

The lifeline election (part one)

di Sam Freedman

Those of us who write about elections often try and generate interest by claiming they're exceptionally important, but with the US midterms later this year hype feels justified.

If the Democrats win both House and Senate they can slow the increasingly out-of-control President down considerably. They could block appointments, subpoena administration members, stop budgets passing, and set off any number of investigations into White House malfeasance.

This wouldn't stop Trump doing *any* further damage. He would still control the military (though not its budget) and have significant leeway over domestic policy. The Department of Justice could continue to intimidate opponents on his behalf. While a Democrat House could impeach him (for a third time), he would not be removed from office as that requires a two thirds majority in a subsequent Senate trial. Even in areas where Congress does have authority he could refuse to comply, sparking constitutional crises.

It would, though, make life much harder for the President, and put him in a position he's never had to deal with. In 2018 he lost the House, which gummed up the final two years of his first administration, but Republicans extended their advantage in the Senate. He's also behaved with even greater disregard for basic norms this time around, which means there's a lot more for his opponents to investigate.

The Democrats have been odds on to take the House for some time (betting markets now have an 85% likelihood). The Republicans only hold it by four seats (218-214) and have fallen well behind in the polls. They've gerrymandered the Texas map to add a few more seats, but the Democrats are doing the same in California and Virginia, cancelling out any advantage. There would have to be a substantial swing back

towards the Republicans for them to hold, which seems unlikely given nothing Trump is doing at the moment is going to make him more popular. Americans tend not to reward high petrol prices.

Until recently the Senate had been considered a much tougher ask, with the Democrats needing four seats to take control, and only two obvious swing state opportunities in Maine and North Carolina, as well as a couple of tricky holds. But Trump's falling approval ratings, and candidate choices in key seats, have put a whole bunch of other states into play. Prediction markets are now split 50/50 on who will win overall control.

In the rest of the post I'll look in detail at the nine key Senate contests that will decide the outcome and assess the Democrats' chances. Any discussion of the midterms naturally raises the question as to what Trump and his team might do to try and prevent a fair contest. So in part two, which I'll post later this week, I look at how he might try to do so and how serious a threat it represents.

The key races

I've ordered these by the likelihood of a Democrat victory. They need to win six of the nine to take control (they currently hold two of them).

A reminder for readers outside the US: each state has two Senators who sit for six-year terms. Every two years a third of them are up for re-election, with an occasional special election (as in Ohio this year) because of an incumbent standing down early or dying.

North Carolina:

We'll start with a couple of races in "purple" states, which have been very closely fought in recent years. In North Carolina there's an open contest because the incumbent, Thom Tillis, is stepping down. He has been one of the few Republicans willing to challenge Trump and as result the President threatened to back someone else in a primary, leading Tillis to quit. Since then he's been even more critical, [destroying Kristi Noem at Senate hearing](#) so badly that she was fired as Homeland Security Secretary.

This is a good example of why candidate selection matters so much, rather than just national polling and the President's approval ratings. Had Tillis stood again he might have had a chance but without him the Democrats should win. They've nominated Roy Cooper, one of the more popular politicians in the state, who held nationwide office as Attorney-General and Governor from 2001-2025 in a state that Trump won three times. The party have been trying to get him to run for Senate for years and, having served his two permitted terms as Governor, he's agreed.

The Republicans have chosen Trump-endorsed candidate Michael Whatley, who was chair of the Republican National Committee. He's not a fire-breathing MAGA-type compared to some of the other candidates coming up, but he has strongly backed Trump, by, for instance, refusing to acknowledge the 2020 election was fair. He's definitely not as bad as Mark Robinson, the Republicans 2024 candidate for North Carolina Governor, who lost by 14 points after [it turned out he'd posted](#) on a pornographic website about his love for Adolf Hitler and various perverse sexual practices. But that's quite a low bar.

Cooper is currently leading by 10 points [in the polls](#). While that gap may well close a bit as Whatley spends more money and gains name recognition, the Democrats are clear favourites for this one.

