

## Cozen Currents: How to Watch Election Night(s)

### The Cozen Lens

- Despite polls showing a tied race and local laws preventing the quick processing of early and absentee ballots in a handful of key states, there are notable signals to watch on Election Night for early signs of who will win the White House.
- Competitive races in Virginia, Ohio, and Maine will provide the earliest indicators of which party might win a majority in the House, but there's a chance that the House majority may still not be determined for several days as a result of slow vote-counting in California.
- Unlike with the White House and the House, there is less uncertainty over who is likely to gain control of the Senate, but the margin of victory in the upper chamber will still be consequential.



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### How to Watch the Presidential Returns

**Ready, Set, Action.** The very first Election Day results will come from noncompetitive states in the 6:00 p.m. hour (for clarity and consistency, all times throughout this note are in ET), but things will begin to heat up an hour later.

- Formerly considered a swing state, polls across most of Florida will close at 7:00 p.m. Florida election workers process early and absentee ballots weeks before Election Day, allowing the state to report results soon after polls close. While the final result in Florida is unlikely to determine the winner of the presidential race, Vice President Harris' success (or lack thereof) in Florida's Miami Dade County will be an early indicator of any erosion in her margins among Hispanic voters.
- The first real swing state polls will close at 7:00 p.m. in Georgia where election workers will be ready to quickly release early and absentee results. As a result, Georgia is a prime candidate for a "blue shift," or a strong early showing for Democrats followed by a tightening race as Election Day votes are counted. Reporting of results in the Atlanta metro area's DeKalb and Gwinnett Counties will provide early insight into Harris' margins among Black voters while the numbers from nearby Cobb County will be a good measure of Harris' relative strength in the suburbs.
- Moving northeast, polls will close in North Carolina at 7:30 p.m. and results are expected soon thereafter. North Carolina typically releases early and absentee votes first, so another "blue shift" could be in store. Results from Wake and Mecklenburg Counties, which cover Raleigh and Charlotte, respectively, will be closely watched to monitor Harris' margins among suburban and Black voters, but even a President Biden-level performance won't flip the state. Instead, election analysts recommend watching the returns in Cabarrus County, a more-conservative suburb of Charlotte where a significant improvement by Harris over Biden would portend good news for her.

**The Main Event.** The action on Election Day will begin for real when Rust Belt polls start to close in the 8:00 p.m. hour.

- Polls in Pennsylvania will close at 8:00 p.m., but the race isn't expected to be

called on Election Night: state election officials can't begin processing early and absentee ballots until an hour before polls close, so results will be released slowly throughout the night. Results from Erie County, home to a large union and working-class population, will provide some of the best insights into Harris' numbers among white, non-college educated voters. Similar to Erie in its demographic makeup, Lackawanna County returns will also be worth monitoring. Analysts at Sabato's Crystal Ball noted last week, "...we would probably expect Harris's margin in Lackawanna County to be somewhere between Clinton's and Biden's if she were to be on track to carry the state."

- Moving further West, most polls in Michigan will also close at 8:00 p.m. Unlike in Pennsylvania, new Michigan laws allow election officials to process early and absentee ballots before Election Day, making a call on Election Night possible. Kent County will be the place to watch for Harris' suburban numbers in Michigan, but Wayne County could provide the most important results. Wayne is home to a large Black population, Michigan's Big Three automakers, and the Arab-American majority city of Dearborn. An overperformance by former President Trump among Black or Arab-American voters in Wayne would put him on strong footing in Michigan as a whole.

- Wisconsin polls will close at 9:00 p.m. Like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin won't be quick to count its early and absentee votes, potentially preventing an official call of the race on Election Night. Wisconsin's WOW counties, specifically Waukesha and Ozaukee, will be the places to monitor throughout the night. Both well-educated, wealthy, and conservative suburbs, they've drifted leftward over the past three election cycles. Per Sabato's Crystal Ball, "If Harris can limit Trump to a single-digit margin [in Ozaukee], that would bode well for her statewide prospects."

**The Nightcap.** The last swing state polls to close will be out west in Arizona and Nevada, where final results won't arrive until the late hours of the night.

- Arizona polls close at 9:00 p.m., but state law prevents election officials from releasing results until 10:00 p.m. As was the case in 2020, the delay will give officials time to count early and absentee ballots, suggesting that the first results to come in could heavily favor Harris. Sixty-two percent of Arizona's population resides in Maricopa County, making it a must-win for either candidate. Hispanic voters make up about one-third of Maricopa's population, making it a good place to monitor whether Trump's improvements among Hispanic voters will materialize in the southwest.

- The last swing state to report results will be Nevada, where polls close at 10:00 p.m. Nevada is an almost entirely mail ballot state, but laws that allow election officials to begin processing the early vote before Election Day will allow for a fairly quick tabulation of the results. Most of Nevada's population resides in Clark County, making it a must-win for Harris, but she will also need to run up her numbers in smaller Washoe County to carry the state. Per analysts at Sabato's Crystal Ball, "For Harris, at least replicating [Senator] Cortez Masto's [2022] margins in the large counties—carrying Washoe by about 5% and Clark by 8%—might be a good goal."

## How to Watch the Battle for the House

**Early Indicators.** Bellwethers in Virginia, Ohio, and Maine may give an early sense of how the race for the House majority turns out.

