

Inside Elections

With Nathan L. Gonzales

SEPTEMBER 3, 2026

VOLUME 10, NO. 17



2026 Election Overview: Democrats Poised for Gains

By Nathan L. Gonzales, Jacob Rubashkin and Inshara Ali

With two months to go before Election Day, Republicans are decidedly on defense. President Donald Trump's job performance has energized Democratic voters, cultivated an appetite for change among independents and contributed to some apathy among Republicans. It's a combination that could deliver Congress to Democrats.

For the last year or so, GOP strategists thought the political environment would improve. But it hasn't. The fever hasn't broken. Republican optimism about fending off historical midterm trends rests more on the unpopular Democratic Party brand, the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America and flawed Democratic candidates rather than an expectation that Trump is suddenly going to get more popular.

The safest bet is still on very narrow majorities for either party in the House and Senate next year. Currently, *Inside Elections* projects net Democratic gains of two to four Senate seats (they need to gain four for control) and two to 10 seats in the House (where they need to gain three).

But there are many Republican candidates polling in the low- to mid-40s, and if undecideds break overwhelmingly against the party in power, dozens of GOP seats will be at considerable risk. A state-by-state and district-by-district fight benefits Republicans, but a uniform shift — similar to what's happened in special elections of the last year and a half — would result in Democratic gains closer to 2006.

From Trump's job rating to the generic ballot to special election performances to historical trends, a majority of evidence points to a good Democratic cycle. But Trump's presidential win in 2016 and House Republicans outperforming expectations in 2020 forces everyone to be open-minded about outcomes that diverge from the data.

Republicans seem to be tempting political fate. Voters are disenfranchised and dissatisfied with the cost of living, gas prices, the war with Iran, tariffs on U.S. allies, overzealous immigration enforcement and the expansion of data centers. While it's possible that polls are underestimating Republican support, surveys could also be understating the negative mood of the electorate.

Republicans need Trump to mobilize and energize the coalition that elected him in order to stave off losses in Republican states and districts. But that coalition has diminished since he took office. Public appearances and ads featuring Trump and his record just remind Democrats and independents about their dissatisfaction with him.

Within the next couple weeks it should be more clear whether this cycle will be defined by a ripple or a wave.

2026 Senate Ratings

Toss-up (3)

NH Open (Shaheen, D)*
MI Open (Peters, D)

Husted (R-Ohio)#

Tilt Democratic (2)

NC Open (Tillis, R)
Ossoff (D-Ga.)

Tilt Republican (3)

IA Open (Ernst, R)
Collins (R-Maine)
Sullivan (R-Ak.)#

Lean Democratic

Lean Republican (1)

Likely Democratic (1)

MN Open (Smith, DFL)

Likely Republican (3)

Graham (R-S.C.)
Marshall (R-Kan.)#
Ricketts (R-Neb.)

Solid Democratic (9)

IL Open (Durbin, D)
Booker (D-N.J.)
Coons (D-Del.)
Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)
Lujan (D-N.M.)
Markey (D-Mass.)
Merkley (D-Ore.)
Reed (D-R.I.)
Warner (D-Va.)

Solid Republican (13)

AL Open (Tuberville, R)
KY Open (McConnell, R)
LA Open (Cassidy, R)
MT Open (Daines, R)
OK Open (Armstrong, R)
WY Open (Lummis, R)
Capito (R-W.V.)
Cotton (R-Ark.)
Hagerty (R-Tenn.)
Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)
Moody (R-Fl.)
Risch (R-Idaho)
Rounds (R-S.D.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

CALENDAR

Sept. 8	New Hampshire Primary
Sept. 9	Rhode Island Primary
Sept. 9	NFL Opening Night: Seahawks vs Patriots
Sept. 9-10	RNC Midterm Convention
Sept. 15	Delaware Primary
Sept. 23	Congressional Women's Softball Game
Oct. 20	NBA Season Begins
Nov. 3	Election Day

Governor Report Shorts

Alaska. Open; Mike Dunleavy (R), term-limited. Democrats have consolidated around one candidate after former state Sen. Tom Begich, who placed second in the all-party primary last month, dropped out of the race and endorsed the first-place finisher, former state Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins (known in-state as JKT). Begich's withdrawal should have bumped the fifth-place finisher, former state Attorney General Treg Taylor, into the general election. But Taylor was disqualified because he failed to file a financial disclosure, so his spot was instead taken by his running mate Candi English, who runs a business that "designs and manufactures tools for oil, gas, mining, and well operations." English picked Taylor's wife, Jodi, as her own running mate. At the moment, it looks as if three Republicans and just one Democrat will advance to the general election. While Kreiss-Tomkins and Begich only combined for 43 percent of the vote, the dynamics of the general election could give Democrats a real opportunity to win the governor's mansion for the first time since Tony Knowles in 1998. Move from Likely Republican to Lean Republican.



Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins

Courtesy Kreiss-Tomkins Campaign

Arizona. Katie Hobbs (D), elected 2022 (50%). While Arizona remains a purple state that has long preferred Republicans, Hobbs enjoys an advantage over GOP Rep. Andy Biggs heading into the fall. She has led in every public survey and even GOP strategists acknowledge she's in the driver's seat despite running in a state Trump won by 5 points in 2024. Neither the Republican Governors Association nor Biggs have made fall TV reservations yet. Hobbs' decision to bypass the state Democratic Party apparatus and instead work with the Navajo County Democratic Party doesn't seem to be hindering her; she has spent \$10 million over the past two months. Move from Toss-up to Tilt Democratic.

Next Gen P (R), Aug 17-19 (1627 LV)(text-to-web) — General election ballot: Hobbs over Biggs, 39% - 38%, Risa Lombardo (G) 1%, Teri Ann Hourihan (NL) 1%.

HighGround Public Affairs (R), Aug. 15-18 (400 LV)(live caller)— General election ballot: Hobbs over Biggs, 49% - 34%.

Quantus Insights (R), Aug. 14-17 (780 LV) (Online panel/text-to-web) — General election ballot: Hobbs over Biggs, 49% - 43%.

Noble Predictive Insights, Aug. 10-13 (923 LV) — General election ballot: Hobbs over Biggs, 48% - 35%, Risa Lombardo (G) 2%, Teri Ann Hourihan (NL) 1%.

Florida. Open; Ron DeSantis (R), term-limited. GOP nominee Byron Donalds began the general election with a massive cash advantage (\$58 million to \$4 million in mid-August) over former Rep. David Jolly, and he has the state's partisan lean in his favor. Democrats haven't won a statewide race in Florida in eight years or a governor's race in three decades, and Republicans' voter registration advantage has swelled to more than 1 million. But early polling at the statewide and congressional district levels point to a competitive contest. Jolly may need a benefactor to bolster his coffers — Florida effectively has no contribution limits — but he starts the race in the hunt. And even though state Rep. Angie Nixon winning the Senate primary is causing Florida Democrats their fair share



Byron Donalds

of heartburn, the two could complement each other on the ticket: Jolly, a mild-mannered, white, former Republican from the Tampa Bay area, and Nixon, a Black state lawmaker from Jacksonville with deep organizing roots and a looming jury trial over a protest she led against Gov. Ron DeSantis. Move from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

Hart Research Associates (D) for Democratic Governors Association, Aug. 10-13 (600 LV)(live caller/text-to-web)— General election ballot: Jolly over Donalds, 46% - 45%.

