

Cozen Currents: Midterm Elections - Do the Issues or Candidates Matter More?

The Cozen Lens

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It's one week until the midterm elections and the biggest battle to determine congressional control is a tug of war between national issues and individual candidate qualities.

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Ticket splitting has declined in recent years, but it could tip the balance of the Senate this cycle.

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Though the midterm elections will likely usher in divided government in Washington, DC, voters could put several states under unified control of a single party while also making key decisions on a range of issues via ballot measures that gridlocked politicians have been unable to resolve.

Which Matters More -- Issues or Candidates?

The Issues. Americans are pessimistic about a number of issues these days, but the out-of-power Republicans hold the upper hand in trying to use economic and crime issues as a midterm's referendum.

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It's the economy, stupid. The James Carville adage broke down during the Trump era – there was more than a 20-point gap between Donald Trump's net job approval and economic approval. President Biden, the man, doesn't drive the discourse like Trump did. That means issues matter more. Biden's net job approval closely matches his economic approval.

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Issues are viewed through a partisan lens. When Trump was in office, Republicans viewed the state of the economy more favorably than Democrats did. When Biden was elected, that switched. Republicans who now view the economy as the most important issue with most believing the US is in a recession right now, while blaming Biden's economic policies. Democrats view abortion as the most important issue and believe Biden's economic policies have had little impact on inflation today.

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Not everyone wears red and blue partisan lenses. Independent voters more closely align with Republicans on the most important issue, even if they give Democrats an edge on non-economic issues like protecting abortion access and democracy.

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Crime is back as a political issue, regardless of the underlying statistics. While murders and violent crime has decreased this year, it remains at elevated pandemic levels. However, coverage of crime in conservative media and Republican crime campaign ads have surged



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since the summer.

The Candidates. In an era of political polarization, candidate quality matters less. However, with the country evenly divided, that quality can make an outsized difference in competitive races.

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The "D" or the "R" after a candidate's name matters more than the candidate does. When 80 percent of Republicans and Democrats believe the other party "will destroy America as we know it," issues of candidate quality matter less in the larger picture.

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In marginal races though, candidate quality does matter. In the most important Senate races, Republicans Blake Masters in Arizona, Herschel Walker in Georgia, and Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania all have negative net favorability ratings that take the focus away from the advantage Republicans have on the issues.

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In rare instances, good candidates can still defy political gravity. Rep. Mary Peltola (D) won a special election this summer to represent Alaska in the House. She's doing so well in her contest for a full term that Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) endorsed her and partisan GOP challenger Sarah Palin even said, "I love [Mary] dearly." Meanwhile, Republican Allan Fung is in a strong position in an open House race in Rhode Island that voted for Biden by 13 points. The Chinese-American has channeled the pragmatic New England Republican mold of Governors Charlie Baker (R-MA) and Phil Scott (R-VT) at the federal level.

The Macro vs. Micro One-Week Out. In 2010 and 2018, all signs were pointing to a wave election against the president's party. There's more uncertainty this year.

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Momentum is on the GOP's side. Polls have shifted towards Republicans after Labor Day, although not overwhelmingly. However, gas prices, perhaps one of the most important economic metrics, are declining once again.

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Republicans are pushing the offensive. In the 65 House races with party spending, 53 of those races are in districts Biden won in 2020. The House battle is on Democratic turf and it's getting even bluer in the closing days. A number of the last minute funding infusions are centering around congressional districts Biden won by 8-12 points in 2020, especially in New York, California, and Oregon.

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Democrats in key Senate races are focusing on the local, while Republicans focus on the national. Senators Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Raphael Warnock (D-GA), and Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) are all trying to localize their races and put distance from Biden and the national Democratic brand. Their Republican opponents are looking to minimize their controversies and focus on GOP talking points.

Will Ticket splitting Make the Difference?

A Polling Mismatch. A cursory glance at current polling shows several states with candidates from different parties leading respectively in the Senate and gubernatorial races.

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Ticket splitting, where a voter chooses a candidate from one party for one position and a candidate from another party for another position, has been in decline for several years.

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In 2020, there was the least amount of split-ticket House voting in decades. In spite of this historical decline, it could still determine control of the Senate and the outcome of other key races this cycle.

All Politics Are Local? In recent midterm elections, there were a handful of states with ticket splitting between the Senate and gubernatorial races, but this was often attributable to unique factors in those races.

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One region that has a history of ticket splitting is New England where Democrats tend to win federal elections, but there is a moderate bent to some Republicans that allows them to build their own brand beyond the national GOP on a statewide basis. This year is expected to be no different as both Vermont and New Hampshire could elect Republican governors and Democratic senators.

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Ticket splitting is also likely to be prominent in some traditionally unexpected places this year, notably Oregon and Kansas. They are primed to elect a Democratic and GOP senator, respectively, but both are experiencing tight races for the governor's mansion. In Oregon, the race has been shaken up by a well-funded, moderate independent, while Governor Laura Kelly (D-KS) is defending her position in a tougher national environment for Democrats than when she first won in 2018.

