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2020 Senate Elections: Kansas — Roger Marshall and Barbara Bollier

Although the most dramatized and contentious election of the 2020 election cycle was obviously the presidential race between Democrat former Vice President Joe Biden and Republican incumbent President Donald Trump, many other U.S. House and Senate races closely mirrored the presidential one including the senate race between two-term U.S. Rep. Roger Marshall and Kansas state Sen. Barbara Bollier. Marshall, who represents the first congressional district of Kansas, the most western and rural district in the state, posed himself as a Trump-type of republican, while Bollier, who ran under the democratic party ticket, posed herself as a moderate and centrist democrat drawing on her party affiliation switch from republican to democrat out of frustration and disgust for the Trump era republican party in the midst of the 2018 midterm elections. Although the GOP has not lost a senate race in Kansas since 1932 (Hanna 2020), this race was one that the national Democratic and Republican parties paid close attention to with the democrats hoping for it to be one of many historically red seats they could flip while the republicans worked to maintain control of this seat and, therefore, the entire state. After continuous polling surprisingly showed the margins closing in during the months leading up to the election, Marshall ultimately won the senate seat by a significant margin of over 10 points (Ballotpedia 2020). In-depth analysis and tracking of this race suggest that despite astronomical fundraising and spending figures from the Bollier campaign, the two key factors which led to a republican victory were Bollier's underwhelming performance in a key, typically

conservative county paired with a particular attack ad ran by Marshall's campaign which was heavily doctored to paint Bollier as an extremist liberal democrat.

Perhaps the most telling sign as to why this race was particularly competitive was the absence of an incumbent candidate. Moderate Republican Senator Pat Roberts had occupied this seat since 1997 and opted for retirement instead of another six-year term (Congressional Directory 2020). Additionally, Kansas, similar to many other assumed republican states, was seemingly moving more center, signaling for a moderate democrat to have a fighting chance at turning one of Kansas's two red senate seats blue. Before entering the political sphere, Bollier and Marshall alike were doctors, Bollier an anaesthesiologist and Marshall an OB/GYN. Both candidates drew on this previous experience to support their platforms regarding COVID-19, abortion, and healthcare (Ballotpedia 2020). Bollier, who has served in the Kansas State House and Senate for the past decade, focused her campaign on combatting rising healthcare costs and increasing access to affordable care, increasing funding for public education and providing COVID-19 financial relief (Carpenter 2020). On the other hand, Marshall's campaign was centered around retaining and reinforcing Trump-era republican politics and the policy positions that come with that (Carpenter 2020), including the party's approach to COVID-19. "He regularly refuses to wear a mask or maintain social distance while campaigning in public," a Bollier spokesperson said. "He continues to hawk hydroxychloroquine" (Tidd 2020), both of which parallel Trump's stances.

With so much attention placed on this race, endorsements were plentiful and diverse. Bollier attained formal support from various previous Kansas government officials from both sides of the aisle, top Kansas media outlets, physicians, and minority communities (Carpenter 2020). Conversely, Marshall was backed by incumbent Senator Roberts, Trump, the U.S.

Chamber of Commerce, the National Rifle Association, anti-abortion groups, and the Kansas Farm Bureau (Carpenter 2020).

One historically significant aspect of this race was the cost. This race was by far the most expensive in state history, with a projected net spending of greater than \$52 million between the two candidates by election day (Hanna 2020). Before this race, the record for the most money raised by a Kansas candidate in one quarter was \$3.7 million, set by Bollier in a previous election cycle. This year Bollier shattered her own record by raising \$13.5 million in the third quarter of the campaign, while Marshall raised \$2.6 million in the first and second quarters combined (Carpenter 2020). The Marshall campaign had GOP groups pouring millions into his candidacy, where “all but \$2.4 million of the \$30 million to be spent is from GOP groups” (Hanna 2020). From August through October Bollier outspent Marshall 4-1 (Hanna 2020), and by the end of September Bollier had raised more than \$20 million while Marshall trailed at \$5.5 million (Hanna 2020). Super PACS in Washington, both democrat and republican, committed to spending \$7 million on the race (Carpenter 2020), showing how important this one senate seat was to both parties. Unsurprisingly, each campaign’s top three supportive donors align with their policy stances while the top three opposition donors were juxtaposed to the campaign’s platform. Bollier’s top three supportive donors were Women Vote! (\$749,192.61), Americans For Progressive Action USA (\$109,441.43), and Future Progress (\$98,700) (Ballotpedia 2020). On the other hand, her top three opposition donors were the Senate Leadership Fund, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and American Crossroads (Ballotpedia 2020). Marshall’s contributions follow a similar, but converse trend. His top three supportive donors were Americans for Prosperity Action, Inc. (\$3,276,924.04), Senate Leadership Fund (\$1,973,148.88), and Keep Kansas Great Pac Inc. (\$246,918.06) (Ballotpedia 2020). As for opposition spending,