Iowa. Open; Kim Reynolds (R), not seeking re-election. The race has tightened since the primary, when the relatively unknown Zach

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**Inside
Elections**

With Nathan L. Gonzales

609 H Street NE, 4th Floor
Washington, DC, 20002

202-546-2822



Nathan L. Gonzales
Editor & Publisher
nathan@insideelections.com
X@nathanlgonzales



Jacob Rubashkin
Deputy Editor
jacob@insideelections.com
X@jacobrubashkin



Inshara Ali
Reporter / Analyst
Inshara@insideelections.com
X@InsideElections



Bradley Wascher
Contributing Data Editor
bradley@insideelections.com
X@bradwascher

Nicholas Demba
Intern

Will Taylor
Production Artist
will@insideelections.com

Stuart Rothenberg
Founding Editor
stu@insideelections.com

X@InsideElections [facebook.com/InsideElections](https://www.facebook.com/InsideElections) [YouTube.com/@InsideElections](https://www.youtube.com/@InsideElections)

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Lahn emerged from the GOP primary. Lahn has consolidated more of the GOP vote but still trails state Auditor Rob Sand, who remains a slight favorite. Tilt Democratic.

Emerson College, Aug. 31-Sept. 1 (750 LV)— General election ballot: Sand over Lahn, 49% - 46%.

Suffolk Univ., Aug. 20-23 (500 LV)(live caller)— General election ballot: Sand over Lahn, 48% - 44%.

Kansas. Open; Laura Kelly (D), term limited. Democratic nominee Cindy Holscher released a poll from Global Strategy Group showing her 1 point ahead of GOP nominee Ty Masterson. It's the only publicly released survey of the general election so far. The partisan lean of the state is working against Holscher even as the environment provides some wind at her back. The state senator is working to scale up her campaign after pulling off an upset over the establishment's preferred candidate in last month's primary. Tilt Republican.

Global Strategy Group (D) for Holscher, Aug. 13-16 (600 LV)— General election ballot: Holscher over Masterson, 47% - 46%.

Massachusetts. Maura Healey (D), elected 2022 (64%). Republicans nominated former medical device CEO Mike Minogue over former state transportation agency head Brian Shortsleeve. Shortsleeve was seen as the more moderate of the two candidates thanks to his pro-choice politics. Minogue, who sold his company for \$17 billion to Johnson & Johnson several years ago, self-funded his campaign with \$15 million and was a major donor to the Trump campaign. Solid Democratic.

Nebraska. Jim Pillen (R), elected 2022 (59%). Former GOP state Sen. Brett Lindstrom filed to run as the nominee for the America First Party, a newly created third party. Lindstrom, who ran for the GOP gubernatorial nomination in 2022, had attempted to petition his way onto the ballot as an independent earlier this year. It's not obvious how his presence will affect the race. While a Republican, Lindstrom has good relationships with many Nebraska Democrats. Democratic nominee Lynne Walz is a credible candidate but Lindstrom would likely need to pull a significant chunk of the vote from Pillen to put her in contention. Solid Republican.

Ohio. Open; Mike DeWine (R), term-limited. Biotechnology entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy and his allies have launched an onslaught of attack ads against Democratic nominee Amy Acton. Between the Ramaswamy campaign and super PAC V-PAC, July and August saw nearly \$30 million of anti-Acton ads, some of which portray the former state health director as a drug-using alcoholic who can't be trusted. The ads have been effective in driving down Acton's favorability rating, but perhaps less so in shifting the actual horse race between the two candidates, which remains neck and neck. It's a sign of strength for Acton (or perhaps an



Amy Acton

Courtesy Acton Campaign

2026 Governor Ratings

Toss-up (2D, 1R)

GA Open (Kemp, R)

WI Open (Evers, D)

Tilt Democratic (2D, 1R)

IA Open (Reynolds, R)

MI Open (Whitmer, D)

Hobbs (D-Ariz.)#

Tilt Republican (1D, 2R)

KS Open (Kelly, D)

OH Open (DeWine, R)#

Lombardo (R-Nev.)

Lean Democratic (1D)

OR (Kotek, D)

Lean Republican (1R)

AK Open (Dunleavy, R)#

Likely Democratic (4D)

ME Open (Mills, D)

NM Open (Lujan-Grisham, D)

MN Open (Walz, DFL)

Hochul (D-N.Y.)

Likely Republican (2R)

FL Open (DeSantis, R)#

Abbott (R-Texas)

Solid Democratic (9D)

CA Open (Newsom, D)

CO Open (Polis, D)

Green (D-Hawaii)

Healey (D-Mass.)

Lamont (D-Ct.)

McKee (D-R.I.)

Moore (D-Md.)

Pritzker (D-Ill.)

Shapiro (D-Penn.)

Solid Republican (11R)

AL Open (Ivey, R)

OK Open (Stitt, R)

SC Open (McMaster, R)

TN Open (Lee, R)

WY Open (Gordon, R)

Ayotte (R-N.H.)

Huckabee Sanders (R-Ark.)

Little (R-Idaho)

Pillen (R-Neb.)

Rhoden (R-S.D.)

Scott (R-Vt.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

indication of how favorable the political environment is for Democrats) that she has weathered the summer storm. Now the physician and first-time candidate is on TV as well, with two positive ads. She will be outspent from now to Election Day by Ramaswamy, who has unlimited resources, but this is a real race. Move from Lean Republican to Tilt Republican.

Oklahoma. Open; Kevin Stitt (R), term-limited. Trump's endorsement record notched another win after former state Sen. Mike Mazzei defeated state Attorney General Gentner Drummond, 50.3 to 49.7 percent, in the GOP primary runoff after narrowly trailing Drummond in the first round in June.

The race got testy in the final days. After being asked in a televised debate if the candidates would release their financial and medical records, the Republicans exchanged blows over the others' compliance with a proposed drug test; Drummond accused Mazzei of misleading voters when he released the results of urine testing (that came up negative) instead of a hair follicle test, which provides a longer look at an individual's drug use history.

Mazzei will face Democratic state Rep. Cyndi Munson to succeed the term-limited Republican Stitt. The state has strongly favored the president in the past and the Republican has a sizable cash advantage over the Democrat. Solid Republican.

Senate Report Shorts

Alaska. Dan Sullivan (R), elected 2014 (48%) and 2020 (54%).

