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A first look at the House playing field

di Geoffrey Skelley

Quick summary:

The main U.S. House seats to watch are 25 Republican-held and 20 Democratic-controlled districts. The good news for the GOP is that only four of their 25 seats voted for former Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2024 election. Still, the 2026 electoral environment looks like it will be at least somewhat blue-leaning, which could be enough for Democrats to win back the House.

The 2026 midterm elections are about eight months away. A lot can and will happen in that time. More states [might redistrict](#); attitudes about President Donald Trump's [job performance](#) and the GOP-controlled federal government [could shift](#); and the parties will pick their nominees in key races in which a stronger or weaker contender could affect the margins just enough to matter to the outcome.

Despite that timeline, we already have a decent idea about which congressional districts will most likely determine control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Republicans hold a razor-thin 220-215 majority, if we include [the three \(relatively\) uncompetitive vacant seats](#) with the party that held them previously. That means Democrats only need a net gain of three seats to gain control. The mid-decade redistricting clash has scrambled the seat-by-seat math to some extent, but it's clear that a group of around 45 competitive seats will probably decide control of the House in 2026.

Here then is a first look at the state of the House playing field. I will refresh this analysis multiple times between now and November. The numbers could and almost certainly will change some as we get new information. And the second and third parts of this series will focus on the most vulnerable Republican- and Democratic-held seats. Still, many aspects of this analysis will remain relevant even eight months from now. Using

a mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures, including district-level electoral data, race ratings by election handicappers, and party target lists, I have broken down the House into some broad categories. Let's take a look.

The marquee contests

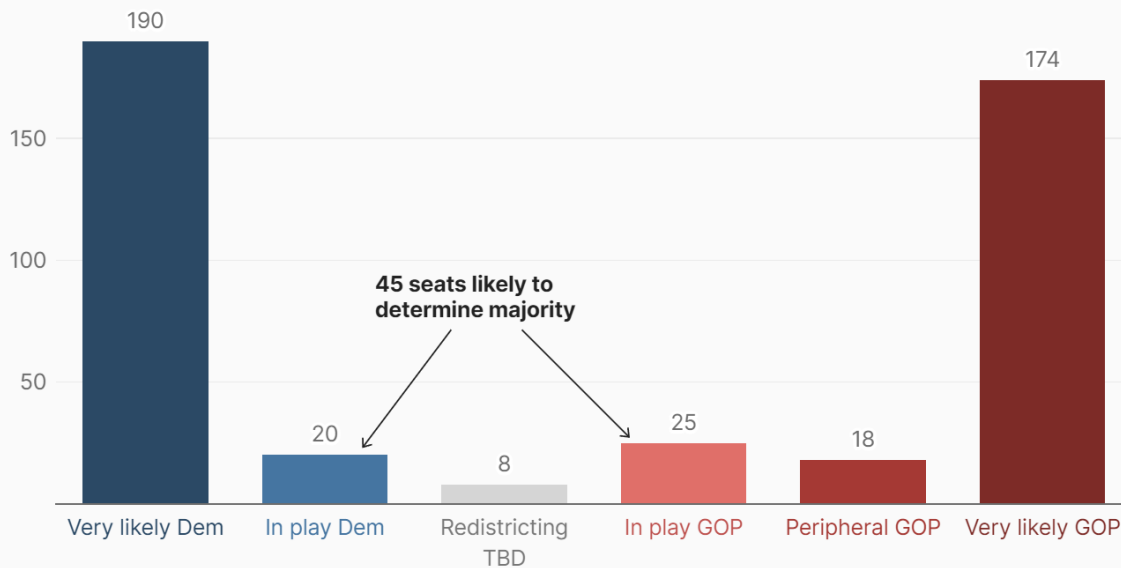
At this point, the 2026 electoral environment looks like it will be at least somewhat Democratic-leaning. After all, the president's party [usually loses ground](#) in the House in midterms, and voters' attitudes toward Trump do not look likely to ameliorate that presidential penalty. As of Sunday, the president's approval rating was just shy of 43% in [Decision Desk HQ's average](#), a position historically associated with roughly a 30-seat loss.

All in all, Democrats appear fairly likely to win the House. They have held a consistent (but not large) lead [in the generic ballot](#), a measure that [tends to trend in the direction](#) of the party out of power as the election nears. And [prediction markets](#) give Democrats [slightly better than a 4 in 5](#) chance of taking control. None of this means Democrats are on track to win a *large* majority. But they are favored to claim more seats.

Knowing this information, we can begin to sort the House's 435 seats into broad categories of competitiveness. Here are my groupings and the number of districts that fall into each one.

The House's broad competitiveness situation

U.S. House seats generally categorized by current anticipated competitiveness and importance to determining House majority, as of Feb. 22, 2026



Categorizations based on qualitative and quantitative analysis, including 2024 presidential vote, inclusion on opposition party target lists, expert ratings, and other information.