Duty and County, Sunflower State, and Women Vote! were Marshall's top three opponents (Ballotpedia 2020). These donor amounts sum to \$1,130,324.08 being spent in support of Bollier and \$24,906,543.31 spent against, while her opponent raised \$6,782,436.76 in support and \$16,081,671.56 in opposition (Ballotpedia 2020).

Advertising arguably played a bigger role in this race than is typical as one attack ad in particular led to the downfall of Bollier. While both campaigns ran ads in support of their namesake, they also ran ads against the other. However, the tone and severity of the attacks differed among the camps. Bollier's supportive ads seemed to play on her moderateness, bipartisan legislative history and calls for unity. Marshall's focused on his family and American values and medical history to back his abortion and COVID-19 platforms (Ballotpedia 2020), again showing how these candidates closely adhered to their national parties' approaches to campaigning this cycle. Marshall's attack ads ran against Bollier worked to cast her in a light that was much more liberal than is accurate. Bollier's ads opposing Marshall honed in on his pro-corporate interests legislative voting record, and one specifically called out the Marshall campaign for a heavily doctored ad approved, and later defended, by Marshall himself (Ballotpedia 2020). The end-all ad for the Bollier campaign run by Marshall and his team was one that dealt with Bollier's gun control position. The ad used out-of-context clips of a Bollier interview where she casually discusses Australia's 700,000 gun buyback policy and talks about the increased safety following the act calling it "this amazing thing" (Ballotpedia 2020). Marshall's campaign used this audio clip and superimposed labels such as "bloomin' liberal" and "dangerously liberal" to undercut Bollier's appeal of being a centrist democrat (Ballotpedia 2020). The Bollier campaign responded by releasing more audio footage from the event in which Bollier goes on to defend the second amendment and went on to create their own

Marshall-opposition ad where they call him out for video manipulation (Ballotpedia 2020). The controversy ultimately hurt both candidates in the polls, but the injury sustained for Bollier was more significant as it led to a loss of support from moderates and independents, a group she had been relying on while Marshall was appealing directly to conservatives who were unmoved by the scandal.

Similar to that of other highly competitive races this election cycle, the news surrounding the Kansas U.S. Senate race was engulfed in COVID-19-related issues, the spread of misinformation, and unprecedented voter turnout rates. Marshall was one of multiple GOP lawmakers who stood behind the president when he called for the use of hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic. Amid the controversy surrounding this unsubstantiated assertion by Trump and embraced by the GOP, Marshall came forward in support saying he and his family began taking the drug, which was not approved by the CDC or FDA, in April and encouraged others to do as well (Stracqualursi 2020). This baseless assertion and encouragement of false information is concerning coming from a licensed doctor speaking to rural voters and was a suspect political maneuver for Marshall to further align himself with Trump and overshadow extreme conservative primary challenger Kris Kobach's stances in an effort to push himself further right leading up to the republican primary in which Marshall was against nine other contenders all vying for the greatest number of registered republican votes. Secondly, in late August, Facebook removed a post from the Marshall campaign on the basis of misinformation regarding the COVID-19 death rate (Tidd 2020). Essentially, Marshall's post distorted data released by the CDC to make the death rate of COVID-19 seem less significant than is accurate. In response to this, the Marshall campaign said, "This is corporate censorship, pure and simple," as well as asserting that this data "unfortunately did not fit the narrative that

the left and the liberal media want us to believe... Americans deserve to be informed” (Tidd 2020). Again, seeing how Marshall responds to conflict when pressed for answers, the parallels between his rhetoric and the rhetoric used by the president and the GOP to demonize the left and discredit science are hard to ignore. Lastly, the most populous county in Kansas, Johnson County, announced in September that they were “planning for 90% turnout for Nov. 3, with most ballots cast by mail” (Hammill 2020). This would be the record for voter turnout in the county, but, again, it follows national electorate trends in more populated counties.