Two weeks after the primary concluded, the general election ballot is finally set in the Last Frontier. Sullivan will face former Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola, an unrelated teacher from Petersburg also named Dan Sullivan, and a perennial GOP candidate named Gerald Heikes. Heikes finished fifth in the primary but earned a spot in the general election after the fourth-place finisher, Democrat David Leslie, dropped out at the last minute. The lineup isn't great for Sen. Sullivan, who has to contend with the confusion surrounding the other Dan Sullivan and potential ballot exhaustion from Republican voters who choose Heikes first and don't rank a second option. Democrats are excited after Peltola's strong primary performance in which she finished 8 points ahead of Sullivan and nearly hit 50 percent. But Republicans believe they have successfully inverted her image in the state. Move from Lean Republican to Tilt Republican.

Iowa. Open; Joni Ernst (R), not seeking re-election.

Rep. Ashley Hinson maintains a slight lead over Democratic state Rep. Josh Turek in public and private polling, but this race is just getting started. Turek began advertising on TV in mid-August while Hinson only began in earnest at the start of September. The entire Hawkeye State continues to be a challenge for Republicans. Tilt Republican.

Emerson College, Aug. 31-Sept. 1 (750 LV) - General election ballot: Hinson over Turek, 50% - 45%, Thomas Laehn 1%.

Suffolk Univ., Aug. 20-23 (500 LV)(live caller) — General election ballot: Hinson over Turek, 45% - 41%.

Kansas. Roger Marshall (R), elected 2024 (53%).

Marshall's numbers are soft given the Republican lean of the Sunflower State, and some private polls indicate he's in a margin-of-error race with pastor Adam Hamilton, the Democratic nominee. Republican strategists say that's a result of Marshall's cosponsorship of the Credit Card Competition Act, a bill he has championed with Illinois Democrat Dick Durbin that is backed by retailers but opposed by credit card companies. Those companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to drum up opposition to the bill nationwide, and have also run ads targeting Marshall in Kansas.

Hamilton is a decent fundraiser with an unusual background for a Democrat: he is the senior pastor at a United Methodist megachurch in the Kansas City area. He faces an uphill climb in a state that hasn't sent a Democrat to the Senate in 100 years, and many Democrats are still burned from the 2020 race, which looked competitive with state Sen. Barbara Bollier but was ultimately a rout for Marshall. But Democratic strategists believe Trump is in a worse position this cycle. There's enough concern on the GOP side that a new super PAC emerged to spend more than \$1 million on negative ads hitting Hamilton as a "woke megachurch CEO." Move from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

Global Strategy Group (D), Aug 12-16 (800 LV)— General election ballot: Hamilton over Marshall, 44% - 43%, Graham 5%.

Louisiana. Open; Bill Cassidy (R), lost in primary.

A Public Policy Polling survey for Democratic nominee Jamie Davis and the state Democratic Party found the crop farmer trailing Rep. Julie Letlow by 4 points. Davis is unknown to more than half of the electorate, but even

after voters are presented with positive information about both candidates, Letlow remains in the lead. That's not a great sign for Davis, who is the financial underdog and doesn't have the resources to introduce himself to voters yet. This race isn't on anyone's radar in Washington, DC, and Letlow had a \$1.4 million to \$479,000 cash-on-hand advantage on June 30. More interesting may be that the poll found Trump's approval rating essentially tied at 47 percent/46 percent in a state he won by 22 points in 2024. Solid Republican.

Public Policy Polling (D) for Davis, July 21-22 (518 RV) — General election ballot: Letlow over Davis, 41% - 37%.

Maine. Susan Collins (R), elected 1996 (49%), 2002 (58%), 2008 (61%) 2014 (69%), and 2020 (51%).

Some Republicans are encouraged that the senator's image has improved compared to any point in the cycle, but it's also worse than it's been in her previous runs. Voters have less of an appetite for splitting their ticket. And she's running for re-election with an extremely unpopular Republican in the White House. Democrat Troy Jackson isn't the perfect candidate, but some of his warts look small compared to the previous transgressions of Graham Platner. Considering Collins significantly outperformed the polls in 2020, we have given her more of the benefit of the doubt compared to another incumbent trailing a challenger. But it's also risky to assume Collins will outperform once again. Tilt Republican.

Massachusetts. Ed Markey (D) elected 2013 special (55%), 2014 (62%), and 2020 (66%).

Markey, 80, ran roughshod over Rep. Seth Moulton in the Democratic primary despite the 47-year-old veteran's attempt to make the contest a generational referendum. Markey's progressive politics powered him to an even larger victory than his come-from-behind win over Rep. Joe Kennedy III in the 2020 primary. Republicans nominated John Deaton, who lost to Sen. Elizabeth Warren in 2024 by 20 points. Solid Democratic.

Mississippi. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R), appointed 2018, elected 2018 special (54%) and 2020 (54%).

Both parties are keeping a wary eye on Mississippi, where prosecutor Scott Colom is challenging Hyde-Smith. Some national Republican strategists are concerned Hyde-Smith isn't taking the race as seriously as she should be — one strategist said she had "Deb Fischer problems," referring to the Nebraska senator who was caught unawares by independent Dan Osborn in 2024 and required a late rescue mission. Colom has been working to raise his national profile in the hopes of attracting outside support. A third-party candidate, Ty Pinkins, further complicates the picture. Pinkins previously was the Democratic nominee for Senate and for state Secretary of State. Solid Republican.

Data for Progress (D) for Way to Lead PAC, Democracy Alliance, and Democracy Strategy Partners, Aug. 5-15 (1,018 LV)(mixed mode)— General election ballot: Hyde-Smith over Colom, 44% - 38%, Pinkins (I) 7%. Hyde-Smith over Colom, 47% - 41%.

Minnesota. Open; Tina Smith (DFL), not seeking re-election.

Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan is the favorite over former NFL sideline reporter Michele Tafoya. But private polling largely shows a mid-single digit race and Flanagan's ties to the unpopular Walz administration could

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still turn out to be a liability for her. One recent Democratic poll in the state found the race essentially tied, but party strategists are divided on whether that's an accurate reflection. Likely Democratic.

Nebraska. Pete Ricketts (R), appointed 2023, elected 2024 special (63%). Ricketts has aired eight negative ads hitting independent Dan Osborn on a raft of issues since early July. Republican strategists are split on whether he needs to do more and dig a bit deeper into his ample pockets as the fall approaches. Osborn's campaign released a poll showing the race tied; the union leader's internal polling has been consistent on that front throughout this cycle. Ultimately, if Ricketts and his billionaire family decide to open the floodgates, Osborn won't be able to compete financially. The ballot is also messier than in 2024; in addition to Ricketts and Osborn, there will be a Legal Marijuana Party candidate on the ballot, as well as candidates from the Working People Party (which Democrats allege is a Republican cutout) and the America First Party (which Republicans allege is a Democratic cutout). But this is a better political environment for Osborn than when he lost in 2024. Likely Republican.

Impact Research (D) for Osborn (I), Aug. 9-13 (600 LV) (live caller/text-to-web) — General election ballot: Osborn and Ricketts tied at 47%.

