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**To: Interested Parties**
**From: Data for Progress**
**Date: May 20th, 2025**
**Re: 2026 Iowa Senate Election - Nathan Sage Only Candidate With Clear Path Against Ernst**

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**Executive Summary**

In May 2025, Data for Progress conducted a survey of likely 2026 general election voters in Iowa. At this early stage, incumbent Senator Joni Ernst holds a significant name recognition advantage over potential Democratic challengers, but is largely viewed unfavorably by Iowa voters, with a -12 net favorability rating statewide. After each respondent read randomized candidate biographies, Nathan Sage emerged clearly as the strongest challenger, leading Ernst 47% to 45% after balanced biographies were presented — while all other candidates trailed by at least 6 percentage points.

**Joni Ernst is Better Known Than Challengers, But Is Less Favorable Among Fellow Republicans**

Joni Ernst begins the race underwater among the electorate overall, with the Senator receiving a -12-point net *unfavorable* rating with likely Iowa voters. In contrast, her fellow Senator Chuck Grassley and President Donald Trump receive -8-point and -2-point net unfavorable ratings, respectively, with the same voters, making her one of the most precariously positioned of the statewide Republicans tested in the survey. Among the Democrats, all of the tested potential senate candidates are significantly less well known, with as many as 90 percent of voters not having heard enough to form an opinion on the least known candidates.

**Ernst Leads Dems by Similar Margins in Blind Head-to-Heads**

Despite Ernst's negative favorability ratings, she initially leads each hypothetical Democratic challenger by 5 to 6 points in initial head-to-head matchups, with 10 percent of the electorate as undecided. Given her less favorable view among voters initially, this lead is likely driven by Ernst's high name ID among the electorate compared to any of the tested potential Democratic challengers.
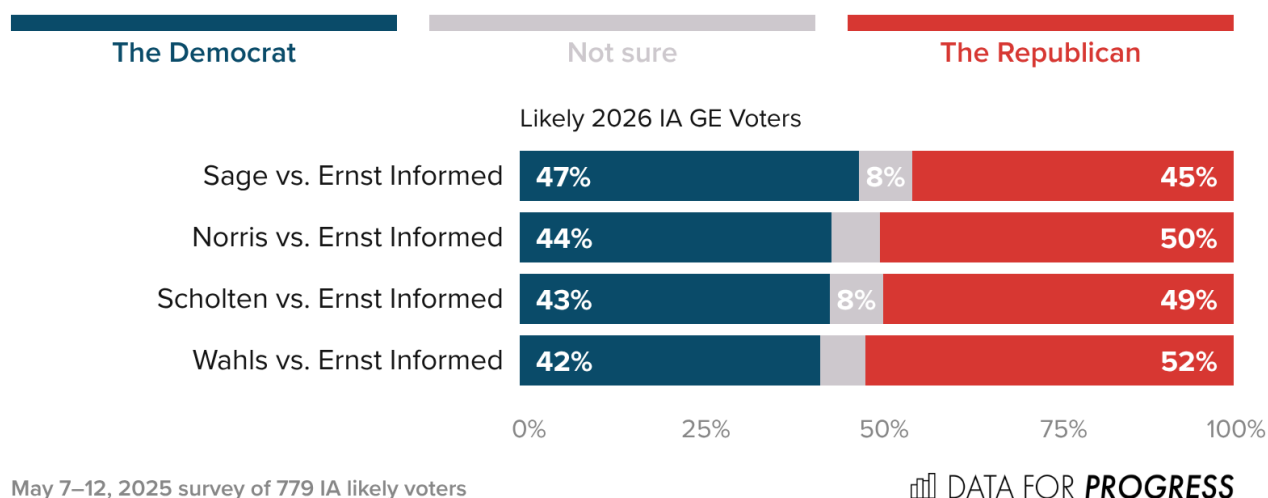
**Sage Is the Only Candidate to Overtake Ernst After Bios**

After respondents viewed all five candidate biographies of similar length — with both the order of the matchups and the placement of each bio randomized —  Nathan Sage was the only candidate to improve his position relative to Ernst. Specifically, while voters continue to support Ernst over Norris and Scholten by a 6-point margin after learning more about each candidate, the Senator is able to  *widen* her margin over Zach Wahls to a +10-point lead after bios. In contrast, Sage's bio resonated much more effectively with Iowans, driving up support for Sage's candidacy and

allowing him to overtake Ernst in the informed matchup, making him the only tested Democratic challenger able to do so in this survey.

