

Self Informed

Published by the National Association for the Self-Employed

June 2026



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Gary O'Neill

Examiners Edge®
Patent Agency

EVERY SMALL BUSINESS ALREADY HAS A *STORY*



MOST JUST AREN'T TELLING IT

*A guest article by Brad Luna and Kristofer Eisenla, **LUNA+EISENLA***

If you're self-employed or running a small business, chances are you didn't start your company because you aspired to become a marketer, spokesperson, or public relations professional. You started it because you had a skill, an idea, or a conviction—and because you believed you could offer something better, more personal, or more trustworthy than what was already in the market.

What many small business owners overlook is this: that journey *is* your story. And when told

intentionally, it can become one of the most effective and affordable growth tools you have.

In today's crowded marketplace, customers are no longer persuaded by polished advertising alone. They want credibility. They want to understand who they are buying from, why that business exists, and whether its values align with their own. For small businesses, that creates a powerful opportunity—because authenticity is not something you need to manufacture. You already live it every day.

If You're Self-Employed, You're Already a Thought Leader (You Just Don't Know It Yet)

Thought leadership is often misunderstood as something reserved for executives with large platforms or companies with entire communications departments. In reality, thought leadership simply means sharing insight that others find useful.

If you've navigated rising costs, unpredictable revenue, changing regulations, or workforce challenges, you've accumulated knowledge others are actively searching for. If you've adapted to new technologies, learned how to price your services sustainably, or found ways to compete against larger players, those lessons matter.

For self-employed professionals, lived experience is expertise. The only thing missing is confidence in sharing it publicly—and a clear understanding of where and how to do so.

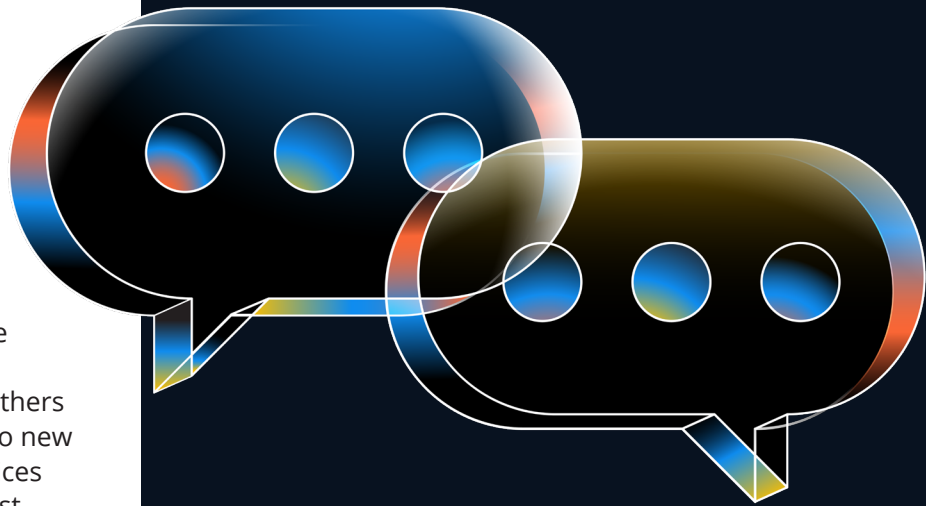
Public Relations Isn't Just for Big Brands—It's a Growth Tool

At its core, public relations is strategic storytelling. It's about shaping how others understand your business through credible, third-party channels.

For small businesses, that doesn't mean chasing national headlines or launching expensive campaigns. It can be as straightforward as:

- Contributing a short opinion piece to a trade or local publication
- Being quoted as an expert on issues affecting your industry
- Sharing thoughtful, consistent insights on LinkedIn or through an association platform
- Participating in community, policy, or industry conversations that intersect with your work
- Using AI to help build your brand identity and identify opportunities that can help promote your small business and your expertise.

These activities don't just create visibility—they build trust. And trust is often the deciding factor when customers are choosing between businesses that offer similar products or services.