New Hampshire. Open; Jeanne Shaheen (D), not seeking re-election. Polling continues to show a close race between Democratic Rep. Chris Pappas and Republican former Sen. John E. Sununu, who are the favorites to win their primaries next week. Pappas faces a challenge to his left from biochemist Karishma Manzur, while Sununu faces former Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown. Even as other opportunities for Republicans have looked more challenging over the summer, New Hampshire remains an intriguing opportunity for the GOP. A strong performance by Gov. Kelly Ayotte at the top of the ticket may also be giving Sununu a boost. This race is still fluid as neither party has fully engaged due to the late primary, but it's one to watch heading into the fall. Move from Tilt Democratic to Toss-up.

Fabrizio, Lee & Associates (R) for NRSC, Aug 27-30 (600 LV)— General election ballot: Sununu over Pappas, 37% - 36%.

Univ. of New Hampshire Survey Center, Aug. 20-24 (1,878 LV)— General election ballot: Sununu over Pappas, 45% - 43%.

St. Anselm College Survey Center, Aug. 17-18 (1,411 LV)— General election ballot: Pappas over Sununu, 48% - 41%.

Ohio. Jon Husted (R), appointed 2025. Former Sen. Sherrod Brown's relentless ads attacking Husted on data centers and the Epstein Files have taken a toll on the incumbent. Private polling at the state and congressional district level shows the race knotted up, and Republicans are sounding the alarm that Brown's focus on data centers is dominating the race. In 2024, cryptocurrency interests spent \$40 million on negative ads against Brown in August and September, and the Democrat's image never recovered. This cycle, Republicans want either cryptocurrency groups or AI companies to get involved again, but that hasn't happened yet. Move from Tilt Republican to Toss-up.

South Carolina. Darline Graham (R), appointed 2026. Graham's campaign accomplished what it needed to in the GOP primary runoff, but it hasn't been entirely smooth sailing for the sister of the late Lindsey Graham. The partisan lean of the state should carry Graham across the finish line, but anytime a candidate is plucked from

political obscurity and dropped into a competitive Senate race, unexpected things can happen. Graham's inability to answer a question on national security during a GOP primary debate underscored some potential vulnerabilities. It doesn't help that primary runoff runner-up Rep. Ralph Norman is aggrieved by his loss and only begrudgingly endorsed Graham after first telling voters to write him in instead. Pediatrician Annie Andrews had \$4.1 million in the bank on June 30 and probably began the general election with a financial advantage. But she'll need a decent chunk of the vote to go to the Libertarian nominee Kasie Whitener and Constitution Party nominee Mark Hackett to outpace Graham. A combination of the national political environment, perceived nepotism and an untested candidate could be ingredients for a Democratic upset. Likely Republican.

Impact Research (D) for Andrews, Aug. 14-22 (900 LV) (Multimodal) — General election ballot: Andrews over Graham 42% - 39%, Whitener 6%. Image ratings: Andrews 35% favorable / 21% unfavorable. Graham 28% favorable / 50% unfavorable.

Impact Research (D) for Andrews, Aug. 18-24 (700 LV) (Multimodal) — General election ballot: Andrews and Graham tied at 41%, Whitener 5%. Image ratings: Andrews 36% favorable / 21% unfavorable. Graham 31% favorable / 49% unfavorable.

South Dakota. Mike Rounds (R), elected 2014 (50%) and 2020 (66%). Now that the Democratic nominee dropped out, the independent candidate, retired Air Force Lt. Col. Brian Bengs has at least a credible path to making this a real race against Rounds. Bengs' campaign released a poll showing the race tied, though GOP polling has Rounds up more comfortably. The next test for Bengs will be if he can raise enough money to introduce himself to the state and effectively rebut charges that he's a Democrat trying to play a trick on voters by running without a party label (Bengs was the Democratic nominee for Senate in 2022, losing by 43 points to Sen. John Thune). Bengs had just \$51,000 in the bank on June 30. Now, Thune may actually be a drag on Rounds; the majority leader's popularity among Republicans is underwater due to his standoff with Trump over the SAVE America bill. Ultimately, South Dakota wants to vote for a Republican and if this race heats up more, Rounds will have the resources to outspend his opponent significantly. Solid Republican.

Impact Research (D) for Bengs (I), Aug.13-17 (500 LV)(live caller/text-to-web)— General election ballot: Bengs and Rounds tied, 44%. Image rating: Rounds 40% favorable / 50% unfavorable.

Texas. Open; John Cornyn (R), lost primary runoff. If the election were held today, Democratic state Rep. James Talarico would probably prevail over GOP state Attorney General Ken Paxton. Republican hopes probably sit with disaffected Cornyn supporters who despise Paxton but don't want a Democratic majority. What do they end up doing? Republicans are waiting for the Trump-affiliated MAGA Inc. to spend significant money to compensate for the large fundraising gap between Talarico and Paxton, but that spending hasn't come yet and the election is creeping closer. A pro-Paxton super PAC began spending this week with a \$13 million splurge on TV, and the attorney general has to hope that the negative advertising begins to erode Talarico's standing. Cornyn hasn't been much help to Paxton; he called him "lazy" and a "poor campaigner" in a recent interview with the Texas Tribune. Lean Republican.

Slingshot Strategies (D) for Texas Public Opinion Research, Aug. 21-24 (1,000 LV) — General election ballot: Talarico over Paxton, 48% - 42%, Brown 1%.

House Report Shorts

Alaska's At-Large. Nick Begich, R, elected 51%. Trump 55%. Independent candidate Bill Hill, a fisherman and Alaska Native backed by Democrats, is the top challenger to Begich. But perennial Democratic candidate Eric Hafner will also appear on the ballot; Hafner, who has run for Congress in four different states, is currently serving a prison sentence in New York and has never visited Alaska. In the 2024 House race, Hafner received 1 percent of the vote in the general election. Libertarian Jim McDermott will also appear on the general election ballot. He finished eighth in the primary but advanced after four other candidates withdrew from the race. Hill will have financial resources but begins trailing Begich and will need to educate Democratic voters about his candidacy. Likely Republican.

Arizona's 2nd District. (Northeastern Arizona) Eli Crane, R, re-elected 55%. Trump 57%. A GBAO poll for Democratic nominee Jonathan Nez found the former Navajo Nation president trailing Crane by just 2 points, 46-44 percent. That's a different look than the poll Crane released a few weeks ago showing him ahead by 11 points. Likely Republican.

GBAO (D) for Nez, Aug. 21-24 (500 LV)— General election ballot: Crane over Nez, 46% - 44%.

California's 14th District. (Southern East Bay) Aisha Wahab, D. Harris 65%. Progressive Aisha Wahab was sworn in Wednesday after defeating fellow Democrat Melissa Hernandez in the special election to replace Eric Swalwell. Wahab won by 6 points, 53 percent to 47 percent, which was a marked change from the all-party primary in June, when Wahab finished ahead of Hernandez by 26 points. The two Democrats will face off again in November for the full term in a slightly redrawn district. Solid Democratic.



