WTM

EDITORIAL INTELLIGENCE



THE WORK THAT ENDURES

Public service beyond the result

EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

Visual intelligence by

NOIR SPIDER ATELIER

Defeat is a result. A legacy is a record.

Beyond the Ballot: What Beto O’Rourke, Stacey Abrams and John McCain Leave Behind

What survives an election defeat?

Public service deserves more than admiration. It requires attention to decisions, consequences and the institutions that remain.

01 **SERVICE**

What changed for people because of the offices a leader actually held?

02 **PARTICIPATION**

Did the work broaden access, and could the institutions sustain it?

03 **JUDGEMENT**

Did conviction survive scrutiny when the decisions became consequential?

These are different careers, not a ranking. Office, advocacy and public attention are not interchangeable.

Editorial framework adapted from WTM’s researched Political Legacies manuscript. Evidence and links: pp. 12–13.

Power held. Higher office sought.

Selected milestones distinguish public authority from candidacy. These are not complete career timelines.

BETO O’ROURKE

2005–2011
El Paso city council

2013–2019
US House

2018
Senate defeat

2022
Governor defeat

STACEY ABRAMS

2007–2017
Georgia House

2011–2017
Minority leader

2018
Governor defeat

2022
Governor defeat

JOHN McCAIN

1967–1973
Prisoner of war

1983–1987
US House

1987–2018
US Senate

2008
Presidential defeat

The living subjects’ work does not end at their latest electoral defeat. McCain died in August 2018.

Sources: US House biographies; National Democratic Institute; Columbia IGP; election record.

Attention is not the same as power.



His 2018 Senate and 2022 gubernatorial defeats limit claims of a statewide governing mandate. They do not erase earlier service.

Sources: US House biography; The Texas Tribune, 14 October 2022. Illustration is a symbolic montage, not a documented event.

PRACTICAL SERVICE

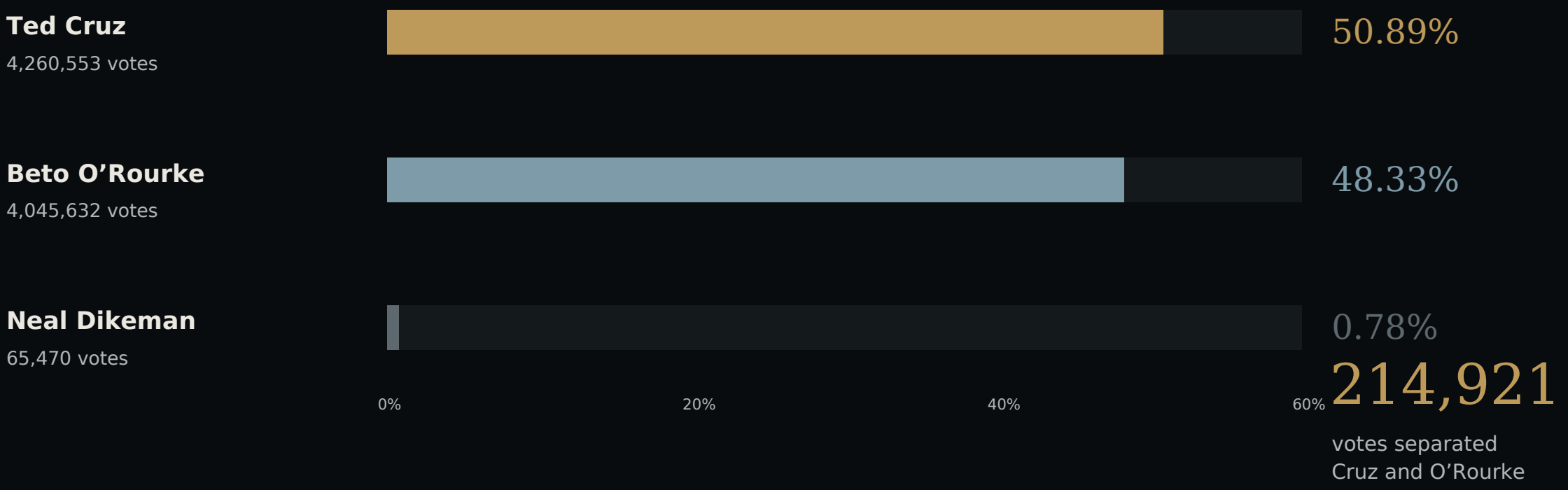
The quieter record beneath the national campaign