**FOR SELF-EMPLOYED
PROFESSIONALS,
LIVED EXPERIENCE
IS EXPERTISE**

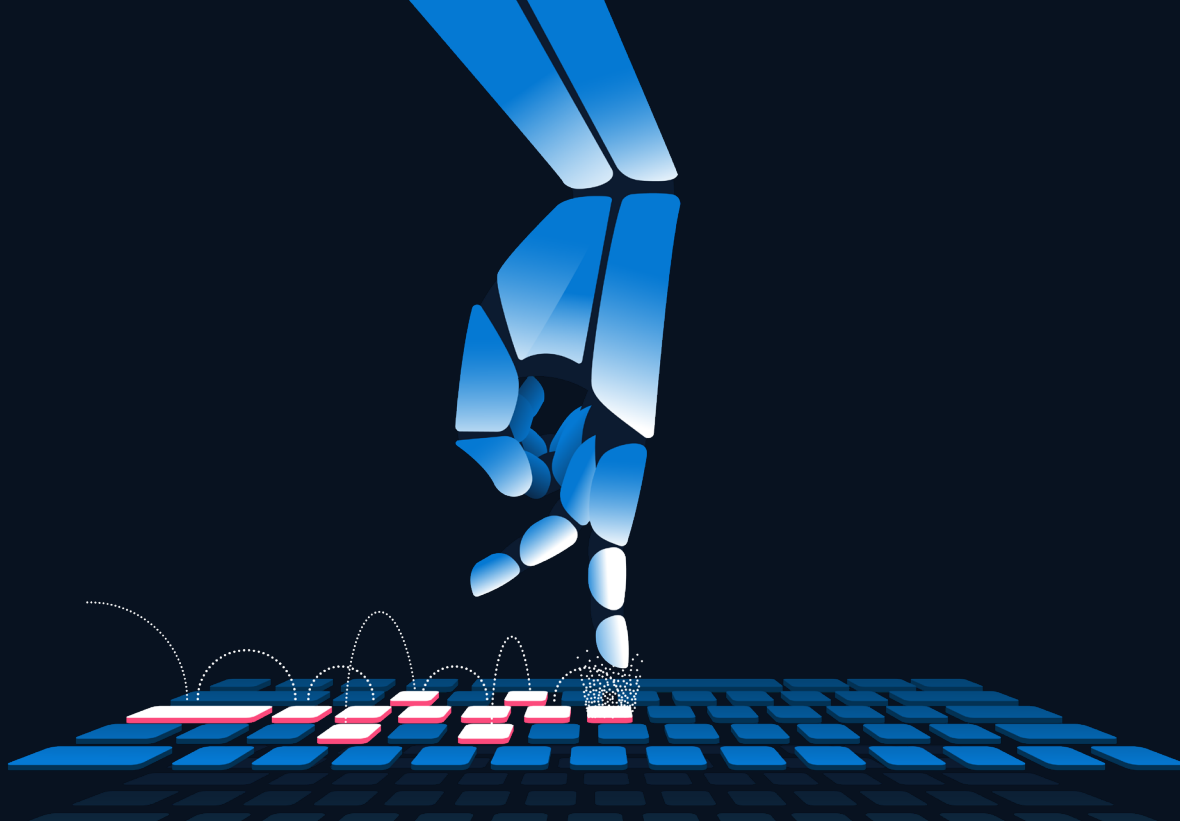
Visibility Builds Credibility—and Credibility Drives Revenue

When potential customers encounter your business through trusted sources—media coverage, association publications, expert commentary, or consistent thought leadership—you are no longer an unknown quantity. You enter the conversation with credibility already established.

That credibility can:

- Shorten sales cycles by reducing skepticism
- Support pricing decisions by reinforcing expertise
- Create inbound opportunities through referrals and partnerships
- Differentiate your business in competitive markets

For small business owners juggling multiple responsibilities, these outcomes matter. Strategic visibility allows your reputation to work for you—even when you're not actively selling.



