



MEMO

To: Interested parties

From: Alana Mounce, Executive Director, NV Dems

Date: Monday, March 19, 2018

Subject: The price of Heller's primary was losing the general election

Dean Heller started the 2018 election cycle as the only GOP incumbent representing a state won by Hillary Clinton in 2016, the most vulnerable Republican senator on the ballot, and the only Republican senator facing a toss-up re-election. But instead of spending the last seven months preparing for an uphill battle in the general election in November, Heller and his political consultants were just forced to spend every day [since the morning of August 8, 2017](#) worrying about the GOP primary and focused on beating Danny Tarkanian.

Let's not forget: Tarkanian's unexpected primary challenge against a sitting senator would never have even occurred if it were not for Heller's own self-inflicted wounds and his terrible political miscalculations on health care. With so many mistakes, it's no surprise that Heller's approval rating [dropped](#) nearly 10 points since the start of the 2018 election season, according to *Morning Consult*.

The result has been a divisive and expensive distraction for Republicans in Nevada and in Washington, D.C. Heller and his allies were forced to spend money on TV and digital ads for the primary, wasting time and throwing away resources to bash Tarkanian and appeal to Republican primary voters. Now, Heller is entering the general election with a sputtering campaign and weak fundraising numbers that have been described as "[stagnant](#)," "[worrisome](#)," "[lousy](#)," and "[embarrassing](#)."

Heller's immediate and dramatic shift over the last seven months cozying up to a President he once vehemently opposed showed Nevada voters exactly who he is: a spineless career politician who has no convictions except self-preservation. From his right-wing shifts on health care and his full-throated embrace of President Trump, to a depressed Republican base, Heller's primary set him up to lose the general election.

HELLER HAS LURCHED TO THE FAR RIGHT ON KEY ISSUES

As soon as Heller knew he was getting a serious primary challenger, he began lurching to the right on key issues. He did what was politically convenient to survive his primary, but Heller now finds himself out of touch with key constituencies he needed to appeal to

if he hoped to win in November. He's raced so far to the right that it's now impossible for him to pivot back for the general election without reinforcing the view that he's spineless and untrustworthy.

- **Health Care:** Heller famously [promised](#) last year not to vote for a bill that takes away insurance away from millions of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Nevadans. But of course, after a [public threat](#) from President Trump, Heller promptly [caved](#) and [broke his promise](#) to vote for the Republican health care plan. Days after the vote, a Super PAC linked to Mitch McConnell [pledged](#) to spend millions of dollars supporting Heller's re-election. Heller sold out Nevadans to benefit his political career. In addition to his toxic health care votes, Heller will also be forced to defend the [radical Graham-Cassidy bill](#) he helped introduce. Heller's proposed health care plan would [gut Medicaid funding](#) and [undermine protections](#) for people with pre-existing conditions, and Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval has strongly [opposed](#) the bill. Health care has emerged as the [top issue for voters](#) in 2018 – and the GOP's unpopular agenda has been dragging down Republican candidates across the country. Heller will be no exception.
- **Women's Health:** Heller wavered in his opposition to Planned Parenthood last year at a Reno town hall, promising to support and protect the organization's funding and then ([not even 24 hours later](#)) re-committing to his decade-long history of voting to defund Planned Parenthood. Since Tarkanian's primary challenge began, Heller has continued to [double down](#) against Planned Parenthood funding. In October, Heller also [quietly signed on](#) as a co-sponsor of an extreme and unconstitutional abortion ban that has been [opposed](#) by the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Medical Association. In February, Heller was [bragging](#) about his endorsement from National Right to Life, a fringe anti-choice group. Nevada is a pro-choice state, and this issue was a major political loser for former Congressman Joe Heck's campaign for Senate in 2016. Heller's opposition to women's reproductive freedom will be a major liability in 2018.
- **Immigration:** Heller, who started his political career in Washington as an immigration hardliner, made a big show of [throwing his support behind immigration reform](#) in 2013. But ever since the White House made the heartless decision to end the DACA program in September, Tarkanian's primary challenge pushed Heller to ignore immigration advocates and instead work tirelessly to be in lockstep with President Trump. For months, Heller has refused to support the bipartisan Dream Act and declined to speak out for protecting Dreamers. In February, Heller voted in favor of Trump's divisive immigration framework, while [voting against](#) both of the bipartisan DACA compromises in the Senate and saying he "didn't have time to meet with" the bipartisan group of senators working on a solution. Heller even [said recently](#) that Democrats are to blame for the lack of a DACA fix because they want immigrants to vote but not work. Heller lost the Hispanic vote by a [staggering margin](#) in 2012. In a diverse state with a growing

Latino population, immigrant families now know they can't trust Heller and will hold him accountable.

