively back in vitro fertilization procedures after the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos were children and that people can be held liable for destroying them.

Daines said his party will be ready for the Democratic attacks.

“They are going to lie about our opposition to abortion any way they can,” he said. “We are not going to sit back and let them.”

Such tough talk has cheered Republican donors and leaders, who are daring to believe again that the Senate majority is in their grasp after two disappointing election cycles. Daines, who spent years as an executive at Procter and Gamble, has taken to pitching donors in private settings on the argument that this is the best chance Republicans will have for many more years to win seats.

With the retirement of Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.), Democrats are almost sure to lose at least one seat in their 51-seat majority and many of the party’s incumbents face reelection in red and purple states this cycle. The Republican presidential nominee is also a lock to win Montana and Ohio in November, a tough headwind for Tester and Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who are both seeking reelection. Democratic-held seats in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona, Nevada and Michigan will also be in play, as Democrats work to gain footing in only two states held by Republicans, Texas and Florida.

Daines in September. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Steven Law — a McConnell ally who runs the Senate Leadership Fund, the largest super PAC supporting GOP Senate candidates — said he joked with GOP strategist Karl Rove in 2022 about how many times they found themselves thinking voters would have to “hold their nose” to vote Republican. This time he says, the NRSC has established an entirely different playing field.

“We have seen just a consistent workmanlike focus in getting us in the best position to win as possible,” Law said.

Much of Daines’s work has been out of public view. He worked to discourage Daniels from running for Senate in Indiana against Rep. Jim Banks (R), worried that the battle would expose disunity in race for a safe red seat. Daines also came out hard against former Michigan congressman Peter Meijer when he entered the race against Daines’s chosen Senate candidate, former congressman Mike J. Rogers (R)

Meijer continues to run, but Rogers is seen as the favorite in that state’s primary. Daines has also not tried to block a contested primary in Ohio, but has implored the candidates there to avoid the scorched earth negativity that wounded, but did not derail, the party’s nominee in 2022, Sen. J.D. Vance (R-Ohio).

Perhaps the biggest coup for the NRSC was the recruitment of Hogan, who declined similar offers of support in 2022. Over Christmas break, Daines’s chief of staff, Maryland native Darin Thacker, wrote a personal appeal for Hogan to run for the open seat in the state, which prompted a quick response from Hogan asking for a meeting, according to people familiar with the exchange.

Daines then commissioned polling in January that showed Hogan with a clear path to victory in the heavily Democratic state. Trump is not expected to weigh in on the Maryland primary, though there has been no deal brokered between the two camps, said a person familiar with the discussions. Hogan, a longtime critic of Trump, announced his campaign this month.

Daines’s ability to work with the former president has also been a key part of the job.

“He realizes that Trump’s a force,” Sen Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), a close Trump ally, said. “Steve is really smart — he’s played all the moving parts well.”

Daines traveled to Mar-a-Lago in February 2023 for an obligatory thumbs-up photo with the former president, and became the first member of Senate leadership to endorse Trump’s presidential campaign months later. Before the Iowa caucuses, Daines worked to get his colleagues to come on board Trump’s campaign. Six Senate Republicans did so in the first weeks of January.

“There is an affinity between the two men,” said one Republican strategist familiar with the Trump relationship. “The president respects Senator Daines immensely, and Senator Daines is not all pomp and circumstance. He is just very straightforward. He is a western state U.S. senator.”

Daines has also managed the relationship with McConnell, a change from 2022 when Scott was in open war with the Senate’s Republican leader. The result is

a Senate caucus that has been generally united. Daines declines all questions about whether he would be interested in continuing in Senate leadership after November, when McConnell, 82, may step back from his role as leader.

“My sole focus is making sure we are having a discussion about a future majority leader,” Daines said.

Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) said Daines showed he was able to recruit quality candidates, dissuade less compelling candidates and “manage the Trump factor” all at once in the Senate race in his home state of Montana.

“Any one of these things could burn most people,” Cramer said.

Democrats, in the meantime, have not backed away from Montana, which may be the party’s last stand in their fight to hold onto Senate control. Millions of advertising dollars on both sides are expected to flood into the state later this year, though Democrats expect to have more money to influence voters.

“The resource gap is something that concerns me,” Daines admits.

Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) said he believes Rosendale dropping out “doesn’t change anything” about his race.

“They’re literally going to do the same thing they’ve done the past three [cycles],” Tester said. “They try to make me into something I’m not so they can run against that person because they can’t beat who I am.”

*Paul Kane contributed to this report.*