Four Practical Steps NASE Members Can Take Now

You don't need a large budget or a dedicated communications team to get started. NASE members are already well positioned to take advantage of tools and resources that support visibility and credibility. Begin with these steps:

1. Clarify the story behind your business.

Identify what makes your business different. Why did you start it? What challenges have you overcome? What insights have you gained that others could learn from? This narrative becomes the foundation for everything else.

2. Leverage trusted platforms and networks.

Association publications, member newsletters, educational webinars, and industry forums—like those offered through NASE—provide built-in credibility. Sharing your perspective in these spaces allows you to reach the right audience without starting from scratch.

3. Focus on education, not promotion.

The most effective storytelling doesn't feel like marketing. It feels like guidance. Share what you know in a way that helps others navigate similar challenges. Credibility grows fastest when value comes first.

4. The Use of AI: Use it to get started but trust a human to finish it.

AI tools can help self-employed professionals and small business owners draft content faster, organize their thinking, and identify the messages that matter most — without requiring a communications department. But efficiency should never come at the cost of authenticity. A quick human review ensures your voice stays yours and your story stays credible.

As the co-founders of LUNA+EISENLA, we recently wrote in [Inc. Magazine](#), smaller firms are actually better positioned than large ones to adopt and benefit from AI — as long as they don't lose sight of the values that make them distinctive in the first place.

Small business owners already wear many hats. Strategic storytelling doesn't need to be another burden—but it can be one of the smartest, most scalable investments you make in your business's long-term growth.

Brad Luna and Kristofer Eisenla are co-founders of [LUNA+EISENLA](#), a boutique communications and media consulting firm. You can visit them at www.lunaeisenla.com.

NOW ACCEPTING Growth Grant Applications

Multiple Growth Grants of \$4,000 are Awarded Each Quarter

Since 2006, the NASE has awarded nearly \$1,000,000 to members just like you through the Growth Grants program by providing small business grants. These grants can be used for things like marketing, advertising, hiring employees, expanding facilities, buying new equipment and other specific business needs. Applications are accepted 365 days a year and you may save your progress, the application doesn't have to be completed in one sitting.

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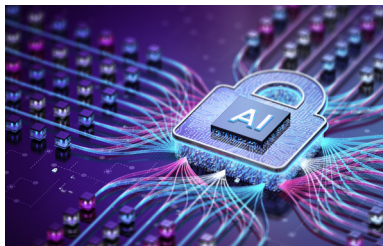


NASE Welcomes New Retirement Savings Accounts as a Critical Step Toward Retirement Security for America's Self-Employed

May 08, 2026

NASE welcomes the launch of Trump IRA accounts as a "bold and necessary step toward closing the retirement savings gap that has long left self-employed Americans behind."

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Jun 17, 2026

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As a member of the National Association for the Self Employed, you now have an opportunity to enroll in **MetLife TakeAlong DentalSM**. TakeAlong Dental offers an individual dental policy or a non-insurance discount dental program. In either case, you can take this benefit with you no matter what life-changing event you experience. It's a dental benefit that stays with you.¹ So take a closer look at this great benefit and enroll online or by phone.

Three Valuable Program Options

No matter which program you choose, you'll enjoy competitive prices and great benefits such as:

PPO:

- Three benefit coverage levels to choose from: Low, medium or high.
- Flexibility to choose any licensed dentist, in- or out-of-network, and still receive benefits.¹
- Save an average of 35% to 50% off dentist list prices with in-network providers for everything from fillings to crowns.²
- No referral needed for specialty care.
- Access to thousands of participating dental locations across the U.S.

Dental HMO/Managed Care³:

- Currently available to California, Florida, New York and Texas residents.
- Two benefit coverage levels to choose from: Low or high.
- At the time of enrollment, pre-select a dentist who participates in the network.
- Broad network of carefully screened general dentists and specialists who provide quality dental care at a reduced cost.
- No waiting periods, claim forms, deductibles or annual maximums.