Aisha Wahab

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Florida's 13th District. (Part of St. Petersburg and suburbs) Anna Paulina Luna, R, re-elected 55%. Trump 56%. A poll from House Majority PAC found retired Army Brigadier General Leela Gray leading Luna by 1 point in a multi-candidate contest and by 5 points in a head-to-head matchup. The survey is a bit of an outlier; Gray's own polling from earlier in the month found her trailing by 3 points, and Luna released a poll with her up 8 points. Likely Republican.

Hart Research Associates (D) for House Majority PAC, Aug. 25-27 (500 LV)— General election ballot: Gray over Luna, 51% - 46%; Gray over Luna, 44% - 43%, Tony D'Arrigo (I) 7%.

Fabrizio Lee & Associates (R) for Luna, Aug. 4-6 (400 LV)— General election ballot: Luna over Gray, 49% - 41%.

GQR (D) for Gray, Aug. 4-6 (500 LV)— General election ballot: Luna over Gray, 47% - 44%, Tony D'Arrigo (I) 4%.

2026 House Ratings

Toss-Up (3D, 13R)

AZ1 (Open; Schweikert, R)	IA 1 (Miller-Meeke, R)	OH 7 (Miller, R)	TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R)	IA 3 (Nunn, R)	PA 7 (Mackenzie, R)	VA 2 (Kiggans, R)
CO 8 (Evans, R)	MI 7 (Barrett, R)	PA 8 (Bresnahan, R)	WA 3 (Perez, D)
FL25 (Moskowitz, D)	NY 17 (Lawler, R)	PA 10 (Perry, R)	WI 3 (Van Orden, R)

Tilt Democratic (5D, 3R)

CA 13 (Gray, D)	OH 1 (Landsman, D)
CA 48 (Open; Issa, R)	TX 28 (Cuellar, D)
NE2 (Open; Bacon, R)	
NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)	
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)	
NY 4 (Gillen, D)	

Tilt Republican (3D, 3R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)
FL 14 (Castor, D)#
FL 22 (Open; Frankel, D)
MI10 (Open; James, R)
OH 9 (Kaptur, D)
TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)#

Lean Democratic (6D, 1I)

CA 6 (Open; Bera, D/Kiley, I)
CA 45 (Tran, D)
NH1 (Open; Pappas, D)
NV 1 (Titus, D)
NV 3 (Lee, D)
NY 19 (Riley, D)
NY 3 (Suoizzi, D)

Lean Republican (2D, 6R)

CO 5 (Crank, R)	VA 1 (Wittman, R)
IA 2 (Open; Hinson, R)	
MI 4 (Huizenga, R)	
NC 1 (Davis, D)	
NCT1 (Open; Edwards, R)	
PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)	
TX 35 (Open; Casar, D)#	

Likely Democratic (7D)

IN 1 (Mryan, D)
NH 2 (Goodlander, D)
MI 3 (Scholten, D)
NJ 9 (Pou, D)
MN2 (Open; Craig, DFL)
NV 4 (Horsford, D)
VA 7 (Vindman, D)

Likely Republican (3D, 12R)

AK AL (Begich, R)	MN 1 (Finstad, R)#
AL 2 (Figures, D)	MT 1 (Open; Zinke, R)
AZ 2 (Crane, R)	NV 2 (Open; Amodei, R)
CO 3 (Hurd, R)	SC 1 (Open; Mace, R)
FL 7 (Mills, R)	TX23 (Vacant; Gonzales, R)
FL 9 (Soto, D)	
FL 13 (Luna, R)	
FL 27 (Salazar, R)	
KY 6 (Open; Barr, R)	
ME2 (Open; Golden, D)	

	GOP	DEM
Solid	185	184
Likely/Lean/Tilt	28	22
Total	213	206
Toss-up	16	
Needed for majority	218	

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

Florida's 14th District .(Tampa and eastern suburbs) Kathy Castor, D. Trump 55%. Despite running in a district that was redrawn to elect a Republican, Castor is holding her own against former state Rep. Mike Beltran. Private polling even shows Castor with a slight edge. But she hasn't faced a competitive race in a long time, while Beltran just emerged from a heavily contested GOP primary. Move from Lean Republican to Tilt Republican.

Florida's 27th District. (Miami and southern suburbs) Maria Elvira Salazar, R. Trump 57%. Democrat former newscaster Elliott Rodriguez has an interesting profile in this once-competitive part of the state. But the Democrat's campaign isn't generating much buzz and it's still unclear if the Hispanic community in South Florida is frustrated enough with Republicans to start voting Democratic again, particularly when the party is becoming more connected to socialism. Likely Republican.

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Georgia's 13th District. (Atlanta's southeastern and outer northeastern suburbs) Everton Blair, D. Harris 71%. Educator Everton Blair won a special election runoff to serve out the remainder of the late Rep. Scott's term, defeating the congressman's daughter, Marcy Scott, 53-47 percent. Blair, the former Gwinnett County School Board chair, trailed Scott by 8 points in the initial five-candidate special primary. While Scott campaigned as an extension of her father's legacy, Blair ran to her left, backing Medicare for All and a wealth tax. Blair will serve only a few months, through the start of the next Congress in January, and Democratic state Rep. Jasmine Clark and Republican Jonathan Chavez will vie for the seat in November. Neither ran in the special election. Solid Democratic.

Massachusetts' 1st District. (Springfield area and the Berkshires) Richard Neal, D, re-elected 62%. Harris 56%. High school teacher Jeromie Whalen was outspent by Neal by 10-to-1 but still held the longtime incumbent to an uncomfortably close 54-46 percent primary win. Whalen was backed by progressive groups and the state's teacher's union. Solid Democratic.

Massachusetts' 4th District. (Western Boston suburbs and Bristol County) Jake Auchincloss, D, re-elected unopposed. Harris 58%. In the Democratic primary, Auchincloss easily defeated AI researcher Jason Poulos, who had support from some progressive groups. Solid Democratic.

Massachusetts' 6th District. (North Shore) Open; Seth Moulton, D, lost Senate primary. Harris 59%. Dan Koh, a former Biden administration official, won a crowded Democratic primary to succeed Moulton. Koh, a longtime aide to former Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, will finally get to Congress eight years after he lost a nailbiter Democratic primary against now-Rep. Lori Trahan in a neighboring district. Solid Democratic.

Massachusetts' 8th District. (Parts of Boston and southern suburbs) Stephen Lynch, D, re-elected unopposed. Harris 62%. Attorney Patrick Roath was a capable fundraiser and received endorsements from several major unions, the *Boston Globe*, and former Gov. Deval Patrick. But it wasn't enough to overcome Lynch, who beat him by 14 points. Solid Democratic.