Abnormal vs. National. Among the other states polling as potential split tickets, it's a question of political gravity versus candidate quality.

- In generic races, expect a generic outcome. There are states like Nevada and Wisconsin where the Democratic and GOP candidates for Senate, governor, and key House races are broadly "generic." Party vote share is similar in the different races and will likely see the same election outcome.
- There are still wide ticket-splitting gaps in gubernatorial and Senate races one-week out from midterms that don't have historical ticket splitting dynamics. Polling is picking up a non-negligible contingency of Mike DeWine (R)/Tim Ryan (D) voters in Ohio, Josh Shapiro (D)/Mehmet Oz (R) voters in Pennsylvania, Brian Kemp (R)/Raphael Warnock (D) voters in Georgia, and Kari Lake (R)/Mark Kelly (D) voters in Arizona.
- Republicans hold more upside as all of these races are in states that are more Republican than the national average. As Election Day gets closer, expect a narrowing gap between some of these polls as more Republicans "return to the fold."

Ballots Beyond the Beltway

Gubernatorial Races. Among the biggest prizes on the ballot this year are governors' races.

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Voters in several key swing states will elect governors next week, and most of these races are highly competitive. According to the latest FiveThirtyEight polling averages, Kari Lake (R) leads Katie Hobbs (D) by 2.6 points in Arizona and incumbent Governor Gretchen Whitmer (D) leads Tudor Dixon (R) by 5.9 points in Michigan. Races in Wisconsin and Nevada are in a dead heat, with Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers (D) up only 0.7 points over Tim Michels (R) and Nevada Governor Steve Sisolak (D) 0.4 points behind Joe Lombardo (R). The exception is Pennsylvania, where Attorney General Josh Shapiro (D) leads far-right candidate Doug Mastriano by 9.3 points.

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Gubernatorial races are also close in some states that are traditionally dominated by one party, and there could be some surprises on Election Night. In Oregon, Tina Kotek (D) and Christine Drazan (R) are tied at 39.1 percent each in the latest FiveThirtyEight average, with third-party candidate Betsy Johnson at 13.8 percent. Oregon last elected a GOP governor in

1982. Democrats have also made the governor's race in Oklahoma competitive. Incumbent Kevin Stitt (R) leads Joy Hofmeister (D) by only 3.3 points. In New York, Rep. Lee Zeldin (R) has narrowed incumbent Kathy Hochul's (D) lead to 6.8 points.

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Two governors considered to be rising leaders within their parties will go before voters this fall: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (R) and California Governor Gavin Newsom (D). FiveThirtyEight polling averages show that both are likely to win reelection: DeSantis leads Rep. Charlie Crist (D) by 9.9 points and Newsom leads Brian Dahle (R) by 21.3 points. Both men are possible 2024 presidential candidates, and strong reelection wins could tee them up to launch presidential campaigns in 2023.

State Legislatures. The partisan balance of state legislatures also hangs in the balance, and with it, the ability for a party to gain a trifecta: control of both chambers of the legislature and the governorship.

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A trifecta enables a party to enact policies without requiring any compromise with the other party, allowing for potentially wide-ranging changes. With divided government expected in Washington, DC, partisan control on the state level could become even more important.

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There are three states holding elections for state offices this year where Democrats currently have trifectas: Maine, Nevada, and Oregon. Any of these states could flip to Republican trifectas depending on the size of a red wave on Election Day. Michigan is also highly competitive and offers both parties an opportunity to pick up a trifecta.

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In several state legislatures, parties could gain veto-proof majorities. In Vermont, Democrats could win several seats to be able to override Republican Governor Phil Scott's vetoes. On the other side of the aisle, Republicans are looking to pick up seats in North Carolina to be able to override Democratic Governor Roy Cooper's vetoes, and in Wisconsin, where a veto-proof majority would be a bulwark against Evers if he were re-elected this year.

Ballot Measures. Voters in several states will also weigh in on ballot measures on major topics with implications for politics, business, and American life.

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Cannabis legalization will be on the ballot in five states: Arkansas, Maryland, Missouri, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Broken down on the state level, support for cannabis reform is uneven. In Maryland, a *Washington Post/University of Maryland* poll conducted in September found that 73 percent of voters were in support. In Arkansas, on the other hand, a *Talk Business and Politics-Hendrix College* poll conducted in October found only 50.5 percent of likely voters would "definitely" or "probably" vote yes, and in South Dakota, a poll conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy in July 2022 indicated that 43.8 percent of registered voters were in support.

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Abortion-related measures will be on the ballot in four states: California, Kentucky, Michigan, and Vermont. These ballot measures could energize left-leaning voters and give a helping hand to Democratic candidates. This could potentially make a difference in competitive US House races in California and Michigan, as well as Michigan's gubernatorial race.

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Due to the size of California's economy, which is poised to become the fourth largest in the world, that state's ballot propositions could have an impact well beyond its borders. Key ballot measures include legalization of sports betting, a ban on flavored tobacco products, and a

new 1.75 percent tax on Californians with income above \$2 million to fund electric vehicle infrastructure.
