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The Democrats' Attempt to Repeat the McCaskill Miracle

In 2012, incumbent Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO) spent millions of dollars funding her opponent's campaign. While unconventional, the strategy proved effective. McCaskill won re-election.

Now Democrats are hoping to repeat the success, but the stakes are higher. In Michigan's 3rd District, Democrat Hillary Scholten is attempting to defeat Republican John Gibbs in the U.S. House race.

During the primaries, [Democratic committees funneled \\$435,000 into promoting John Gibbs](#). The main promotion came in the form of television ads that portrayed Gibbs as "too conservative for Michigan," which was a persuasive message for many Republican primary voters.

The theory is that Democrats will have less resistance running against far-right Republican candidates that have primary appeal but are too extreme come midterms. In this case, Gibbs beat the incumbent Peter Meijer in the primary and is in a tight midterm battle against Scholten.

When McCaskill decided to help Todd Akin win his Republican primary, she was counting on his frequent blunders to cost him the general election. Her wager was correct. [Akin lost nearly all support after claiming that victims of "legitimate rape" avoid pregnancy because their bodies "shut that whole thing down."](#)

But the political context has shifted dramatically since 2012, and McCaskill's strategy is risky. By aiding Gibbs' candidacy, Democrats eliminated Meijer, a moderate

Republican who voted to impeach Trump and has been willing to work cooperatively with Democrats.

If Gibbs can win in November, the Democrats will have helped send a Trump-endorsed candidate — [one who believes the 2020 election was rigged](#) — to Congress.

As a political science student and member of the Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations, and Human Rights at Grinnell College, I am convinced that the result of this race will influence the regularity of the McCaskill strategy. Should Scholten win, the Democrats will have greater incentive to continue funding extreme primary opponents.

The potential issue is that the more attention extreme candidates receive, the more voters will consider them viable options. Moderate voters may side with Scholten in this election, but they may be willing to side with an extremist in the next election if they disapprove of Scholten's two years in office.

Meanwhile, Democrats may be isolating the increasingly limited number of Republicans willing to seek compromise on legislation. [Republicans may become fearful of appearing moderate or working with Democrats](#) since Democrats may frame their actions negatively in the primaries to attempt to flip seats.

Focusing on the details, it is apparent that the themes of this race are reflective of many competitive contests nationwide.

First, redistricting is playing a major role. In 2020, Trump won Michigan's 3rd District by three points. With the new lines, [Biden would have won the 3rd District](#) by nine points.

Although the redistricting appears to have benefited Democrats both in District 3 and statewide, [The Cook Political Report](#) labels the contest as only “lean[ing] Democratic,” and [RealClearPolitics](#) considers it a toss-up. Considering that Scholten lost by 6 points to Meijer in 2020, she needs more than simply advantageous redistricting to win.

In terms of polling, [FiveThirtyEight](#) indicates that Scholten is currently 3.2 points ahead of Gibbs, but the margin has been closing over the past week.

Scholten has the clear fundraising advantage, with [\\$1.3 million to Gibbs' \\$480,000](#). However, Gibbs defeated Meijer in the primary despite being outspent by \$2.3 million.

The lack of an incumbent in this race should lead to a more competitive contest, as neither candidate had a head start on fundraising, advertising or imaging.

In the end, candidate quality and issue ownership may be decisive. [Scholten](#) is emphasizing her Christian faith and family values while prioritizing healthcare reform, reproductive rights, local jobs and the environment. [Gibbs](#) highlights his connection to Trump and prioritizes “America First,” the economy, decreasing crime and taxes, and protecting first and second amendment rights.

Notably, Gibbs is against abortion in any case, including rape, incest, and risk to the mother. This is a significant departure from public opinion in Michigan, where [64% of recently surveyed voters indicated their support](#) for a state ballot measure protecting abortion access.

Historically, the candidate who owns [the most salient issue](#) to an election has a distinct political edge. If abortion remains salient, Scholten should benefit.

Gibbs has also been dealing with controversy over a [website he created in college](#) that advocated for a patriarchal society and the country has suffered since women's suffrage.

Despite the unpopular opinions, Gibbs remains in striking distance of Scholten. The November result will be consequential both in terms of determining whether the McCaskill strategy is replicable and concluding whether extreme candidates can regularly win competitive races.

McCaskill recently stated that [her strategy is too risky](#) to rely on based on the shifts in politics over the last decade. Democrats are trying it anyway. Michigan will act as the moment of truth, and the future of campaigning is on the line.