

Pennsylvania's special election**Conor Lamb is likely to lose PA-18**

That is still consistent with the idea of a Democratic wave



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WHEN Tim Murphy resigned from his post as the representative for Pennsylvania's 18th congressional district, Republicans had a heavy load lifted from their shoulders. Mr Murphy, publicly a social conservative, was caught sending text messages to his mistress urging her to have an abortion. His re-election campaign would have road-tested the proposition that partisanship covers all sins. The outlook for Republicans was looking good for the special election that takes place on March 13th to replace him, until it wasn't. Republican state representative and Harrisburg insider Rick Saccone will face off against a former marine and assistant US attorney, Conor Lamb. Republicans have spent more than \$9m to preserve control of a district President Donald Trump won by 20 points. They have reason to worry even that sum might not be enough.

Since Mr Murphy's resignation in October, there have been 49 special elections to state legislatures and Congress. Democrats in these contests have on average performed 14 percentage points better than Hillary Clinton did in the 2016 election. Democrats flipped control of 12 Republican-held seats in these elections. If this pattern holds true in Pennsylvania's 18th district, Mr Saccone would win by six points. That in a seat deemed so safe that Mr Murphy ran unopposed in 2014 and 2016.

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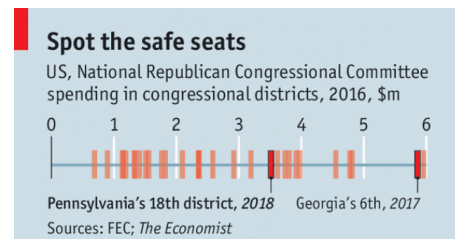
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Mr Lamb has been touting his credentials as a captain in the Marine Corps, a solid strategy for a rural, white district. He has also taken advantage of support from Democratic figures like Joe Biden to capitalise on the party's apparent edge in voter mobilisation. He took a bipartisan stance on gun reform after the massacre at a Florida school in late February, saying he would not support a ban on assault weapons and would focus instead on

expanding background checks and mental-health reform. Meanwhile Mr Saccone has followed identikit Trumpian messaging on immigration, taxes and health care.

The National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC), the Republican Party's fundraising arm for contests in the House of Representatives, has spent \$3,516,845 on outside advertisements to support the Saccone campaign. According to an analysis of campaign finance data by *The Economist*, that is more than the NRCC spent in 70% of the congressional districts they targeted in 2016. In stark contrast, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has spent just \$312,500 on the contest, setting up an interesting test of how much money really matters.



Economist.com

What is already clear is that the NRCC's 11-to-one fundraising advantage is not increasing Mr Saccone's chances of winning by anything like that margin. According to the average of polls taken since February 12th, Mr Lamb is running two percentage points behind Mr Saccone. These polls are consistent with the idea of a nationwide Democratic wave. Mr Saccone may have a slight lead in the district, but not nearly as large as it should be given recent history.

Democrats have scored many wins since their crippling loss in the 2016 presidential election. Several of those districts swung like the pendulum in a grandfather clock. What remains to be seen is how well the changes observed at state level relate to those near the top of the ticket. Yet even if Mr Saccone wins, as polls suggest he will, his expensive victory will be short-lived. After redistricting ordered by Philadelphia's Supreme Court takes effect in May, the seat may not even exist in its current form in November.

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