- While the outcome at the presidential level will be determined by the results in only seven swing states, the House majority will come down to a number of races across a wide array of non-battleground states. The Cook Political Report considers 43 House races to be competitive this year, 26 of which are defined as toss-ups.

- Polls close in Virginia at 7:00 p.m., making the state the first place to look for signs of the House majority. Unlike in 2020, the Old Dominion is expected to report out early voting and mail-in ballots quickly due to a change to state law in 2021. Both

Virginia's 2nd and 7th congressional districts have competitive races, although the former favors the GOP while the latter is a toss-up. A Republican pick-up in the 7th district, left open by the retirement of Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA), would be a favorable sign for the GOP's odds of retaining its slim majority.

- Polls in Ohio will close by 7:30 p.m., and a pair of races there could signal where control of the lower chamber is headed. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) is defending Ohio's Democratic-leaning 9th district, while Rep. Emilia Sykes (D-OH) is defending a toss-up seat in Ohio's 13th district. These are must-win seats for Democrats to flip the House.

- One other early and competitive bellwether race is in Maine, where polls are set to close at 8:00 p.m. Rep. Jared Golden (D-ME) is defending a seat in Maine's 2nd congressional district, which favored former President Trump by about six points in 2020. Polls show Golden marginally trailing his GOP competitor in a seat that Democrats will want to retain to recapture the majority.

**A Longer Wait.** There's a good chance that the House majority may not be determined on Election Night.

- Results from competitive House races across states in New York, Iowa, Nevada, and more will come in as the night continues, but *seven* of the most competitive House races are in California, a state known for its slow counting of ballots. GOP incumbents are defending five toss-up races across California's 13th, 22nd, 27th, 41st, and 45th districts. Democrats are favored in an open seat in California's 47th district and in incumbent Rep. Mike Levin's (D) race in the 49th district.

- California is an entirely vote-by-mail state, and many voters drop off or postmark their ballots on Election Day, leading to delays in tabulating the results. According to reporting from the AP, the Golden State has counted an average of 38 percent of votes after Election Day. If the California House races are as competitive as polls suggest, it could take days to know the final results and, in turn, the House majority. Polls in the state won't close until 11:00 p.m. regardless of the ballot processing speeds.

- Although it may take longer to know the House majority than the winner of the presidential race, it won't make the result any less important. The House could be the most important determinant of policies enacted over the next two years. If Trump wins and Senate Republicans flip the upper chamber, whether the GOP is able to retain control of the House will determine whether the party can use budget reconciliation to extend the expiring provisions of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. On the other hand, if the GOP wins the House majority but Vice President Harris wins the White House, the risk of brinkmanship over the debt ceiling and the potential for a government shutdown would increase.

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#### How to Watch the Contest for the Senate

**Advantage — GOP:** Democratic control of the chamber depends on two incumbents in decidedly red states.

- Democrats currently hold a slim 51-49 majority in the Senate. With Senator Joe Manchin's (I-WV) seat all but certain to flip into GOP hands, that means Democrats must realistically keep the White House and triumph in every contested race to keep a 50-50 majority where the vice president would break ties (barring a surprise, long-shot win in Nebraska, Texas, or Florida).

- When polls close at 7:30 p.m. in Ohio, the first important Senate results will begin to trickle in. Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) leads by just 7 points in 538's polling average of his race. Polls have tightened in recent weeks as the race has come closer in line with the presidential level, although Brown continues to peel off just enough ticket-splitters to maintain a narrow edge. If GOP challenger Bernie Moreno appears poised to overcome Brown's incumbency advantage, the GOP will be set for an early flip of the Senate majority on Election Night.

- The other most closely watched Senate race of the night will begin at 10:00 p.m. when polls close in Montana. Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) is Democrats' most vulnerable incumbent, having trailed GOP challenger Tim Sheehy in polls since the early summer. A loss for Tester would likely end Democrats' hopes of retaining their Senate majority. Given the time difference, the outcome in Montana may not be known until Wednesday, although if Sheehy is running well ahead of Tester, a call could come as soon as midnight.

**Margins matter.** Although the two contests above will determine control of the upper chamber, the size of an expected GOP Senate majority has major implications for nominations and policy.

- During President Biden's first two years, two moderate senators — Manchin and Senator Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ) — demonstrated an ability to wield outsized influence over a thin legislative majority. If the GOP can only secure a 51-49 seat majority, two GOP senators on their own could hold up a bill or confirmation, giving them significant leverage in negotiations. The two most likely candidates to engage in such tactics are moderate Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), who have each demonstrated an independent streak over the years.

- Besides Ohio and Montana, Wisconsin's competitive race will be the next bellwether to track. Polls will close at 9:00 p.m. in a state that features a close race between incumbent Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and GOP challenger Eric Hovde. While Baldwin led polls of the race all summer, more recent surveys suggest Hovde has cut into her lead in the final weeks of the campaign. The Cook Political Report shifted the race to a toss-up rating on October 8th. Due to slow tabulations of results in Milwaukee, we may not know the Wisconsin Senate result until Wednesday morning: In 2022, the AP didn't call the closely contested Wisconsin Senate race until the day after the election.

The other competitive Senate races in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Arizona, and Nevada will matter, but the slow processing of results in Pennsylvania and the Democratic advantage in Michigan, Arizona, and Nevada make them less likely to be bellwethers of Senate control. While the presidential race in these states is tightly contested, Democratic Senate candidates are noticeably outperforming Vice President Harris' polling here. GOP performance here will, however, have an impact on a hypothetical majority's margins.

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