## Sage Bio Outperforms Ernst and Challengers

If the **November 2026 general election** for **United States Senator from Iowa** was held tomorrow, and these were the candidates, who would you vote for?

The Democrat | Not sure | The Republican

Likely 2026 IA GE Voters

| | The Democrat | Not sure | The Republican |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sage vs. Ernst Informed | 47% | 8% | 45% |
| Norris vs. Ernst Informed | 44% | | 50% |
| Scholten vs. Ernst Informed | 43% | 8% | 49% |
| Wahls vs. Ernst Informed | 42% | | 52% |

0%    25%    50%    75%    100%

May 7–12, 2025 survey of 779 IA likely voters

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Sage's growth was driven by increased support among previously undecided voters and some who supported Ernst in the initial ballot. This, in turn, further bolsters the argument that Sage is well positioned to win over not only Iowa Democrats and left-leaning independents, but also moderate and more conservative Independent voters who are critical to winning statewide in Iowa.

**Methodology**

From May 7 to 12, 2025, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 779 likely voters in Iowa using SMS and web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography, and recalled presidential vote. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error associated with the sample size is ±4 percentage points. Results for subgroups of the sample are subject to increased margins of error. Partisanship reflected in tabulations is based on self-identified party affiliation, not partisan registration. For more information please visit dataforprogress.org/our-methodology.

**Appendix**

*Below are the candidate biographies as presented — each shown side-by-side (one Democrat vs. Ernst). All respondents saw each Democrat tested individually against Ernst, with the order of matchups and candidate placement randomized. For Sage's biography, respondents were evenly split, with half viewing "Split A" and half viewing "Split B."*

**Nathan Sage (Split A)**
Nathan Sage is a Democrat from Indianola. Born and raised in a trailer park in Mason City, Sage enlisted in the Marines, served two tours in Iraq, then re-enlisted in the Army and served a third tour in Iraq. Back home, he put himself through college with the GI Bill and worked as a mechanic, a sports radio host, and eventually became Director at an Iowa radio station, working closely with local businesses. He's now the director of his local Chamber of Commerce as a voice for Iowa small businesses and working people.

**Nathan Sage (Split B)**
Nathan Sage is a lifelong independent running for U.S. Senate as a different kind of Democrat, one who actually cares about working people. Sage is a patriot, not a politician. He enlisted in the Marines, served two tours in Iraq, then re-enlisted in the Army and served a third tour in Iraq. Back home, he put himself through college with the GI Bill and worked as a mechanic, a sports radio host, and eventually became Director of the Knoxville chamber of commerce, working closely with local businesses as a voice for Iowa small businesses and working people.

**J.D. Scholten**
J.D. Scholten is a Democrat from Sioux City. He played college baseball, then pro baseball in several countries before coming home to run a non-profit organization helping low-income Iowans. He ran for Congress in rural Iowa, only losing narrowly and showing how Democrats can compete in rural America. He was then elected and re-elected to the Iowa State House of Representatives representing the Sioux City area in Des Moines.

**Jackie Norris**
Jackie Norris is a Democrat from Des Moines. She was an award-winning high school government teacher, the CEO of Goodwill of Central Iowa, worked for global non-profit organizations, and served as White House Chief of Staff in Washington to First Lady Michelle Obama. She is now Chair of the Des Moines Public Schools Board, working to support strong public schools.

**Zach Wahls**
Zach Wahls is a Democrat from Iowa City, a sixth generation Iowan, a passionate LGBTQ+ advocate, and an Eagle Scout. He works at a credit union, helps manage his family tree farm, and he wrote a nationally bestselling memoir called "My Two Moms" about being raised by two lesbians and he co-founded Scouts for Equality to promote LGBT equality and end discrimination in the Boy Scouts of America Organization. He is currently an Iowa State Senator, representing the Iowa City area in Des Moines.

**Joni Ernst**
Joni Ernst is a current Republican U.S. Senator. She grew up on a farm in Southwest Iowa and served in both the Army Reserves and Iowa National Guard, including leading a unit that drove convoys through Iraq. After returning home, she was elected as County Auditor, then to the Iowa State Senate and, in 2014, was elected to the U.S. Senate. She has served Iowa in the U.S. Senate for over 10 years and is now seeking a third term to continue upholding Iowa values.