MetLife Discount Dental Plan⁴:

- This is a discount plan and is not insurance.
- Discount plan for dental services from nationwide networks of participating providers.
- Save 5% to 50% on most dental procedures.
- 5% to 20% savings on orthodontics, including braces and retainers.²
- 5% to 20% reduction on specialist's fees. Specialties include endodontics, oral surgery, orthodontics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics and prosthodontics where available.²
- Cosmetic dentistry, such as bonding and veneers, is also included.
- You may visit any dentist participating in the program.
- All dentists must meet highly selective credentialing standards based on education, background, license standing and other requirements.⁵
- The program is not available in Washington, Utah and Vermont

It's easy to get started.

Find all the information you need in one convenient location at [metlifetakealongdental.com](https://www.metlifetakealongdental.com)



Member Benefits

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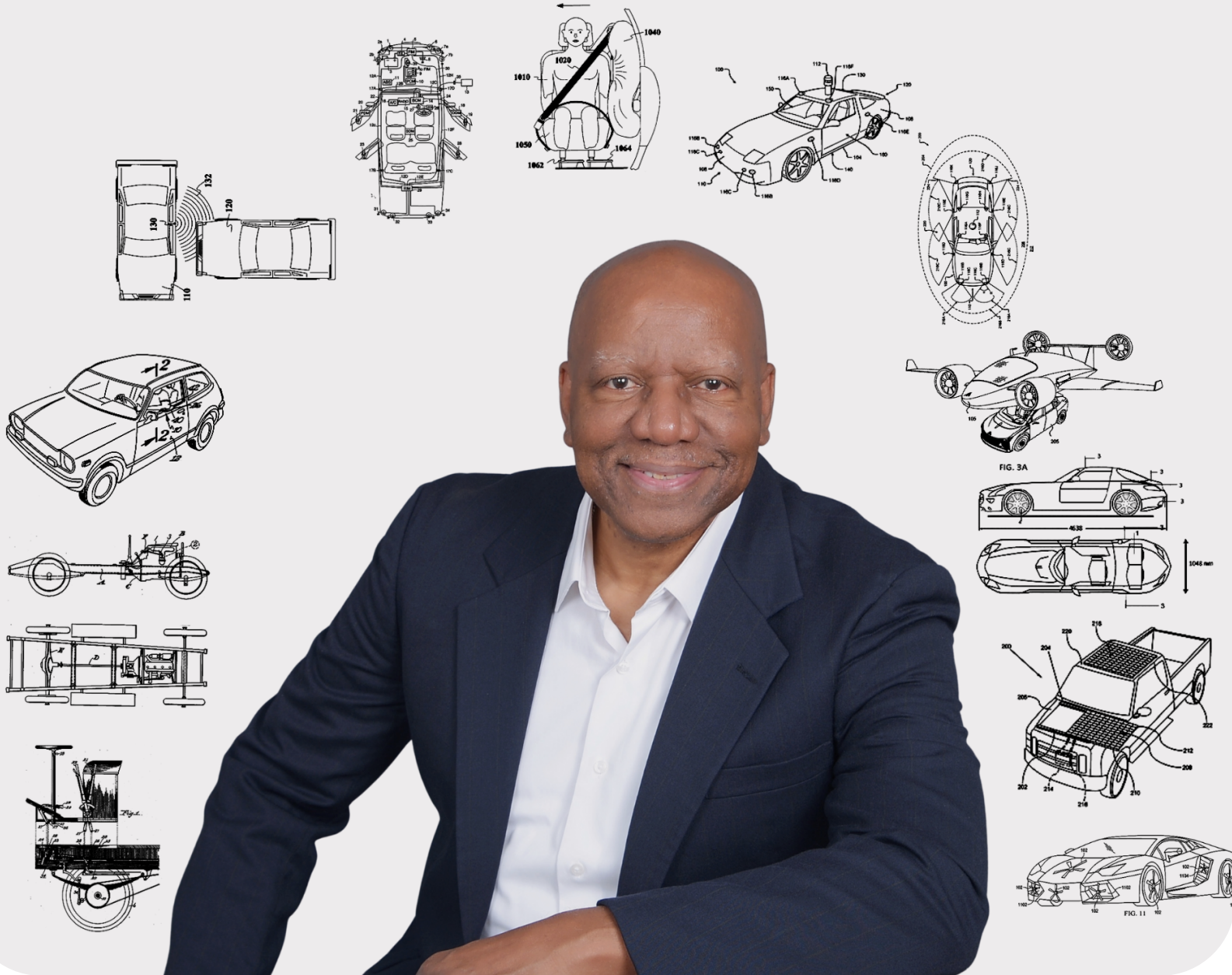
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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Gary O'Neill