Georgia:

Another purple state where both Republicans and Democrats have won in recent years. But here the incumbent is a Democrat, Jon Ossoff, who took a surprise win in the 2020 elections. After forcing the incumbent into a run-off, he was boosted by Trump's refusal to accept he'd lost the presidency. Rather symbolically Ossoff's win was announced during the riots on the 6th January. He's sickeningly young (still only 39), has made a strong impression, and has raised a huge amount in donations, to the point where there is [some chatter about a presidential run](#).

The Republicans haven't yet decided on his opponent, with the primary not until May 19th, which is helping Ossoff. Trump hasn't endorsed anyone (he has a pretty bad track record in Georgia – his last endorsement, for Herschel Walker in 2024, probably cost

them the other Senate seat), but [the favourite is Mike Collins](#), a MAGA-ish state representative, who enjoys baiting liberals on twitter.

Ossoff leads all of his possible opponents [in polling match-ups](#) but only by a few points in Collins' case. So this isn't a done deal. But he's currently favourite and should be helped by his spending power and high levels of Democrat enthusiasm.

Maine:

This really should be an easy Democrat gain in a typically blue state, but Maine is unusual. Republican incumbent Susan Collins is now the only senator to hold a seat in a state that reliably votes the other way in presidential elections. Trump has lost here all three times but she's hung on. Collins was widely expected to lose in 2020, with polls showing her 4 points down against Sara Gideon, but she ended up winning by 9 points.

She has a reputation as a vanishingly rare "moderate" Republican, being willing to (sometimes) vote against Trump, albeit more often dithering and then voting with her colleagues.

The race to be her opponent is still going on and is by far the most contentious on the Democrat side. The frontrunner is Graham Platner, an army veteran and oyster farmer, who is running on a populist, left-wing (for America) platform arguing for universal healthcare, affordability and an end to foreign wars. He's also strongly opposed Israel's actions in Gaza and has been compared to Zohran Mamdani. Some of Mamdani's team helped developed his campaign materials.

But Platner's also been embroiled in a series of controversies over past behaviour that has come to light during the campaign. This includes a series of (now disavowed) [reddit posts](#) with a range of offensive opinions including that rural Americans are "racist and stupid" and that women worried about assault "should take some responsibility for themselves" and not get drunk. He also has a [tattoo on his chest of a Totenkopf](#), a Nazi symbol used by the SS. He claims he didn't know what it was until pointed out during the campaign, though one acquaintance [has said he did know](#). His campaign also seems chaotic, with a series of staff resignations.

Either way his candidacy has become the subject of bitter internecine battles amongst Democrats – partly along the old Bernie Sanders / Hillary Clinton divide. Those on the left backing Platner, like Sanders, see him as the ideal type of working class populist to take on Trumpism and those opposed see someone with a dangerous proclivity to extremism.

His main rival for the nomination is Janet Mills, the current Governor best known for having a public argument with Trump over [blocking transgender participation in school sport](#). She is 79, which would make her the oldest ever freshman Senator, and has promised to serve only one term if elected. As things stand it's looking like Platner will win the primary on 9th June and he is also [polling better against Collins](#), leading her by around 4 points, whereas Mills is level.

While the Democrats should win here, Collins' ability to upset the polls in the past and potential for further controversy around Platner make me less confident than the New Carolina and Georgia races.

Michigan:

Like Georgia this is a state that Trump won in 2024, where the incumbent Senator is a Democrat, but this one, Gary Peters, is stepping down. Had he run he would have likely won without too much drama but as an open contest it's looking trickier.

There are [three candidates in a tight contest](#) to be the Democrat nominee representing different wings of the party. Congresswoman Haley Stevens is the establishment choice; Abdul El-Sayed, who previously tried running for Governor, is the Sanders' endorsed left-winger running on a similar platform to Platner in Maine; and state senator Mallory McMorrow is somewhere in-between. There's not much polling and what there is doesn't tell a clear story but McMorrow leads in prediction markets and the most recent poll. Gaza is proving to be a big issue as Stevens has been more supportive of Israel than the other two.

