

P *Parties trade flips in too-close-to-call battle for the Senate*

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Democrats' path to a Senate majority has narrowed dramatically as the party under-performed expectations in a handful of the most expensive races in the country, but control of the Senate remains undecided with a handful of states still too close to call.



Andrea Smith, File/AP 2020-10-30 Perdue AP 773

Though Democrats expanded the battleground map in the fall and ran closer than expected to GOP incumbents, they fell short in their second- and third-tier targeted races like South Carolina, Texas and Kansas — states where the party raised and spent nine-figure sums.

Republicans remained optimistic as they cling to a slim Senate majority, buoyed by victories in those states and a key victory in Iowa, where Sen. Joni Ernst won a second term against Democrat Theresa Greenfield despite being badly outspent by the Democrat throughout the race. The GOP also held a narrow lead in North Carolina with votes still coming in.

Indeed, Democrats rolled into Tuesday with their best chance at reclaiming the Senate majority since they lost it six years ago — yet Republicans still have a clear path to retaining power in the remaining races.

With Democrats falling well short of a sweep, it's unlikely that control of the Senate will be decided on election night. High volumes of mail-in ballots are already dragging out the vote-counting process in some states, and with Georgia's two races expected to head to runoffs, a verdict on Senate control could potentially be delayed for months.

Democrats flipped a seat in Colorado, where former Gov. John Hickenlooper defeated GOP Sen. Cory Gardner by a relatively large margin. Hickenlooper was recruited late into the race and led Gardner throughout in the bluest state on the map that featured a Republican incumbent.

But Republicans countered with their own flip, with former Auburn football coach Tommy Tuberville defeating Democratic Sen. Doug Jones in Alabama.

Republicans are defending their 53-47 majority in traditionally conservative states that have shifted toward Democrats in recent years.

Just two Democratic senators were considered vulnerable — Jones and Gary Peters of Michigan — and the party has elevated races that started 2020 as afterthoughts to the middle of their target list, driven by an unprecedented fundraising operation, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's eleventh-hour push in states with competitive Senate races, and President Donald Trump's sagging poll numbers.

One of those states, Georgia, has both of its Senate seats up for grabs this year: GOP Sen. David Perdue is facing reelection against Democrat Jon Ossoff, and there is a special election to fill the remainder of former Sen. Johnny Isakson's term, after he resigned at the end of last year.

In that race, Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-Ga.) will face off against Democrat Raphael Warnock in a runoff set to take place on Jan. 5, 2021. Runoffs between the top two finishers are required when no candidate reaches 50 percent.

Perdue led Ossoff in the other Georgia race, but a significant portion of the vote is not yet counted.

If neither party holds the Senate majority after election night, the outcomes of those races will determine whether Republican Mitch McConnell or Democrat Chuck Schumer is the majority leader.

Trump loomed over several of the races, and his sagging popularity dragged down some Republican senators, all of whom embraced the president throughout the campaign despite what majorities in polls saying he has mishandled the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, freshman GOP senators and entrenched incumbents alike are at risk of losing.

Races in a few reliably red and blue states were called shortly after polls closed on the east coast Tuesday night.

McConnell, the Senate majority leader, won reelection to a seventh term, fending off Democratic challenger Amy McGrath. Though McGrath had raised more than \$90 million, McConnell was widely expected to win.

And in Texas, GOP Sen. John Cornyn defeated his Democratic challenger MJ Hegar, and was outperforming Trump in the key battleground state.

Later in the night, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) defeated his Democratic opponent, Jaime Harrison, a major relief for Senate Republicans, who worried that Harrison's well-funded operation could flip the reliably Republican seat.

And Republicans held a Senate seat in Kansas when Rep. Roger Marshall defeated Democrat Barbara Bollier, replacing the retiring Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.).

A handful of races remained too close to call early in the night. In North Carolina, GOP Sen. Thom Tillis held led of nearly 2 points over Democrat Cal Cunningham with the majority of the vote counted, but the race remained too close to call. Trump narrowly led Biden in the state, as well.

In Montana, Democrat Steve Bullock held a narrow lead over Republican Sen. Steve Daines with a huge portion of the vote still to be counted.

And Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins held a lead over Democrat Sara Gideon with large portions of the vote still to be counted.

Candidates from both parties raised record-breaking sums of cash in the final stretch, fueled in part by the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Senate Republicans' effort to confirm her replacement, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, just eight days before the election. Democrats, in particular, raised eye-popping amounts.

Harrison, the Democrat challenging Graham in South Carolina, raked in \$57 million in the third quarter of 2020, shattering the previous record for a Senate campaign. Graham raised \$28 million in the same time period, which was a record for a Republican Senate candidate.

The fundraising totals helped lesser-known candidates raise their profiles in states that were not thought to be competitive even a few months ago. Democrats began the cycle with a relatively narrow path back to power that ran through Arizona, Colorado, Maine and North Carolina. But after recruiting successes and strong fundraising, they were able to put red states in play from places like Iowa and Georgia to Montana, Kansas and South Carolina, expanding their potential paths back to power.

The cash fueled the most expensive races in history in many states. North Carolina became the most expensive non-presidential race of all time, in any place, topping \$260 million in spending. Iowa topped \$215 million and Maine and Montana, two much less populous states, saw \$317 million combined in total advertising.

In each of those races, Democratic candidates had massive spending advantages.

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