Summary

The elections next month will determine who controls Congress. Right now, a lot of races look very close. We should be in for a dramatic Election Night. Who controls Congress will have a major impact on President Trump's freedom of action.

As we get closer to the election, there are still undoubtedly surprises ahead. Still, we can get a sense of where things are heading based on current information. Who controls Congress will impact a lot of issues, including environment and energy. Even with a President as wilful as Trump, Congress has significant levers to pull. Where do things stand today? Since I'm not a political expert, I'll rely on two political websites, Cook and Sabato, for guidance.

The House.

Let's start with the House. Sabato sees the House leaning strongly toward the Democrats, with 20 toss-up races and Republicans needing to win 16 compared to 5 needed by their opponents. (These numbers reflect a shift toward the Democrats by Sabato on Tuesday). Cook sees only a slight tilt toward the Democrats, with Democrats needing to win 10 out of 22 toss-ups, while Republicans need to win 13.

There's a big difference between those forecasts — much bigger than it during the summer. It's hard to know whether this only reflects a difference in how cautious they are in make predictions, a difference in methodology, or difference in their information about individual districts. If you averaged between them, you'd conclude that Republicans need to win about twice as many of the current toss-up states as Democrats.

Sabato has a tab on rating changes. (Cook may have something similar, but if so, it's paywalled.) Strikingly, all the rating changes since August 1 have been in the direction of the Democrats. This may not matter much if a House race goes from safe Republican to likely Republican, since most likely the Republicans will hold the seat anyway. But it's an ominous trend for the GOP.

Interestingly, forecasters who are looking at the national political situation rather than individual races seem much more optimistic than Cook that Democrats will win the House. Despite gerrymandering, I find it hard to believe that the GOP can hold the House in an off-year election with a very unpopular President. But I've been

wrong before! We'll find out a month from now who's right.

The Senate

In terms of the Senate, things look close. The good news for Democrats is that North Carolina is leaning Democratic, the only state that can currently be identified as a pickup by either party. Cook sees seven toss-up states, with two of them (Michigan and New Hampshire) now held by the Democrats. To win control, Democrats need to flip three of the five toss-up states now held by the GOP (or four if they lose Michigan or New Hampshire.). Those five states are Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, and Texas.

Sabato also sees Democrats as favored to flip North Carolina, but he sees only five tossups, all in states currently held by Republicans. The key difference is that Sabato sees New Hampshire and Michigan both leaning Democratic while Cook sees toss-ups. In Sabato's view, Democrats can control the Senate by flipping three toss-ups . Added to North Carolina, that would net the Dems four seats for a 51-49 majority.

Elections in the Senate tend to depend a little more on local circumstances and candidates than House elections. The safest prediction seems to be that the Senate will be more closely divided than it is today. We might end up with Murkowski or Collins as the swing Republican voter, or Fetterman as the swing Democrat.

The bottom line is that the Democrats can control the Senate by holding Michigan and New Hampshire, and winning three of the five current GOP seats that are now considered toss-ups. That's doable but definitely not a sure thing. Keep an eye on whether there's clear movement in any of those toss-up states toward the Democrats in the next 2-3 weeks. If any of them move from toss-up to leaning Democratic, that would be a scary sign for Republicans.

Trendlines

Except for two states where Republicans solidified leads, turning states from likely wins to solid holds, all the changes that Sabato lists in Senate races since May have been in favor of the Democrats. These shifts may not ultimately say much about control of the Senate, they're moving in the wrong direction in a fairly consistent way from the Republican perspective. Maybe the large funding advantage that Republicans hold can stem the tide.

Again, the forecasters who are looking at the national political picture seem to think that control of the Senate could be closer to a toss-up than Cook seems to think than Cook and Sabato seem to think. That would assume that there's a high correlation between voter movements in states with close races. That could well be right. If Democrats were to flip Texas, for instance, it seems likely that some other states would also be likely to filip. There's some evidence that the experts who focus on individual races have historically overrated the chances of the President's party in off-year elections. If so, many of the toss-up races may turn against Republicans.

Frankly, I don't know whether to put more stock in the people running national models or the ones with in-depth knowledge of individual races. It might depend on whether we have a strong enough wave to overpower district-level forces. That's one of many things we'll find out early next month. I'm also not sure whether to trust Cook or Sabato more in terms of House races. If nothing else, it should be an informative election night, as well as an especially important one.