O’Rourke worked with Republicans Jodey Arrington and Mike Coffman on veterans’ transitions and mental-health provision. This was collective legislative work, not a solo achievement.

54 sponsored or cosponsored bills became law; one had him as principal sponsor.

A close defeat remained a defeat.

US Senate • Percentages calculated from certified vote totals and rounded to two decimal places.



214,921
votes separated Cruz and O’Rourke

Source: Texas secretary of state, 2018 certified results. Scale: 0–60%. Vote shares sum to 100.00% after rounding.

Participation is an institutional task.



The lesson: “bipartisan” starts the assessment. It does not settle who gained, who lost, or whether the bargain was sufficient.

Sources: NDI; Columbia IGP; Governing; PolitiFact on the 2011 HOPE compromise; election record.

REPRESENTATION + BARGAINING

Conviction does not remove the costs of compromise.

A tax attorney and Georgia House minority leader, Abrams became the first Black woman nominated for governor by a major US party in 2018. She lost to Brian Kemp in 2018 and 2022.

Her HOPE scholarship compromise with Republican governor Nathan Deal preserved a tier without standardised-test requirements, but reduced its generosity. Full-tuition Zell Miller aid carried higher academic and testing thresholds.

Do not confuse a movement with one person.

New Georgia Project and its action fund are distinct from Fair Fight. Keep organisational and personal findings separate.

2013

FOUNDING

Abrams founded the New Georgia Project.

2017

DEPARTURE

She stepped down and said she had no subsequent role.

JAN 2025

CONSENT DECREE

The two organisations accepted a $300,000 campaign-finance fine.

OCT 2025

CLOSURE

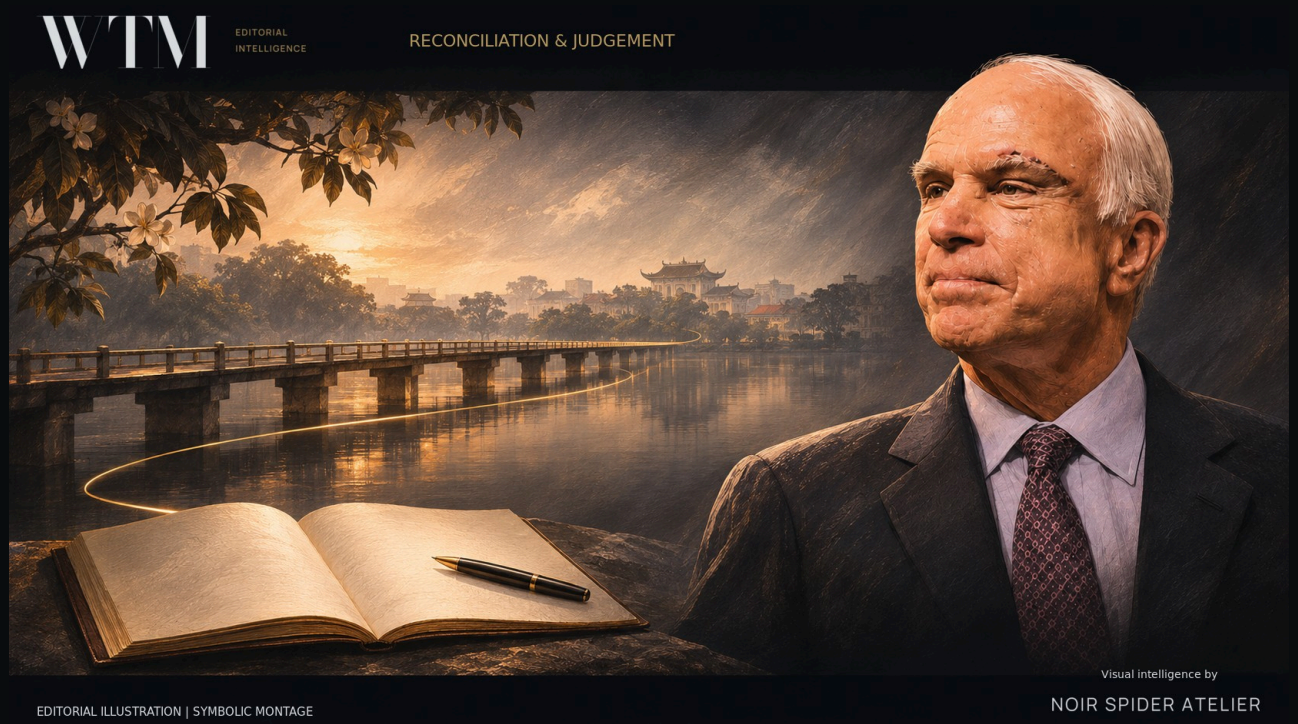
The organisations announced they were closing.