Gary O'Neill is the Managing Director of **Examiners Edge® Patent Agency** in Dallas, Texas, where he helps self-employed business owners and micro-business leaders turn innovation into defensible patent assets. A federally licensed U.S. Patent Agent and former senior USPTO Patent Examiner, Gary has supported the prosecution of 1,000+ patent applications across a wide range of technologies. Examiners Edge focuses on practical, business-aligned patent strategy—helping clients

reduce competitive risk, improve negotiating leverage, and position their innovations for growth.

Because patents can feel abstract, the firm uses a managed-investment approach with clear decision checkpoints so clients stay in control of scope, timing, and budget. The typical entry point is a 45-minute Patent Asset Strategy Session™ using the Examiners Edge proprietary evaluation framework to clarify feasibility, priorities, and next steps.



When and why did you join NASE?

I joined NASE in 2021 to stay connected to a national community of self-employed business owners, to access practical resources that support growth, and to align with an organization that advocates for micro-businesses.

What inspired you to enter the field you are in?

I've always been drawn to the intersection of engineering, business, and innovative problem-solving. Working inside our nation's innovation capitol—the **United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO)**—showed me how powerful intellectual property can be when it's aligned to a real business objective. I wanted to bring that "insider" perspective to small business leaders in a clear, accessible way.

When and why did you start your business?

Examiners Edge® launched in 2012 to serve a gap I saw repeatedly: strong innovators were building valuable products, but many didn't have a structured plan to protect what made them different. I built the agency to help business owners reduce competitive risk and treat patents as a managed investment.

How do you market your business?

Our marketing is education-driven. We publish practical insights, speak at small business workshops, and build relationships through partner ecosystems (SBDCs, SCORE, Chambers, and Accelerators). The goal is simple: demystify patents enough that a business owner feels confident taking the next step—booking a Patent Asset Strategy Session™.

What challenges have you faced in your business? How have you overcome them:

The biggest challenge is that patents are intangible and unfamiliar to many business owners. We address that with clarity: a visual roadmap, plain-English explanations, and decision checkpoints that keep clients in control of scope, timing, and budget. Trust is earned by making the process understandable without oversimplifying it.

Do you have any employees?

We operate with a lean core team and a vetted network of specialists as needed, allowing us to scale support while keeping quality high. Currently we have four employees (full and part time) and a variable number of other partners.

What's your schedule like, what's a typical day for you?

As Managing Director and the senior Patent Agent practitioner, my typical day (although I use *typical* quite loosely) includes managerial oversight of the team members (meetings, answering staff questions, company metrics analyses), review and approval of patent work products, and assessing how ongoing changes in the US patent system (from within the US Patent Office, relevant court rulings, and/or key international IP authority policy shifts) will likely affect our clients and company business model. Other days include active argumentation and negotiations with US government officials on

behalf of our clients, at the USPTO (US Patent and Trademark Office). Finally, some weeks have greater focus on building and nurturing partnerships with small business ecosystems and refining internal systems, so our clients receive consistent, high-quality support.

What's the best thing about being self-employed?

The freedom to build something meaningful and client-centered. I can focus on impact—helping business owners protect what they've built—without layers of bureaucracy. The decade that I spent inside the US Patent Office gave me a front row seat into exactly HOW the US patent system works in practice, WHO uses it, and the sophisticated strategies and nuanced tactics they use to build their companies patent assets. My US Patent Office tenure also illuminated WHAT works in that arena, and equally important what does NOT work. Now that I have learned many of the USPTO internal playbooks, it is quite exciting to use these to the advantage of our clients. My fun is playing 'patent chess' against an opponent whose moves you know ... before he uses them.