Minnesota's 1st District. (Southern Minnesota) Brad Finstad, R, re-elected 59%. Trump 55%. In 2006, this rural, GOP-leaning district came online

late in the cycle as a high school teacher and political newcomer leveraged frustration over an unpopular war in the Middle East to oust a six-term incumbent Republican. This year, high school math teacher Jake



Jake Johnson

Johnson hopes to recreate the magic future Gov. Tim Walz tapped into decades ago. But these days Walz is a drag on Democrats across

the state, and Johnson is instead counting on Sen. Amy Klobuchar to put up a strong performance in the open gubernatorial race. Johnson is a decent fundraiser for a first-time candidate and has outraised Finstad through the first six months of the year. And he's made some high-profile breaks with his party, including calling for a balanced federal budget and supporting a ban on trans athletes in women's sports. Move from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

New York's 17th District. (Lower Hudson Valley) Mike Lawler, R, re-elected 52%. Harris 50%. Lawler may be one of the only Republicans running for re-election in a district that Harris carried in 2024, but he's tying himself more closely to Trump than many of his colleagues. He rallied with the president earlier this year and is slated to speak at the midterm convention in Dallas, which RNC Chairman Joe Gruters termed "Trumpapalooza." Toss-up.

North Carolina's 1st District. (Inland northeastern North Carolina) Don Davis, D. Trump 55%. The GOP nominee, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Cyber Policy Laurie Buckhout, admitted to making wagers on her own campaign on an online prediction market. She was fined and banned from the platform for three years. Those aren't the kind of headlines challengers want to be making in races against incumbents, even in favorable districts. Lean Republican.

Oklahoma's 5th District. (Oklahoma City area) Stephanie Bice, R, re-elected 61%. Trump 58%. Speaking privately to a group of Oklahoma State students, Bice expressed frustration about some of Trump's priorities and expressed concern that her re-election bid



Stephanie Bice

could be in trouble. While the 5th voted for Trump by a hefty margin in 2024, it did narrowly break for Democratic gubernatorial nominee Joy Hofmeister in 2022. This year's Democratic gubernatorial nominee, Cyndi Munson, would need

to win the 5th handily to have a shot at a statewide victory. Fortunately for Bice, her Democratic opponent, teacher Jena Nelson, had just \$17,000 in the bank on June 30 to Bice's \$2 million. Solid Republican.

Pennsylvania's 1st District. (Northern Philadelphia suburbs) Brian Fitzpatrick, R, re-elected 56%. Harris 49.7%. A poll from the Democratic House Majority PAC found Fitzpatrick leading Bucks County Commissioner Bob Harvie by 1 point, 49-48 percent. While Fitzpatrick has defied political gravity before, this is clearly his most competitive race since 2018, when he won by 2.6 points against a flawed opponent. The incumbent has a significant financial advantage over his challenger, but outside Democratic groups see this year as their best opportunity to beat the Republican and may invest accordingly. Harvie recently filed a defamation lawsuit against a pro-Fitzpatrick super PAC that has called the Democrat an "FBI corruption subject" and insinuated that he had an inappropriate relationship with a county employee. Lean Republican.

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GQR (D) for House Majority PAC, Aug. 19-23 (400 LV)— General election ballot: Fitzpatrick over Harvie, 49% - 48%.

Tennessee's 5th District. (Nashville suburbs up to north-west Tennessee down to Memphis) Open; Andy Ogles, R, lost primary. Trump 61%. Columbia Mayor Chaz Molder released a poll showing him 8 points down to former state Agriculture Secretary Charlie Hatcher, who ousted Ogles in the August GOP primary. Despite running a well-funded, credible campaign, Molder may struggle to catch up to Hatcher given the partisan lean of the district, which was redrawn earlier this year to remove his home city and be even more Republican-friendly. The new 5th's Baseline is R+17. Solid Republican.

Impact Research (D) for Molder, Aug. 19-24 (500 LV)(multi-modal) — General election ballot: Hatcher 48%, Molder 40%, Johnson 1%, O'Leary 0%.

Texas' 15th District. (McAllen in the Rio Grande Valley to the outer San Antonio metro area) Monica De La Cruz, R. Trump 58%.

Tejano music star Bobby Pulido continues to poll ahead of De La Cruz. But while things have been going unusually well for Texas Democrats over the summer, that could begin to change as the fall approaches. Republicans have yet to hit Pulido on the airwaves for some of his past inappropriate comments and his band member's criminal history. At the top of the ticket, Republican Ken Paxton's Senate campaign has been slumbering while Democrat James Talarico floods the state with TV ads, and GOP Gov. Greg Abbott only just began to flex his financial muscle. If Pulido is still ahead after another month, it's a sign that Texas Republicans' problems run deep. Tilt Republican.

Texas Southern Univ., Aug. 18-22 (700 LV)(SMS/online panel) — General election ballot: Pulido over De La Cruz, 50% - 45%. Image ratings: Flores 41% favorable/43% unfavorable, Pulido 45% favorable/34% unfavorable.

Texas' 28th District. (Laredo and eastern San Antonio suburbs) Henry Cuellar, D. Trump 55%. A nonpartisan survey from Texas

Southern University showed a much different result than a June poll



Carlos De La Cruz

sponsored by Republican Tano Tijerina, the Webb County judge who is Cuellar's most formidable opponent in years. Tilt Democratic.

Texas Southern Univ., Aug. 18-22 (600 LV)(SMS/online panel) — General election ballot: Cuel-

lar over Tijerina, 45% - 34%. Image ratings: Cuellar 41% favorable/41% unfavorable, Tijerina 29% favorable/31% unfavorable.

Texas' 34th District. (Eastern Rio Grande Valley) Vicente

Gonzalez, D. Trump 55%. Gonzalez remains the most vulnerable Democratic incumbent in Texas. But Democratic and Republican polls disagree on whether he's up within the margin of error against former prosecutor Eric Flores, or down. Toss-up.

Texas Southern Univ., Aug. 18-22 (700 LV)(SMS/online panel) — General election ballot: Gonzalez over Flores, 45% - 42%, Espinoza 3%, Royal 2%. Image ratings: Flores 33% favorable/35% unfavorable, Gonzalez 35% favorable/36% unfavorable.

Texas' 35th District. (San Antonio suburbs) Open; Greg

Casar, running in 37th District. Trump 55%. The 35th was redrawn to elect a Republican, but a rebound for Democrats among Latino voters and strong top-of-ticket campaigns for Senate and governor are keeping former Bexar County sheriff's deputy Johnny Garcia in the hunt against Republican Carlos De La Cruz. Move from Likely Republican to Lean Republican.

Normington Petts (D) for House Majority PAC, Aug. 27-31 (500 LV)— General election ballot: De La Cruz over Garcia, 45% - 44%. **IE**

Democrats Seek Majority in Most Republican Senate Class

By Bradley Wascher

One year ago, the conventional wisdom was that Republicans would probably keep their Senate majority, regardless of what happened in the House. The 2026 Senate map is simply not good for Democrats. They need to gain four seats for the majority, a task that requires winning in multiple states that President Donald Trump carried by at least 10 points in 2024.