The core seats of interest are 25 Republican-held and 20 Democratic-controlled districts that we describe as most clearly “in play.” Suffice it to say, if Democrats win around half of these GOP-held seats and hold onto most of their seats, they will win a narrow majority. Still, if Republicans make inroads into some of the key Democratic-held seats and hold onto many of their own, they might just barely lose control of the chamber — or even find a path to keep it.

The good news for Republicans is that only four of their 25 seats voted for former Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2024 election. Fact is, Democrats have only a few Republicans to target in competitive seats that Harris carried. That’s a very different reality from the 2018 midterms, when the Democrats could pursue [a large number of light-blue or purple seats](#) held by Republicans that had moved toward Democrats in the 2016 presidential election.

25 GOP-held seats likely to decide House majority

Republican-held U.S. House seats that will be critical to determining the 2026 majority, by the incumbent, median rating of rating outlets, and 2024 presidential margin in district

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District	Incumbent	Expert rating	2024 Pres. margin
NE-02	OPEN (Bacon)	Lean D	D+4.6
CA-48*	Darrell Issa	Toss-up	D+3.4
NY-17	Mike Lawler	Toss-up	D+0.6
PA-01	Brian Fitzpatrick	Lean R	D+0.3
VA-02	Jen Kiggans	Toss-up	R+0.2
AZ-06	Juan Ciscomani	Toss-up	R+0.7
NJ-07	Tom Kean Jr.	Toss-up	R+1.2
MI-07	Tom Barrett	Toss-up	R+1.3
CA-22*	David Valadao	Toss-up	R+1.8
CO-08	Gabe Evans	Toss-up	R+1.8
AZ-01	OPEN (Schweikert)	Toss-up	R+3.1
PA-07	Ryan Mackenzie	Toss-up	R+3.2
IA-03	Zach Nunn	Toss-up	R+4.4
WI-01	Bryan Steil	Likely R	R+4.5
VA-01	Rob Wittman	Lean R	R+4.9

*Seat redistricted ahead of 2026 election.

Data reflects new district lines in California. Data for Virginia seats based on state's present boundaries, not the proposed Democratic-drawn map currently up for debate in that state.

Source: Dave's Redistricting App, The Downballot, The Cook Political Report, Inside Elections, Sabato's Crystal Ball



Still, 17 of these seats voted for Harris or backed Trump by 5.5 percentage points or fewer. That figure is a back-of-the-envelope threshold that points to the potential vulnerability of these seats. Trump led the national popular vote by about 1.5 points in 2024, but Democrats have slightly better than a 4-point edge [in our generic ballot polling average](#) — all told, that would amount to about a 5.5-point swing to the left from 2024.

We will go into more detail about these seats in the next part of this series, but here are a couple of potential wrinkles to monitor. First, redistricting could change district lines in Virginia, home to two seats on this list. Should Democrats [convince voters to support an April 21 referendum](#) temporarily allowing the legislature to redistrict, the

Democrats' proposed map would likely leave Rep. Rob Wittman with no good options for his reelection bid. An amended version of the map [would also make](#) Rep. Jen Kiggans' seat somewhat bluer, hurting her chances.

Additionally, Republicans could have more trouble defending Colorado's 3rd District thanks to a recent Trump intervention. On Saturday, Trump withdrew his endorsement of Rep. Jeff Hurd after Hurd backed a resolution [disapproving of Trump's declaration of a national emergency](#) to raise tariffs on Canada. [Trump endorsed](#) Hurd's primary opponent, former state party vice chair Hope Scheppelman. Although Trump carried this seat by nearly 10 points in 2024, it almost flipped to the Democrats in 2022. In that race, controversial Rep. Lauren Boebert [barely won reelection](#); she ran in the far-redder 4th District [in 2024](#) and Hurd [won the open 3rd](#) by about 5 points. Should Hurd lose renomination, Scheppelman might prove to be a weaker general election candidate.

Democrats do have 20 vulnerable districts to defend, some of which could prove especially tough to retain thanks to redistricting and retirements. Trump carried 12 of these districts in 2024, five by more than that 5.5-point threshold mentioned above. New Republican-drawn maps in North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas [made four Trump-won seats redder](#), with each having a margin of at least Trump +10. And [the retirement of Rep. Jared Golden](#) opened up a Trump +9 seat in Maine, which the GOP could very well flip in November.

20 Democratic-held seats that could be pivotal

Democratic-held U.S. House seats that will be critical to determining the 2026 majority, by the incumbent, median rating of rating outlets, and 2024 presidential margin in district

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District	Incumbent	Expert rating	2024 Pres. margin
NC-01*	Don Davis	Lean R	R+11.6
OH-09*	Marcy Kaptur	Lean R	R+10.6
TX-28*	Henry Cuellar	Lean D	R+10.4
TX-34*	Vicente Gonzalez	Toss-up	R+10.1
ME-02	OPEN (Golden)	Likely R	R+9.1
NY-03	Tom Suozzi	Lean D	R+4.3
WA-03	Marie Gluesenkamp Perez	Lean D	R+3.3
OH-01*	Greg Landsman	Toss-up	R+2.6
MI-08	Kristen McDonald Rivet	Lean D	R+2.0
NM-02	Gabe Vasquez	Lean D	R+1.8
NJ-09	Nellie Pou	Lean D	R+1.1
NV-03	Susie Lee	Lean D	R+0.7
IN-01	Frank Mrvan	Lean D	D+0.4
CA-13*	Adam Gray	Lean D	D+0.5
NY-04	Laura Gillen	Lean D	D+1.3

Data reflects redistricting effects in California, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. Data for Virginia seats based on state's present district lines, not the proposed Democratic-drawn map currently being debated in state legislature.