The primary isn't until August which means the Democrats won't be able to get round a single candidate till much closer to the election, helping Republican Congressman Mike Rodgers who is certain to win his primary. Rodgers very nearly beat Michigan's other Democrat Senator Elissa Slotkin in 2024 so is an established name, with a strong

fundraising record. He is on the (relatively) saner wing of MAGA-era Republicanism. McMorrow and Stevens are both running slightly ahead of Rodgers in polling, so the Democrats are favourites but not as strongly as they would be if Peters was running again.

Ohio:

A former swing state that has trended strongly Republican, Ohio voted for Trump by over 11 points in 2024. This is a special election because J. D. Vance vacated his seat when becoming Vice-President. The Republican governor, Mike DeWine, appointed his close ally John Husted to the seat in the interim but now he has to win it properly. Against almost anyone Husted, a fairly boilerplate Republican, would have been a solid favourite. But the Democrats are nominating one of the few people who might beat him, Sherrod Brown, who has been a mainstay in Ohioan politics for fifty years. He was a Senator for three terms before narrowly losing in 2024 by 3.5 points, running well ahead of Kamala Harris but unable to hang on.

This time, with Trump's approval ratings well down, he has a better chance, with higher favourability numbers than Husted and more money to spend. He's one of those rare Democrats who appears to be more successful at winning voters from the kind of lower income white voters who are attracted to the President, perhaps because he has a long record of supporting policies for that group and is so well known.

This is a very tight race, with polls averages showing Brown two points ahead. He's made it a seat that's very winnable.

Alaska:

Like Ohio, this is a state that Trump won comfortably in 2024 (by 13 points). It last went for a Democrat presidential candidate in 1964. But Alaska has an independent streak and can sometimes vote blue for statewide offices. As in Ohio the Democrats have managed to persuade probably the only person capable of winning to stand: Mary Peltola.

She is an indigenous Alaskan and one of only two Democrats to win national races in the state this century, when she won its only House seat in 2022. That was a surprise

victory over Sarah Palin, who you'll remember as John McCain's Vice-Presidential candidate. The one who could see Russia from her house. Peltola is considered a moderate "blue dog" Democrat who was often willing to break with colleagues during her two years in Washington, opposing gun control laws (a big issue in Alaska) and strongly supporting Israel. In 2022 Peltola was endorsed by the equally independently-minded Republican Senator from the state, Lisa Murkowski, who is a rare moderate in her party.

This time Murkowski is backing her Senate colleague, the incumbent Dan Sullivan. Unlike her, though, he's a strong Trump supporter. Indeed, he's a good example of the journey many ambitious Republicans have been on. Sullivan was in George W. Bush's cabinet as energy secretary and seen as fairly mainstream. In 2016 he opposed Trump due to his behaviour towards women. Since then, though, he's consistently backed him. He was never exactly moderate - he's long refused to acknowledge the evidence on climate change - but like most of his colleagues he has now tied himself to the President's record for fear of retribution.

As things stand the race is incredibly tight, with Peltola polling fractionally ahead. But we haven't had any polls from there for a few months so we don't know if Trump's recent actions have made any difference. It's another race that's moved from "unlikely" to "winnable" for the Democrats.

Texas:

We're now moving on to three states that are longer shots for the Democrats but where wins are plausible given the context. Texas has been a source of repeated heartbreak for them in recent years. They've been given hope by polls and a belief that a growing Latino population would back them, only to lose every time. In 2024 the state moved further away from them as more Latinos voted for Trump than ever before.

Could it be different this time? The demographics are shifting back in their favour as voters worry about ICE raids, plus a large exodus from California is bringing more Democrat voters into Texas's big cities. But the potential gamechanger is the mess the Republicans have got into over candidate selection.

The incumbent Senator John Cornyn has been challenged by the MAGA-extremist Attorney-General Ken Paxton. This is part of a wider split within the Texas Republican party between those willing to show absolute fealty to Donald Trump and those who will occasionally criticise him. Paxton, a Trump cheerleader from the start, has been at the heart of this battle. In [2023 he was impeached](#) by the Republican-led Texas House for using his office to help a donor. Because Paxton was one of those leading the charge to have the 2020 election result overturned, Trump has backed him in return, attacking those involved in the impeachment and [endorsing challengers](#) to them.

