The House of Representatives has 435 members, which means 435 elections every two years. Due to gerrymandering and political geography, most of those are safe seats. But even today, there are probably thirty or so genuinely contested elections – too many for most of us to pay attention to. Yet, control of the House could make all the difference next year – especially if Trump returns to the White House. This is a companion to my other post today, which surveys the 2024 election more broadly.

The reason House control is so important in a Trump victory scenario is that Republicans are very likely to control the Senate. With Joe Manchin's seat now open, Republicans are almost certain to flip West Virginia. That would give them fifty seats, which would be a controlling majority since J.D. Vance would be casting the tie-breaking vote as Vice President. If the GOP also carried the House, that would create unified Republican government.

Unified government would give Trump a much freer hand. He wouldn't have to worry about annoying congressional investigations. Assuming the filibuster remained intact, Democrats would be able to block ordinary legislation, but the Senate reconciliation procedure would allow Republicans to pass major tax and spending legislation. Much of Biden's climate and energy legacy came in the form of spending and tax credits in the Infrastructure Act, the CHIPS Act (energy research), and the Inflation Reduction Act (clean energy subsidies). Republicans wouldn't be likely to repeal all of those provisions, but they could slice away at them and give subsidies to fossil fuels instead while cutting environmental agencies.

On the other hand, if Democrats controlled the House, Trump's Administration would face lots of investigations, and Trump would have to negotiate with them on spending and tax issues. That would give Trump much less leeway.

If Harris wins, Mike Walz would be the one with the tie-breaking vote in the Senate, so Republicans would need to flip one more Democratic seat to have Senate control. There are several very close Senate races, so the odds favor the Republicans winning at least one. Barring defeats of Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio, that one extra seat would give them Senate control. If so, control of the House would be less crucial to either side, though it would help Harris in negotiating with the Senate to have the House on his side.

Of course, if Democrats do manage to cling to every seat except Manchin's and win the White House, Harris would benefit greatly if they also controlled the House.

Unified Democratic government would free her from hostile investigations and allow her to use the Senate reconciliation procedure, allowing an expansion of federal support for clean energy and climate action.

In short, those two or three dozen contested House races may be obscure, but they could have a big impact on the next few years of climate and energy policy. The election results for the House often come in later, and there could be some photo finishes. So we may not know for days or weeks after Election Day whether Hakeem Jeffries or Michael Johnson will be the next Speaker of the House.