WHAT THE RECORD DOES NOT ESTABLISH

The consent decree made no finding of improper coordination with Abrams’s campaign. Separately, the 2022 Fair Fight voting-rights ruling favoured Georgia on all issues remaining at trial. It did not establish that Abrams had been deprived of a victory, or resolve every possible voting-access concern.

Sources: AP reporting via GPB (fine), WABE (closures and lawsuit). Earlier lawsuit claims had been resolved or dismissed.

Courage does not exempt judgement.



His 2008 presidential defeat: Obama 365 electoral votes; McCain 173. Acceptance of defeat is itself a democratic act.

Sources: Congressional biography; Clinton White House; Senate roll call 237 (2002); National Archives.

RECONCILIATION + RESPONSIBILITY

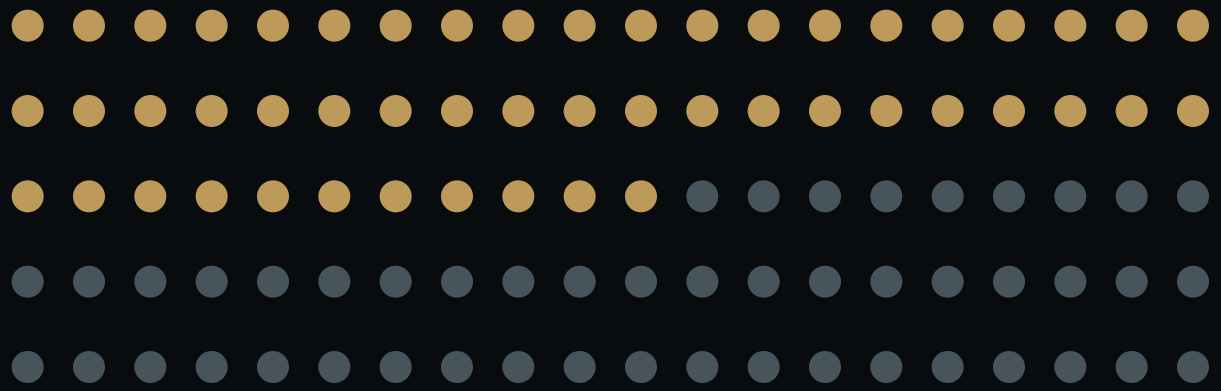
A record can contain both engagement and war.

A prisoner of war in Vietnam and long-serving senator, McCain helped make reconciliation politically possible. In July 1995, President Clinton explicitly credited McCain, John Kerry and other veterans when announcing normalisation of relations.