- **Legalized Marijuana:** Nevada voters decided to legalize and regulate recreational marijuana by a substantial margin in 2016, so there was widespread outrage after the Justice Department reversed its policy effectively allowing states to decide how to enforce federal marijuana laws. While Nevada Democrats and other Senate Republicans from legal marijuana states went on the attack, Heller's reaction was [weak](#) and [lukewarm](#). By refusing to directly criticize the Trump Administration's decision to rescind the Cole Memo or take any meaningful action, Heller failed to stand up for Nevada's cannabis industry. Heller is the [only GOP senator](#) up for re-election this year from a recreational marijuana state who voted to confirm Jeff Sessions as attorney general.
- **Travel Ban:** In January 2017, Heller [responded](#) to Trump's announcement of his controversial travel ban by saying he was "deeply troubled by the appearance of a religious ban." But in November 2017, after Tarkanian's primary challenge, Heller flip-flopped and [implicitly endorsed](#) one of President Trump's most contentious proposals – an overly broad travel restriction targeting several predominantly Muslim countries.

HELLER IS HUGGING TRUMP, AND NOW HE CAN'T SEPARATE HIMSELF IN A GENERAL ELECTION

What happened to the senator who vehemently opposed Trump because he denigrates human beings? After Tarkanian launched his campaign, Heller did everything he could to emphasize his unwavering loyalty to the President in order to get that Trump tweet.

- [Nine months after the election](#) and less than a week after Tarkanian jumped in the primary, Heller finally admitted he had voted for Trump in 2016.
- Heller used a Metro press conference after the October 1 mass shooting [to brag](#) that he got "two hours of face time with the president at 30,000 feet."
- Heller made a big show of standing [right behind Trump](#) at a White House event celebrating passage of the tax law.
- Heller boasted that he and Trump now have a "[much closer relationship](#)."
- Despite the endless string of scandals and controversies coming out of the White House, Heller has [repeatedly refused to criticize Trump](#).
- In 2017, Heller voted in line with President Trump 96 percent of the time. Heller has never voted against any Trump nominee.

- Heller awkwardly tied himself [to Trump on immigration](#): “I have a tendency to support what the president’s trying to do, and that’s probably the position that’s closest to where I am.”
- When Trump endorsed Heller’s re-election on Twitter at the eleventh hour, Heller’s capitulation was [complete](#): “I appreciate President Trump’s support and kind words.”

Heller solved his short-term primary problem, but he’s made it [impossible to separate himself](#) from Trump in a general election. In a state that Trump lost in 2016, Heller’s politically self-serving courtship of the White House is a double-edged sword that will drag him down in November.

MANY REPUBLICAN VOTERS AREN’T BUYING IT, MAY NOT TURN OUT IN NOVEMBER

Tarkanian’s challenge has underscored an issue that isn’t going away in 2018: many Nevada Republicans do not like Heller, and they’re not motivated or excited about re-electing him to the Senate. Remember, public polling last fall showed Heller actually [losing the primary](#) to Tarkanian.

Heller’s deep vulnerability in the primary was a preview for the base problem he’s still going to face in a general election. As one upset Nevada voter and conservative talk radio caller [warned](#) on Friday: “He’s depressed his base... He’s not going back to Washington. Heller’s done.”

Despite President Trump’s tweeting, it seems clear that some Republican voters will decline to show up at the ballot box, and some will still refuse to support Dean Heller in the primary or the general election.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Long before Tarkanian entered the race, Heller was in deep trouble. While the GOP Senate primary ended on Friday, this process has caused lasting damage for Heller’s already beleaguered re-election campaign.

More than anything, what the primary has reinforced is that Heller’s biggest electoral liability is [himself](#). Over the past year, Heller has shown himself to be a career politician who lacks convictions, who will do or say anything to keep his job, and who will always put himself and his party first.

This is a senator who’s just spent the last seven months showing Nevada voters that he’s more concerned with politics than principle. So, while Heller’s backroom deal may have saved him from a nasty and competitive primary in June, the price will be losing the general election.