But with November's elections now just two months away, the narrative has shifted. The national electorate increasingly disapproves of the Trump administration, weighing down Republican candidates. And Democrats feel optimistic about their own class of Senate recruits, who lead in most battleground state polls and are fundraising at record rates.

The story may sound different, but the map — and the math — is the same. According to *Inside Elections* Baseline, Democrats will need a national environment of around D+9 in order to flip the Senate. That's because the Class II Senate map is uniquely favorable for Republicans, and despite Democrats' lead in the generic congressional ballot, history shows there's no such thing as a "uniform" swing.

Of the three Senate classes, Class II is the most Republican-leaning. Its median seat tends 10 points to the right of the nation, compared to the D+2 median Baseline for Class I and R+6 for Class III. Class II is also moving toward the GOP more than any other class: its median seat was R+4 in 2014 and R+9 in 2020.

Baseline is a trimmed average of all federal and statewide elections over the past four election cycles and aims to represent each state's typical partisanship in a neutral environment. A simple mental model is to start with the statewide partisan lean, then add the "national mood" to approximate the total margin a candidate needs to overperform to win. (For example, Alabama has an R+26 Baseline, but in a D+10 year, a victorious Democrat would only need to overcome around 16 points of headwind, all else equal.)

The Starting Line

Democrats' surest path to the Senate majority begins with

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winning their own competitive races. *Inside Elections* currently rates three Democratic-held Senate seats as Toss-up or Tilt Democratic: Georgia, Michigan, and New Hampshire.

Cutting against Georgia's R+4 Baseline, the Peach State's Class II Senate seat is held by Democrat Jon Ossoff. Ossoff overperformed by 4.6 points in his 2020 victory, according to our Vote Above Replacement metric, earning 50.6 percent in the January runoff compared to Georgia's 46 percent Democratic Baseline that year. One term later, Ossoff is a potential 2028 presidential candidate, the Senate race currently tilts in his favor, and it's hard to imagine a Democratic majority post-November without him.

The seats in New Hampshire (Baseline: D+2.3) and Michigan (D+4.6) are open following the respective retirements of Democratic Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Gary Peters.

New Hampshire's Senate race has flown somewhat under the radar. 1st District Rep. Chris Pappas, the likely Democratic nominee, is a consistent overperformer, earning a 6.2 VAR in 2022 and 3.7 in 2024. (While these scores are just for the 1st District, it does cover half the Granite State, which has two districts.) The likely Republican nominee, John E. Sununu, once held this exact Senate seat, but his 2002 and 2008 elections pre-date our VAR metric.

Meanwhile, Michigan is one of the only Senate battlegrounds where some polls show the Republican leading. Former congressman/2024 Senate nominee Mike Rogers won the GOP nomination in August, and he'll face progressive former Wayne County health official Abdul El-Sayed in November. The FiftyPlusOne polling average currently shows El-Sayed 3 points ahead of Rogers, 45–44 percent.

But the Wolverine State tends toward Democrats in Baseline, meaning an El-Sayed loss would require a significant underperformance — at least 5 points behind the average Democratic statewide margin — before accounting for any boost from the national mood.

Still, candidates matter, and the parallel possibility of a Rogers overperformance shouldn't be discounted. The former congressman earned a 1.8 VAR in his narrow 2024 loss to Democrat Elissa Slotkin, while El-Sayed is a first-time candidate for statewide or federal office. (It's worth reminding that VAR is calculated on vote share, not margin, giving each candidate their own score.)

The six other Senate battleground seats are held by Republicans, and they can be divided into two tiers based on average partisanship — separated by a crucial gap that could define the majority.

The first tier includes Democrats' two best pickup opportunities: North Carolina (Baseline: R+2.2) and Maine (D+9.4). Like in Michigan, candidate quality will be decisive in both races.

The Tar Heel State's seat is open following the retirement of Republican Sen. Thom Tillis. Democrats are excited about their nominee, former Gov. Roy Cooper, who won with a 3.1 VAR in 2020 and is seen

as a standard-bearer for North Carolina Democrats. Republicans are running Michael Whatley, the former chair of the Republican National Committee and a first-time candidate. Fundraising can be a proxy for candidate strength: Cooper reported nearly six times as much cash on hand as Whatley at the end of June, \$20.7 million to \$3.5 million.

If North Carolina isn't Democrats' best Senate pickup opportunity this November, it would be Maine. Republican Sen. Susan Collins is seeking a sixth term amid the harshest headwinds of her political career — her VAR having already tightened from a titanic 23.8 in 2014 to a still-formidable 5.8 in 2020. In July, Democrats swapped their nominee to former state Senate President Troy Jackson.

This race is hard to read because Maine is a unique state that produces unique overperformers. Collins outran the top of the ticket by double digits in 2020, carrying the state by 9 points as Joe Biden won by a similar margin. Meanwhile, Jackson held his northern Maine state Senate district even as it voted for Trump in the 2016 and 2020 elections by 7 and 11 points, respectively — also outrunning the top of the ticket by double digits.

Collins reported \$11 million on hand at the end of June, and despite Jackson's late start, his campaign has already raised at least \$3 million. Outside spending will also be high. But money can only go so far in the Pine Tree State, which has around one million active registered voters spread across three media markets. (For comparison, five other Senate battleground states — Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas — are among the nation's ten most populous, and all five plus Iowa include at least 10 media markets, by our calculation.)

The national environment matters insofar as Collins' capacity to distance herself from voters' negative perceptions of Trump and the Republican Party, a familiar position for the five-term senator.

The Dividing Line

To take stock: flipping both North Carolina and Maine while playing perfect defense would put Democrats at 49 seats — two away from the Senate majority. But the party's remaining pickup opportunities are a reach even in a favorable year. Baseline suggests Democrats would need at least a D+9 national environment to pick up two seats from this category, which would be enough to flip the Senate at 51 seats. (The vice president breaks ties.) Running the table to 53 might require a D+11 mood or more.

Baseline suggests the closest of these four targets is R+7 Iowa, which is rated Tilt Republican. Neither candidate has statewide electoral experience, but both are well-liked in their home districts. GOP nominee Rep. Ashley Hinson overperformed in both of her most recent congressional races, finishing 2.4 points above the 2nd District's Republican Baseline in 2022 and notching a 5.7 VAR in 2024. For his part, Democratic state Rep. Josh Turek won re-election by 5 points in 2024, even as Trump carried Turek's state House district by 8 points.

One factor to consider in Iowa is not only the national environment but also vibes within the state. On top of its high-profile Senate race, the Hawkeye State will feature competitive elections for governor and other statewide row offices, not to mention a number of key congressional races. If either party is especially energized in November, the trend here might look different from the national picture.