McCain also voted for the 2002 authorisation to use military force in Iraq. His endurance and capacity for reconciliation do not settle the merits of that decision.

The celebrated vote was part of a coalition.

Senate “skinny repeal” amendment • 28 July 2017 • Proposal defeated



51 against 49 for

Each dot = one senator

Susan Collins
John McCain
Lisa Murkowski

The three Republican senators joined the Democratic caucus. McCain’s vote was decisive, but so were theirs.

Earlier, the McCain–Feingold campaign-finance bill passed the Senate 60–40 in 2002. Cooperation is a method, not proof that a policy settles every future problem.

Sources: NPR/KNAU account of the healthcare vote; contemporary Senate announcement of campaign-finance reform.

Three different kinds of political action.

Compare the evidence on its own terms. These are not equivalent forms of executive foreign-policy experience.

01

DECISIONS + VOTES

McCain helped reconciliation with Vietnam and voted for the Iraq war authorisation. These were consequential acts within federal power.

02

CAMPAIGN PROPOSALS

O’Rourke proposed rejoining the Iran nuclear agreement if Iran complied, working with allies and addressing China’s human-rights record.

03

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Abrams discussed democracy and political inclusion at Chatham House in 2019. This was an international forum for ideas.

Authority

A vote can enable state action.

Advocacy

A proposal is not an implemented policy.

Public argument

A speech is not a treaty or command.

Sources: Clinton White House / Senate roll call; Council on Foreign Relations (2019); Chatham House (2019).

Admiration should sharpen scrutiny.



START WITH THE SOURCE

“our nationalism with tribal rivalries”

McCain’s official farewell uses this wording. A social-media tribute substituted “patriotism” and omitted “tribal”. It also framed the text as an attack on Trump, whom the statement never names.

Interpretation is legitimate.
Silently rewriting the source is not.

Judge records. Trace consequences. Credit collective work.
Which contribution should matter most when a politician loses the office they sought?

Source: John McCain’s official farewell statement, August 2018. Closing artwork is symbolic, with fictional anonymous figures.

Evidence you can inspect.

Select any source title to open the cited record. Links are carried over from the researched WTM editorial.

01 McCain: official farewell statement
www.johnmccain.com

02 O’Rourke: US House historical biography
history.house.gov

03 Texas: certified 2018 Senate results
elections.sos.state.tx.us

04 Texas Tribune: O’Rourke’s bipartisan record
www.texastribune.org

05 CFR: O’Rourke foreign-policy answers
www.cfr.org

06 NDI: Stacey Abrams biography
ndi.org

07 Columbia IGP: Stacey Abrams biography
igp.sipa.columbia.edu

08 Ballotpedia: Abrams election record
ballotpedia.org

09 Governing: Abrams legislative profile
www.governing.com

10 PolitiFact: HOPE compromise
politifact.com

11 AP/WABE: New Georgia Project closures
www.wabe.org

Evidence you can inspect.

Select any source title to open the cited record. Links are carried over from the researched WTM editorial.

12 ABC: Abrams and the 2018 result
abcnews.com

13 AP/WABE: Fair Fight lawsuit ruling
www.wabe.org

14 AP/GPB: organisations’ $300,000 fine
www.gpb.org

15 Chatham House: democracy and identity
www.chathamhouse.org

16 US House: McCain biography
history.house.gov

17 National Archives: 2008 electoral votes
www.archives.gov

18 US Senate: campaign-finance reform
www.cantwell.senate.gov

19 Clinton White House: Vietnam normalisation
clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov

20 US Senate: Iraq authorisation roll call
www.senate.gov

21 NPR/KNAU: 2017 healthcare vote
www.knau.org

READING THE EVIDENCE

Official records establish dates, votes and statements. Reporting supplies context and institutional developments. Judgements in this edition are editorial analysis, not quantitative rankings.