A central component of the election process that is being called into question now that the election cycle is complete is the accuracy and necessity of polling. In many cases, pre-election day polls showed democrats performing far better than they actually did. This stands true for the polling done for this race. Polls from March show Marshall leading Bollier by 10 points, but that margin closed significantly by early August when Marshall only had a one-point lead over Bollier (FiveThirtyEight 2020). By mid-September, the two candidates were tied at 40-42% and by the end of the month, Bollier had pulled ahead by 3 points after Marshall had underperformed among registered republicans (FiveThirtyEight 2020). By mid-October, a New York Times Poll showed Marshall leading by 6 points (FiveThirtyEight 2020).

Although the final polling results before election day showed Marshall leading Bollier, no poll predicted his campaign to win by over 10 points. The statewide results show Marshall obtaining 53.5% percent of the total vote, or 711,951 votes total, and Bollier at 41.6%, or 553,014 votes total (The New York Times 2020). One reason for this incorrect prediction is the fact that Bollier overwhelmingly underperformed in one county in particular—Sedgwick County. The results in order of the top five most populous counties in Kansas are as follows: **(1) Johnson County—Bollier: 51.5% (173,222)**; Marshall: 44% (148,024), **(2) Sedgwick County—Bollier:**

43% (91,329); **Marshall: 52.3% (111,119)**, (3) Shawnee County—**Bollier: 50.3% (42,242)**; Marshall: 44.5% (37,372), (4) Wyandotte County—**Bollier: 63.3% (34,535)**; Marshall: 30.2% (16,747), (5) Douglas County—**Bollier: 67.7% (38,932)**; Marshall: 27.9% (16,056) (The New York Times 2020). Expectedly, Bollier, the democrat, easily won four out of five of the most populous counties, but the significance is found in the one county she did not win. Sedgwick County is the second most populous county in Kansas and encompasses the traditionally white, evangelical, and conservative city of Wichita. When Sedgwick is excluded from the calculations, Bollier won the other four counties by an average of 21.55%, but when Sedgwick is included, her lead drops to 15.38%. In contrast, the results in order of the top five least populous counties in Kansas are as follows: (1) Greeley County—Bollier: 15.6% (96); **Marshall: 80.5% (494)**, (2) Wallace County—Bollier: 6.5% (53); **Marshall: 90.4% (732)**, (3) Lane County—Bollier: 15.2% (134); **Marshall: 79.5% (701)**, (4) Comanche County—Bollier: 16.9% (153); **Marshall: 77.7% (702)**, (5) Hodgeman County—Bollier: 17.1% (176); **Marshall: 79.6% (818)** (The New York Times 2020). In these counties, Marshall's margin of win averages out to 67.28%. These calculations demonstrate how Bollier's chances of success in this race were contingent upon her margin of win in the most populated counties of the state, and considering how much of the state is rural compared to suburban or urban, she simply could not afford to underperform in Sedgwick where a better performance could have overpowered the influence that the vast rural regions of the state exercise in state-wide elections.

Although Bollier did not prevail in this election, the very fact that Kansas was considered a competitive state for an open senate seat is significant in and of itself as it signals the beginning of a shift in the Kansas electorate moving left. Broadly, Trump won the state by over 20 points in 2016 and that lead shrunk to 15.2 in 2020 (The New York Times 2020). Further, in the 2018

midterm elections Kansas was hit hard by the “blue wave.” In the gubernatorial race between extreme conservative Secretary of State Kris Kobach and Democratic candidate Laura Kelly, Kelly beat Kobach by 5 points by winning Sedgwick County (The New York Times 2020). Moreover, the third congressional district of Kansas, comprising exclusively suburban and urban regions with a PVI rating of R+4, voted out eight-year Republican Incumbent Representative Kevin Yoder in favor of newcomer Democrat Sharice Davids (Daily Kos 2020). However, Davids wasn’t just any Democrat. She is one of the two first female Native American representatives elected to the U.S. Congress, one of the few openly gay representatives, and a community college graduate. Davids beat Yoder in 2018 by 10 points after Yoder had been re-elected to the seat in 2016 by a margin of 10 points (The New York Times 2020). Finally, Bollier slightly outperformed President-elect Joe Biden across the state this cycle (Daily Kos 2020).

All in all, the 2020 Kansas U.S. Senate election was one in which no incumbent was up for reelection and two doctors, one extreme conservative and one former republican turned democrat, were running against each other with drastically different interpretations of science amid a pandemic. The race’s candidates, polling, fundraising, party partisanship, rhetoric, electorate trends, and more, all paralleled that of other 2020 national elections. Despite Democrat’s disappointing congressional election results, these factors of the Kansas election beg the question that if a state like Kansas, which hasn’t voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964—before major party realignment (Bacon Jr. 2020), could potentially elect a Democratic Senator, does the national electorate follow suit?

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