Opinion
NCR Voices





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Can the Democrats win the Senate in this autumn's midterm elections? On Monday, I looked at the rising blue wave, and how it has put Republican-leaning districts like Kentucky's 6th in play. Today it is time to survey the landscape in the contests for control of the Senate.

Winning the Senate won't be easy. The Democrats now hold 47 of the chamber's 100 seats, so they need a net gain of four seats. And, as The New York Times noted, "They are trying to defend seats in two states Mr. Trump won in 2024. And four of the six most competitive races are in states Mr. Trump won by double digits."

Let's start with the two contests they are trying to hold in states Trump won narrowly two years ago: Georgia and Michigan. The Cook Political Report now lists Georgia as "lean Democratic" and Michigan as a "toss-up." Georgia's incumbent Sen. Jon Ossoff has been doing gangbusters, delivering powerful indictments of the president, calling him a "draft-dodging, crook," which has stirred conversations about him running for the White House in 2028. His record of constituent services inspired two GOP mayors to endorse him. Barring a banana peel, Ossoff looks to win Georgia.

Michigan should have been easy. Two years ago, even while Trump was narrowly winning the state 49.7% to 48.3%, Democrat Elissa Slotkin defeated Republican Mike Rogers by an even narrower margin of 48.6% to 48.3%. If Democrats can win Michigan in a presidential year by defeating Rogers, they should have easily been able to hold onto the seat of retiring Sen. Gary Peters, beating Rogers again.

In the primary, Michigan's Democrats narrowly chose Dr. Abdul El-Sayed as their candidate, so instead of an easy win by a moderate Democrat in a favorable environment, it is doubtful the Democrats can hold the seat. But, the GOP's attack on El-Sayed for his religion and ethnic background have been ugly, and may produce a backlash. Nonetheless, you can bet Republicans are preparing ads that highlight the video of Palestinians celebrating the attacks on 9/11, the 25th anniversary of which is in two weeks. Look for the Michigan race to be a nail-biter.

While Democrats' prospects in Michigan have become cloudy, the sun is shining on other paths to a Democratic majority. Axios looked at the polls and fundraising in Maine's Senate contest, where 16% of the population is estimated to be Catholic. Democrat Troy Jackson appears to be benefitting from the enthusiasm generated by former nominee Graham Platner, without the negative publicity: Jackson doesn't

have any Nazi tattoos nor a series of allegations that he abused women. Collins has pulled out victories before on the strength of her influence in Washington and the money she has brought back to the state. Trump's renewed trade war with Canada, which borders Maine on two sides, may tip the state into the Democratic column but we can expect another nail-biter.

President Trump won Ohio, where approximately 15% of the population is Catholic, in each of the last three contests, beating Kamala Harris by more than 10 points in 2024. This year, voters are not happy about much. Former GOP congressman Jim Renacci posted a warning to Republican candidates on Facebook saying, "The biggest issues for Independents are: Iran War. Gas prices. Food prices. Utility bills. Rent." None of those issues help Republican candidates in this cycle.

Former Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, who lost two years ago, is trying to get back into the Senate this year, and he has one more issue to add to Renacci's list: AI data centers. Brown is making incumbent GOP Sen. Jon Husted the face of these controversial projects. A leaked memo from the National Republican Senatorial Committee said: "More than any other thing in this race, data centers are the anchor hanging around Husted's neck." Ohio increasingly looks like a Democratic win on election night.

Iowa baffles me. The Hawkeye State launched Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008 with a decisive win over Hillary Clinton and John Edwards and Obama went on to win the state's electoral votes in the 2008 and 2012 general elections. But Trump won the state in all three of his contests, the last time by more than 13 points. Its Catholic population is estimated to be about 15%, concentrated in the eastern half of the state where Democrats are also hoping to pick up some House seats.

Republican Sen. Joni Ernst is retiring. Iowa's farmers have been hit hard by tariffs and outrageous diesel price increases. Congresswoman Ashley Hinson is the GOP candidate and, like most GOP candidates, has tied herself in knots supporting the president. The Democratic nominee is state Sen. Josh Turek, an impressive Paralympian who represents a deeply red district in the state legislature. The Cook Political Report recently shifted the race from "lean Republican" to "toss-up."

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Alaska is the least Catholic state to host a competitive Senate contest, with only about 5% of the population. In last week's non-partisan primary, former Democratic Congresswoman Mary Peltola garnered the most votes with 48.1% against incumbent GOP Sen. Dan Sullivan's 42.7%. They advance to the runoff in November where turnout appears to be the key. Cook rates the contest a "toss-up" and another nail-biter appears likely.

Finally, there is Texas where 20% of the population is Catholic and which Cook also shifted to "toss-up" recently. The Lone Star State has broken Democratic hearts before when Beto O'Rourke lost the race for governor in 2022 and for Senate in 2018. This year, the Republicans ousted incumbent Sen. John Cornyn and backed Attorney General Ken Paxton, who had been impeached by the Republican-controlled state House of Representatives but was acquitted in the state Senate. Paxton is pure MAGA and Trump endorsed him in the contest against Cornyn.

The Democratic nominee is state Rep. James Talarico who is also a Presbyterian seminarian. His aspirations to sanctity have not protected him from the campaign's nastiness. Talarico hammers Paxton on his ethical challenges while Paxton hammers Talarico for his progressive positions on cultural issues, especially Talarico's statement that "God is nonbinary," a statement Talarico has begun walking back. Ironically, of course, God does transcend any human characteristic. But Talarico did not make that statement to be theologically precise. He said it to be provocative and now admits it was "cringey."

You can't gerrymander a Senate seat, although the American people have mostly self-sorted themselves so that states like Wyoming and North Dakota are unlikely to elect a Democrat anytime soon and states like Connecticut and Massachusetts are trending from blue to cobalt blue. Still, some states like Texas and Ohio which should be firmly in the GOP column are now up for grabs. Republican candidates can't really distance themselves from an unpopular president who nonetheless sucks up all the media oxygen. The Democrats now have a real shot at taking the Senate.

Editor's note: *You are reading a selection from Michael Sean Winters' weekly newsletter. To get the full edition — including the "In the News" link roundup — delivered 24 hours before it appears online, sign up here!*

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