That's an important point to reiterate before digging deeper into the Senate map: the "national environment" doesn't materialize the same in every state. What is often boiled down to a "uniform" national swing is more accurately measured as the average or aggregate of

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Inside Elections

Podcast

Episode 78: Nathan, Jacob, Inshara and Marianna Sotomayor of Puck News and 535 analyze the Florida primary results and look ahead to the general election in the Sunshine State.

Episode 77: Nathan, Jacob, Inshara and Matthew Klein of the Associated Press discuss the Most Unusual Candidates of 2026 and other midterm superlatives.

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individual trends.

The 2018 midterms are a good example. Democrats won the national House popular vote by nearly 9 points, enough to gain 41 seats and roar to the majority. But in the Senate, Republicans knocked off four Democratic incumbents, while Democrats only flipped two seats.

The difference was at the individual race level. Republicans flipped Florida (Baseline: R+5; Result: R+0.1), Indiana (Baseline: R+12; Result: R+6), Missouri (Baseline: R+6; Result: R+6), and North Dakota (Baseline: R+29; Result: R+11), while Democrats flipped Arizona (Baseline: R+4.9; Result: D+2) and Nevada (Baseline: R+2.4; Result: D+5).

But Democratic incumbents also held the line in four key seats — Montana (Baseline: R+7; Result: D+4), Ohio (Baseline: R+10; Result: D+7), Pennsylvania (Baseline: D+7; Result: D+13), and West Virginia (Baseline: R+6; Result: D+3) — that would all be lost when the class was up again in 2024.

For those following along at home: those statewide Baselines and results are all over the place. The modal overperformance in these battlegrounds was around D+7 — a point or two lower than the House popular vote that same year. Because Senate races can be heavily defined by individual candidate characteristics and unique statewide demographics, the intensity of the “swing” ultimately varies state-to-state.

(Further evidence for a number in this ballpark: the average Democratic VAR across every contested Senate race in 2018 was 3.8, while the average Republican VAR was -3.4. Doubling either number to convert vote shares to margins suggests a systematic Democratic advantage of around 7 points.)

The GOP Lifelines

Democrats’ final few pickup opportunities could be won — or lost — in any combination. If the party swept every state covered above plus one of the next three, they would clinch the Senate majority with 51 seats.

Baseline sees a 2-point Republican gap between Iowa and the next state, Alaska (R+9.4). Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan is being challenged by former Rep. Mary Peltola, who overperformed the Democratic Baseline by over 15 points in her 2022 House win, before losing with a 4.4 VAR in 2024. (Alaska has one at-large congressional district, qualifying Peltola as a former statewide candidate.)

Sullivan’s two most recent performances are a mixed bag — notching a -6 VAR in 2014 and 2.4 in 2020 — but the ball is in Peltola’s court to outperform an established incumbent on a ranked-choice ballot.

Democrats are also optimistic about their nominee in R+10 Ohio. Former Sen. Sherrod Brown will face GOP Sen. Jon Husted in a special election to complete Vice President JD Vance’s term ending in 2028. Formerly holding the Buckeye State’s other seat, Brown was one of the Democratic juggernauts who crushed Baseline expectations in 2018 (VAR: 9.3) yet failed to re-defy political gravity in 2024 (VAR: 2).

While appointees usually perform a bit worse than “true” incumbents, Husted has multiple statewide victories under his belt, earning a 7.4 VAR in the 2014 secretary of state election and running twice for lieutenant governor alongside GOP Gov. Mike DeWine. Republicans have won every statewide race since Brown’s last victory in 2018, and while the national political mood at this point in 2026 might feel similar to eight years ago, Ohio isn’t necessarily trending toward Democrats.

Finally, there’s Texas. With an R+11 Baseline, it’s the most Republican-leaning 2026 Senate battleground — but it’s become increasingly competitive. (In 2018, when Democrat Beto O’Rourke came within 3

points of unseating GOP Sen. Ted Cruz, Texas’ Baseline was R+14.5.)

The Class II seat is open after Sen. John Cornyn lost the Republican primary to state Attorney General Ken Paxton, who had Trump’s endorsement. But Paxton also carries immense personal baggage, and his VAR scores aren’t dazzling: 1.1 in 2014, -5 in 2018, and -0.8 in 2022.

Democrats’ hopes rest on state Rep. James Talarico. Talarico represents a deep-blue district in Austin and went unopposed in the 2024 general election, so it’s difficult to gauge his relative strength. But this is another contest where fundraising says a lot about candidate quality: Talarico reported an eye-popping \$68.6 million in total receipts at the end of the second quarter, while Paxton had raised \$9.3 million. (The cash-on-hand comparison is even starker: Talarico has \$21.5 million to Paxton’s \$1.8 million.)

Outside spending will almost surely level the financial playing field. The bitterly contested GOP primary between Paxton and Cornyn was already among the most expensive on record, and heading into the general election, Paxton stands to benefit from GOP Gov. Greg Abbott’s \$67 million campaign machine. Recent polls show Talarico about a point or two ahead of Paxton, with around 8 percent still undecided. More voters will make up their minds once the airwaves are saturated.

The Bottom Line

Democrats’ path to the Senate majority seems more plausible in August than at the beginning of the year, but Baseline doesn’t count Republicans out.

Democrats would need to flip four of six realistic targets while keeping Georgia, Michigan, and New Hampshire. The first two GOP marks (Maine and North Carolina) are within reach according to Baseline — but then there’s a big gap before the rest (Alaska, Iowa, Ohio, and Texas).

Baseline helps draw a line in the sand. By this metric, a national environment of D+7 would place Democrats one seat away from the Senate majority, while D+9 seems to be the magic number. But not every state will swing uniformly — and even strong candidates lose in favorable years — so a margin closer to D+11 would provide a safer cushion. Even if the climate ends up being less favorable for Democrats than anticipated, it’s possible two recruits still overperform just enough.

To anchor it in reality, recent polls of the generic congressional ballot show Democrats leading by 6–8 points.

The good news for Republicans is that the bottom probably won’t fall out any further. For Democrats to reach 54 seats or beyond, they would need to hunt in Florida (Baseline: R+10) or South Carolina (R+15), which are both currently occupied by Republican appointees.

The wildest of wild cards are the three Senate races featuring no Democrat at all — but don’t hold your breath. Democratic nominees in Idaho (R+32), Nebraska (R+23), and South Dakota (R+30) all dropped out to clear the way for independent candidates, pitting these self-styled mavericks directly against Republican incumbents. Their moonshot bids follow the recent example set by Dan Osborn, who used this blueprint in 2024 to finish with 46.5 percent against Republican Sen. Deb Fischer in Nebraska, a state where Democrats typically earn 38 percent. (Osborn is running it back in 2026, this time against GOP Sen. Pete Ricketts.)

There’s no strong evidence that Republicans could lose in states where they have a 20- or 30-point partisan advantage. Instead, the Senate majority will almost certainly hinge on the handful of battleground states with Baselines between R+7 and R+11.

Democrats don’t need a full sweep, but it will take some upsets. **IE**