What's the best compliment you've ever received from a client?

"Gary has an incredible ability to understand your invention and passionately convey it in every required way to the examiner. Anything you value enough to patent, I wouldn't hesitate to entrust to Gary and his team at Examiners Edge. I couldn't be more pleased with the journey and outcome".

What's the most important piece of advice you would give to someone starting their own business?

You should think VERY carefully about what makes your business different — what is your product, service, methodology, or marketplace uniqueness—, and THEN proactively protect those advantages early: before you begin marketing, building websites, social media postings, going to tradeshows, pitch competitions, gathering customers AND creating competitors. This is where timing and sequencing REALLY DO matter, and you can open opportunities or forfeit them, depending on how you handle this. Essentially the game of business is halfway won if you start well. In business, as in sports and in life, the "set up" truly matters. Build a marketplace defensible business



superstructure on top of your intellectual assets. Define your critical relationships and key business systems as intentionally as you build your product.

Which NASE member benefit is most important to you?

At the top I would place access to the HRA 105 legal plan. I also value the expert advice resources in key areas such as finance, accounting, taxes, marketing, and business strategy. The opportunity to get unbiased and specific answers to business questions, such as using the HRA 105 legal plan has been a tremendous benefit. The NASE advocacy for micro-businesses also helps maintain a healthy business climate for smaller businesses.

Any other information you would like to share?

If you're innovating—launching a new product, improving a service, or building a new process—patent strategy may be worth a conversation. The goal isn't "a patent at any cost"; it's a smart, business-aligned plan you can justify and manage. Beyond patents, there is a broad range of intellectual property asset development options and approaches that we discuss with business leaders to help them formulate an optimized, defensible business—*without losing rights*.

5 Key Battleground Senate Races



And What it Means for the Self-Employed & Small Business Community

The 2026 midterm elections are shaping up to be one of the most consequential Senate cycles in a decade. Republicans enter November defending a 53-47 majority, and the battleground map — while favorable to the GOP overall — contains enough volatile seats to put majority control genuinely in play. Five races in particular deserve close attention from small business advocates: Alaska, Iowa, Maine, North Carolina, and Texas. **Together, they will do more than determine which party controls the floor; they will reshape the committees, priorities, and personnel that drive small business policy in Washington.**



Texas

The Long-Shot That Could Change Everything

Texas is not a Democratic target in any conventional sense. Cook Political Report has noted that Texas “isn’t initially a top Democratic target,” but that Democrats, with only two obvious offensive opportunities in North Carolina and Maine, need to put one of the other double-digit Trump states in play to find the four seats needed to regain the majority.

What makes the Lone Star State suddenly worth watching is a Republican primary implosion of historic proportions. Incumbent John Cornyn and Attorney General Ken Paxton advanced to a runoff after the March primary, with Cornyn facing a candidate described by his own Republican colleague Thom Tillis in notably colorful terms as “ethically challenged.” The Senate Leadership Fund, the super PAC aligned with Majority Leader John Thune, did not include Texas in its initial \$342 million investment list, a telling signal that even GOP strategists aren’t sure what they’re working with yet.

Democratic nominee James Talarico, a 37-year-old state representative and former teacher, is positioned to capitalize if the Republican nominee is sufficiently damaged. For small business advocates, Texas is home to more small businesses than almost any other state, and a competitive race there would put issues like SBA lending access, federal contracting, and tariff relief front and center in one of the country’s most entrepreneurially active economies.

a former Marine veteran and oyster farmer who upended traditional Democratic politics in the state by defeating Maine’s sitting Governor Janet Mills, who Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer had recruited for the seat. Collins has the advantage of incumbency and \$10 million in campaign cash on hand. The Senate Leadership Fund has committed \$236 million to defend five Republican-held seats, with Maine among them.

Collins has historically been one of the more small business-friendly voices in the Senate regardless of party, known for her willingness to cross party lines on economic issues affecting working families and Main Street employers. Her loss would remove a moderating influence on Republican small business policy and signal a chamber moving toward more ideologically defined outcomes on issues like access to capital, federal contracting thresholds, and regulatory burden.