In the primary held earlier this month Cornyn got 42% and Paxton 41%, which means, under the Texan rules, there needs to be a run-off which won't be held until 26th May. A brutal internal battle in which both candidates spend more of their war chest harming each other should help the Democrats a lot. Trump hasn't yet endorsed either candidate and has said that when he does he expects the other one to drop out. Paxton said he wouldn't, which upset the President. But no one knows what he's going to do.

The Republican establishment is pushing him hard to back Cornyn, but it's not clear who has a better chance of winning as the incumbent [is less popular with Trump voters](#) than Paxton. Meanwhile, the Democrats have chosen James Talarico, a young candidate in the Jon Ossoff mould: very presentable with impeccable liberal credentials. In [the most recent polling](#) Talarico is just ahead of both Republican candidates. I'd expect the GOP to hold on here again in the end but this is the best shot the Democrats have had in a while.

Iowa:

Like Ohio, this is a state won by Obama that has slipped away from the Democrats. Trump took it by 13 points in 2024, while both Senators and the Governor are Republicans. But there is a potential opening this year as the incumbent Senator, Joni Ernst, has stepped down (after [replying "well we are all going to die"](#) in response to concerns about rising health insurance costs).

The Republicans will choose Congresswoman Ashley Hinson, who has the precious Trump endorsement, as their candidate. She has a standard set of MAGA views and is running on immigration, spending cuts and various culture war issues. The Democrat race for their nomination is quite similar to Michigan in that there are candidates representing the more moderate and left-wings of the party.

Josh Turek is the moderate, and a Paralympic gold medallist in basketball (he was born with Spina Bifida and uses a wheelchair). He's a state representative who's won several times in a red district that voted for Trump. Zach Wahls, a state Senator, is the progressive (to the point of earning the somewhat unlikely nickname "the Mamdani of Iowa"). The Republicans would definitely rather run against Wahls and are pushing him as the favourite but Turek is slightly ahead in prediction markets. The primary is on June 2nd.

Both candidates were three points behind Hinson in [the one recent poll we have](#), though when their bios were read out Turek closed the gap and Wahls didn't. It remains a likely Republican hold but it's in play.

Nebraska:

This one isn't appearing on many "races to watch" lists but is definitely worth paying attention to. Nebraska is a deep red state that Trump won by 21 points in 2024. In a Senate race that year, though, independent Dan Osborn only lost by 7 points. Osborn who was in the navy and then became a local union leader, has an appeal to blue collar workers that Democrats have struggled to find.

He's running again as an independent this year and the Democrats have endorsed him. It's expected that, if he won, he would caucus with them and be another anti-Trump vote. Osborn is up against Pete Ricketts, the incumbent, and yet another identikit Republican. It really is remarkable how ideological consistent they now are. The [one poll we have from 2026](#) shows Osborn and Ricketts neck-and-neck, so this one is definitely in play, though again you'd expect the Republicans to hold on in the end.

Osborn's success in 2024 has [led other independents](#) to try and win deep red states where the Democrat brand is toxic. In Montana, Seth Bodnar, who was President of

the state university is running as one on a moderate platform, backed by the last Democrat to win in the state, Jon Tester. In South Dakota, Brian Bengs is trying the same trick, as is Todd Achilles in Idaho. But in these other states the Democrats have not dropped out leading to the likelihood of split tickets.

The overall picture

In each of these races the Democrats (or an associated independent) are competitive, but in none bar North Carolina are they clear favourites. Based on limited polling, past history, and the context of the races I'd put them just ahead at the moment in Georgia, Michigan and Maine, with Alaska and Ohio as toss-ups. They'd need all those six to take control. If they lose one or two there are some plausible alternatives in Texas, Iowa or Nebraska, but those are longer-shots. So it remains a real challenge but one that now looks achievable, in part because of good Democrat candidate selection (with the arguable exception of Maine).

Though local factors are usually the most important thing in Senate races, the President's ever more obvious failings have helped make them more competitive. And it seems likely this trend will continue. He appears to have no plans to deal with any major public concerns and his war in Iran will disrupt the economy and raise prices, which we know is voters' biggest issue. In the next post I'll look at what he might try and to do to interfere with the midterms as he gets increasingly desperate, and why that could make things even worse for the Republicans.