

It's natural that the Presidential election has soaked up all the attention. But control of the Senate may be equally important — some might say even more important.

If a Democrat wins in 2020, there will be little or no chance of passing significant legislation without control of Congress. It seems very likely that the Democrats will keep the House, but that won't give them a lot of legislative leverage if Mitch McConnell is calling the shots in the Senate. A Republican Senate would impede appointments to executive branch positions or lower federal courts, and perhaps impossible to fill vacancies even on the Supreme Court. So a Democratic President would be shackled from the outset by a Republican Senate.

On the other hand, if Trump wins, a Democratic Senate would be the only safeguard against a continuing slew of anti-regulatory judges. If one of the remaining liberals on the Supreme Court were to leave the bench, Trump would be in a position to secure a 6-3 conservative majority on the Court for at least 10-20 years. That could be a near-permanent barrier to vigorous environmental regulation.

In order to control the Senate, the Democrats need a net gain of four seats unless they win the White House. Because of the Vice President's tie-breaking vote, the Democrats would only need three net pickups to control the Senate if they win the White House. To get a sense of the prospects, I took a look at two respected political prognosticators, Larry Sabato and Cook's Political.

Begin with the seats that Democrats need to defend. Sabato rates Jones's Alabama seat as either leans Republican or a toss-up. Jones beat Roy Moore previously, but given how Republican the state leans, reelection will be a real battle. In fact, just this yesterday, Cook changed the rating on this race to "Lean Republican." Sabato views the race in New Hampshire as leaning in favor of the Democratic incumbent, but that seat could turn out to be in play.

What are the Democrat's pickup opportunities? Sabato and Cook agree that Arizona (McSally's seat) and Colorado (Gardner's seat) at toss-ups. Cook also views Maine (Collins) as a toss-up. (Sabato says "Leans Republican.") If the Democrats won these three races and kept the Alabama seat, that would be enough to give them control of the Senate if they win the White House. Their other possible pickup opportunities seems to be Iowa (which Sabato rates "leans R") and North Carolina (which Cook rates that way and Sabato rates as a toss-up). Susan Collins isn't very popular in Maine, but the ranked-choice voting system makes predictions difficult there. Finally, both Cook and Sabato rate Georgia as "Leans Republican," so the Democrats would probably need a strong national wave to win there.

It's also worth noting that control is important, but so is the margin. If the President and Senate are from the same party, but control of the Senate hangs by a vote or two, individual Senators can play the kind of spoiler role that McCain played with Obamacare repeal. The margin matters less if the Senate is from a different party, because the Senate majority leader has so much power to control the agenda. But a narrower opposition party margin still works in the President's, since it provides the opportunity to win close votes in situations where the filibuster doesn't apply. And a wave election could increase the Republican margin, making it harder for Democrats to filibuster.

A lot can happen between now and election day. In fact, from the time I first started work on this post, I've already had to do updates. But at present, if the two parties split the toss-up elections equally and keep all of their other existing seats, the Republicans will retain control. So Democrats will need to fight all the races very hard and hope for a at least a small blue wave to push them over the top in enough races to win control.

My guess would be that if Trump wins, the Republicans will probably keep the Senate too, while a Democratic President would have a substantial chance of having to deal with a Republican Senate. Democrats need a wave or a great deal of luck to win control. But we're still nine months away, and in today's political world, that's a lifetime. Sometimes, even one week seems that way in the Trump era.