Source: Dave's Redistricting App, The Downballot, The Cook Political Report, Inside Elections, Sabato's Crystal Ball



Reflecting the blue-tinged electoral environment, ratings outlets mostly view the other seats in this category as leaning toward the Democrats. Still, circumstances in some of these districts could change in ways that might more clearly open the door to a GOP flip. For instance, in New York's 4th District on Long Island, Democratic Rep. Laura Gillen [recently attracted a primary challenge](#) on her left from former state Assemblymember Taylor Darling, who is attacking Gillen for voting in January to increase funding for the Department of Homeland Security. A more left-leaning candidate could have trouble in this swingy seat, especially against [the GOP's potential candidate](#), former Rep. Anthony D'Esposito (whom Gillen [defeated in 2024](#)).

The rest of the map

Beyond these core districts of interest, 18 other GOP-held seats are more peripheral targets for the Democrats. In other words, these are not the seats that will decide the majority, but if Democrats were to flip some of them, that would indicate a potential blue-wave type of election.

18 red seats that might become competitive

U.S. House seats with a clear Republican lean that could be competitive, by the incumbent, median rating of rating outlets, and 2024 presidential margin in district

District	Incumbent	Expert rating	2024 Pres. margin
OH-10*	Mike Turner	Solid R	R+7.8
NC-11	Chuck Edwards	Solid R	R+9.5
OH-15*	Mike Carey	Solid R	R+10.0
TX-35*	OPEN (New)	Likely R	R+10.4
OH-07*	Max Miller	Solid R	R+11.1
FL-15	Laurel Lee	Solid R	R+11.2
MO-02*	Ann Wagner	Solid R	R+11.4
MT-01	Ryan Zinke	Likely R	R+11.6
FL-13	Anna Paulina Luna	Likely R	R+11.9
MN-01	Brad Finstad	Solid R	R+12.0
FL-07	Cory Mills	Likely R	R+12.5
SC-01	OPEN (Mace)	Solid R	R+13.0
NC-03*	Greg Murphy	Solid R	R+13.6
FL-27	María Elvira Salazar	Solid R	R+14.7
AZ-02	Eli Crane	Likely R	R+15.0
KY-06	OPEN (Barr)	Solid R	R+15.0
TX-15*	Monica De La Cruz	Likely R	R+17.9
TN-05	Andy Ogles	Likely R	R+17.8

*Seat redistricted ahead of 2026 election.

Data reflects new district lines in Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas.

Source: Dave's Redistricting App, The Downballot, The Cook Political Report, Inside Elections, Sabato's Crystal Ball



All of these are seats that Democrats [are definitely pursuing](#), even if it might take a sizable swing for the party to flip any of them. In some cases, the GOP incumbent

might have a history of underperforming the district's lean (e.g. [Eli Crane in Arizona's 2nd](#)) or have scandals that could endanger the seat (like [Cory Mills in Florida's 7th](#) and [Andy Ogles in Tennessee's 5th](#)). Other seats could be vulnerable if Latino voters swing back toward Democrats after Trump's big gains in 2024 (Florida's 27th, Texas's 15th and 35th). Some are seats that might shift more if the turnout and Democratic swing among college-educated voters are especially high (Missouri's 2nd, where close to half the population has at least a bachelor's degree).

Redistricting uncertainty continues to hang over some races, so the analysis places a group of eight seats in limbo. Two are Republican-held seats in Virginia that could be endangered if Democrats manage to implement their proposed gerrymander. Another five are Democratic-held seats in Florida, where the GOP-led legislature [may redistrict](#) in an April special session. It remains to be seen how aggressive Sunshine State Republicans might be, but a 25-3 GOP map that nets them five seats seems like a safe upper bound. Lastly, a [series of state court decisions](#) in New York could lead to a redraw of the state's solidly red 11th District, making it a highly competitive seat.

Lastly, 364 seats — more than 4 in 5 in the chamber — appear very likely to vote for one party or the other. Of those, 190 fall into the Democratic column. Those seats are either solidly blue seats or districts that are unlikely to be competitive in a blue-leaning midterm year. Plus, four of the seats in this group — three in California and one in Utah — are likely to flip to the Democrats thanks to redistricting. Conversely, 174 seats are sufficiently red to likely fall into the Republican basket. Of those, two are redistricted seats in Texas that are all but certain to flip to the GOP.

We will publish a more in-depth look at the key Republican-held seats in Part Two of this series. However, we first plan to preview [the March 3 primaries](#) in our next newsletter, so look out later in March for our next piece on the House playing field.