North Carolina

The Democrats’ Best Pickup Opportunity

North Carolina is the lone toss-up state already in full general election mode, after former Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and former Republican National Committee Chair Michael Whatley secured their nominations in uncontested March primaries. Republican Thom Tillis is retiring from a state Trump won by a single-digit margin in 2024, and Tillis has never won an outright majority of votes in his races. Cooper, who served two terms as governor, is widely regarded as a strong recruiter pick and enters the general as the slight favorite.

North Carolina’s economy is a microcosm of the small business policy agenda: a rapidly growing tech and life sciences sector, a large rural agricultural base, and a robust community of minority-owned small businesses concentrated in the Research Triangle and Charlotte metro. A Cooper win would mean North Carolina’s Senate delegation flips, with Ted Budd holding the junior seat. It would also remove from the Senate Small Business and



Maine

Collins Fights for Survival — Again

Susan Collins holds the only Republican Senate seat being defended in a state that Kamala Harris won in 2024, making Maine Republicans’ most exposed flank on the map. Collins has survived blue waves before — she won her 2020 race by nearly nine points even as the state went for Biden — but this cycle looks different. Collins faces Graham Platner,

Entrepreneurship Committee a member — Budd — who currently serves on the committee alongside his seats on Armed Services and Commerce, potentially requiring the committee to be reconstituted with different Republican voices from a new Senate class.



Alaska

Peltola's High-Stakes Bid

Trump carried Alaska by 13 points in 2024, but Democrat Mary Peltola — the first Alaska Native member of Congress — lost her at-large House seat by less than 3 points. Now she's running for Senate against incumbent Republican Dan Sullivan. Polling in the state is sparse, but Peltola has led in the few surveys published, and if she wins, Alaska would have two of the nation's most moderate senators sitting on either side of the aisle.

Alaska's small business community is uniquely dependent on federal relationships — from fisheries to federal contracting to energy permits — making Senate representation acutely consequential for Main Street there. A Peltola win would be a significant Democratic pickup in a state that has not elected a Democrat to the Senate in modern memory, and would signal a broader wave environment capable of reshaping the majority. The Senate Leadership Fund has included Alaska in its \$236 million defensive investment, underscoring how seriously Republicans are taking the threat.



Iowa

The Small Business Committee Seat in Play

Iowa may be the race with the most direct implications for the small business policy community. Republican incumbent Joni Ernst announced in September 2025 that she would

not seek reelection, opening up one of the most consequential small business-related seats in the chamber. Ernst has chaired the Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee in the 119th Congress, and her departure creates a leadership vacuum with real consequences.

Republican Congresswoman Ashley Hinson and Democratic state representative Josh Turek are the nominees after their respective primaries on June 2. Hinson won the GOP primary with nearly 74 percent of the vote, backed by Trump's endorsement and a \$6.5 million campaign war chest. Democrats have become increasingly optimistic about their chances given changing political dynamics in Iowa, as fallout from Trump's tariffs on farmers and small businesses, as well as voters' economic concerns, have created headwinds for Republicans — enough that Cook Political Report shifted the race from "likely Republican" to "lean Republican." The Senate Leadership Fund has committed \$29 million in ads to defend the seat. Iowa has not elected a Democrat to the Senate since 2008, but the structural conditions of this cycle are testing that history.

What's at Stake for Small Business Policy

The five races collectively span the full ideological and geographic diversity of small business America — from family farms in Iowa to tech entrepreneurs in North Carolina to fishermen in Maine and Alaska. Their outcomes will determine not only which party sets the Senate agenda, but which members have the leverage to advance or block legislation on SBA lending, federal procurement reform, the SBIR/STTR innovation programs, and tax provisions affecting pass-through businesses. In a closely divided Senate, even a single seat can determine whether small business priorities move from committee to the floor — or stay bottled up entirely.

Katie Vlietstra is NASE's Vice President for Government Relations and Public Affairs; You can contact her at kvlietstra@nase.org.