

ANALYSIS

Trump bets on Moore in Alabama and suffers stinging defeat

Jones victory a rebuke to president

By JULIE PACE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rarely has a sitting president rallied behind such a scandal-plagued candidate the way Donald Trump did with Alabama's Roy Moore. And rarely has that bet failed so spectacularly.

Moore's defeat Tuesday in Alabama — as stalwart a Republican state as they come — left Trump unapologetic and his political allies shell-shocked. Trump had dug in on his support for Moore despite allegations the former judge engaged in sexual misconduct with teenagers when he was in his 30s, becoming one of the candidate's most ardent national supporters in the race's closing days.

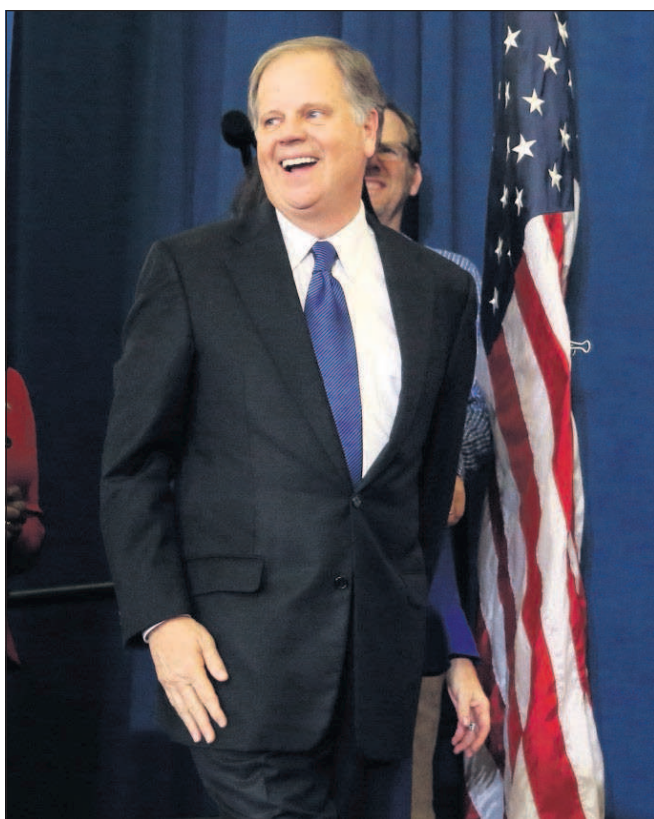
Now, out of the wreckage of Moore's defeat to Democrat Doug Jones, Trump faces mounting questions about the limits of his own political capital. He'll head into his second year in office with one less Republican senator, narrowing a margin already so slim that it has so far left him unable to push major legislation through Congress. Democrats, who

started the year as a deeply wounded minority party, press toward the midterm elections with a burst of momentum from the most unlikely of states.

To be sure, the Alabama race was highly unusual, and as with all special elections, there's no guarantee it will prove to be a barometer for contests a year from now. A perfect storm of controversies helped Jones overcome Alabama's strong Republican bent, most notably the sexual misconduct allegations that surfaced against Moore. The matter left the Republican Party deeply divided over whether holding a Senate seat was worth the potential long-term risks of supporting Moore.

Some Republicans did pull their support from Moore after the allegations surfaced, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and the National Republican Senatorial Committee. Many more GOP officials in Washington, D.C., privately preferred the prospect of a Moore defeat over having to deal with daily questions about his actions and the possible cloud of a Senate ethics investigation hanging over the party.

But Trump is the Republican Party leader, and he jumped in with both feet. In a moment of national reckoning over sex-



AP Photo/John Bazemore
Democrat Doug Jones smiles as he arrives to speak Tuesday in Birmingham, Ala. In a stunning victory aided by scandal, Jones won Alabama's special Senate election, beating back history, an embattled Republican opponent and President Donald Trump, who urgently endorsed GOP rebel Roy Moore despite a litany of sexual misconduct allegations.

ual misconduct, where hardly a day passes without a prominent man being ousted from a powerful position, the president made it impossible for the GOP to disassociate itself from Moore and the accusations swirling around him.

Trump's immediate

response to Jones' victory was a tweet congratulating him Tuesday night, surprisingly magnanimous for a president who lashes out at the smallest perceived slight and often seems to prioritize winning above all else. But by Wednesday, Trump was on the defen-

sive, reminding his followers that he had originally endorsed Moore's Republican primary opponent, Sen. Luther Strange. "I said Roy Moore will not be able to win the general election. I was right!" Trump wrote in a pre-dawn tweet. "Roy worked hard but the deck was stacked against him!"

The president offered no immediate insight into whether he viewed the results as a referendum on himself, personally or politically.

But there's no doubt that Trump's track record of late has indeed been worrisome for Republicans weighing how closely to align themselves with the president in the midterms, where control of Congress will be at stake.

Last month, the Trump-backed Republican gubernatorial candidate in Virginia lost in a race that wasn't close. The president now has the dubious distinction of picking wrong twice in Alabama, a state he won by 28 points just over a year ago. His first blemish came during the state's Senate primary, when he backed Strange, a decision he openly questioned while on stage at a rally for the incumbent days before the vote.

Moore's victory over Strange pushed Trump back to the roots of his presidential campaign. He realigned himself with Steve Bannon, his chief strategist during the 2016 race and in the White House

until he was ousted in a staff shakeup earlier this year. Bannon was one of Moore's most prominent supporters from the start and viewed the contest as a ripe opportunity to press forward in his goal of disrupting the Republican Party.

More traditional Republicans have long warned that Bannon's chosen candidates signal disaster for the party and will struggle to defeat Democrats in competitive states. The fact that one of those candidates couldn't succeed in reliably red — or conservative — Alabama was quickly wielded as all the more reason for party leaders to marginalize Bannon.

"Not only did Steve Bannon cost us a critical Senate seat in one of the most Republican states in the country, but he also dragged the president of the United States into his fiasco," said Steven Law, the head of the McConnell-linked Senate Leadership Fund super PAC.

It's far from certain if Trump feels the same way after the Alabama race. The president seems more naturally attuned to other political outsiders and is well-aware that his command over a sizeable swath of the GOP primary electorate makes him a powerful player in determining the party's direction in upcoming elections. Whether he can transfer his own political good fortunes to those candidates remains an unanswered question.

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107 Public Notices

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