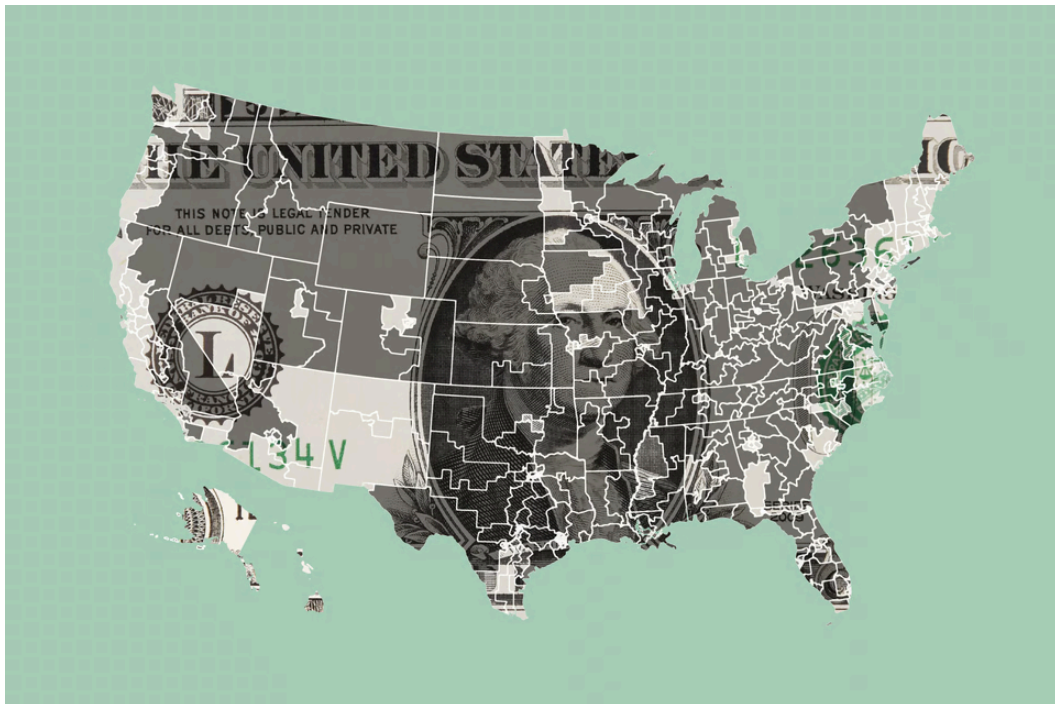


**MEMO** *Published October 25, 2022 · 12 minute read*

# Which Congressional Districts Offer the Most Bang for their Buck?

**Lucas Holtz**



The political battle of 2022 is turning into a midterm election unlike any seen in our lifetimes. The fundamentals tell us that Republicans should sweep in races across the country, yet key races have tightened going into October. With less than three weeks left until election day, we examine which Congressional districts are the most high-leverage competitive seats—where investments will get the most bang for their buck—using a six-point scoring system. Essentially, if there is outsized electoral importance for that state’s U.S. Senate or Gubernatorial election, voters in specific competitive Congressional districts can have a powerful impact well beyond the outcome of their House race.

## Methodology

We used Cook Political Report’s updated 2022 Partisan Voting Index (PVI) data to analyze the 87 Congressional districts that fall within the D+5 to R+5 range. We looked at six criteria and awarded points if a Congressional district fit each qualification. The criteria ranged from the incumbent member being listed by the DCCC as a Frontline member or by the NRCC as a Patriot—programs that prioritize fundraising for competitive incumbents—to whether voters in that district can make a realistic difference at the Senate and Gubernatorial levels.<sup>1</sup> Two additional criteria, college education concentration and Latino voting age population concentration, are included because we believe that even marginal movement in party alignment and turnout of these two demographics, which are integral to each party’s coalition, will have an outsized impact in determining who wins the most competitive races in the country.

Every district meets at least one of these criteria. This is *not* ranking which races we believe are the most likely to flip or which are the most competitive in the country. Rather, a higher score on this index tells us that investment in those districts would be particularly well-spent on either side of the aisle.

**1) 2022 Senate race:** These are the districts that reside in those states that have a competitive Senate race this year (ranked Likely, Lean, or Toss Up by Cook Political). There are 31 House seats in 10 competitive Senate states that fit this description. (+1 point)

**2) 2022 Governor’s race:** These are the districts that reside in those states that have a competitive Gubernatorial race this year (ranked Likely, Lean, or Toss Up by Cook Political). There are 42 House seats in 14 competitive Gubernatorial states that fit this description. (+1 point)

**3) 2020 Close Margin:** These are districts where the 2020 Presidential margin was in the single digits. There are 61 House seats that fit this description. (+1 point)

**4) DCCC Frontline or NRCC Patriot:** These are incumbent Members of Congress who are listed by their parties as a priority district for fundraising because they are competitive seats. Incumbents historically perform two to three points better than nonincumbents from the same party running in comparable races—making an investment in such a House race even more worthwhile for the party controlling that seat. <sup>2</sup> There are 47 House seats that fit this description. (+1 point)

**5) High Concentration of Latino Voters:** These are districts that have Latino Voting Age Populations (VAP) at 15 percent or higher. There are 36 House seats that fit this description. (+1 point)

**6) High Concentration of College-Educated Voters:** These are districts that have college-educated populations at 25 percent or higher. There are 74 House seats that fit this description. (+1 point)

## **High-Leverage Districts**

## **Six-Point Races**

There are four districts that fit into this category: FL-27, FL-28, NV-03, PA-07.

Each of these districts meet all six of the criteria. FL-27 (Even PVI) and FL-28 (R+2 PVI) particularly stand out: these are two districts, residing in Miami-Dade County and the Miami suburbs, where voters moved so far to the right in 2020, it all but ensured that Florida was out of reach for Biden in 2020.

Both districts have NRCC Patriots defending their seats. If Democrats were to make up ground in one of these districts, it may be a sign that they managed to pull back some of the

Florida Cuban-American voters, as well as non-Cuban Central and South American voters, that they lost in 2020, and it could mean some lower turnout Trump voters were not as energized to vote for Republicans down ballot this year. However, Democrats face incredibly tough odds in both districts, and it will likely be Republicans who find more bang for their buck when it comes to investments here this election cycle. Candidates running in the Florida Senate and Governor races will need to excel here if they are to triumph in their races as well.

NV-03 (D+1 PVI) and PA-07 (R+2 PVI) are notable for comprising diverse electorates, high concentrations of Latino and college-educated voters. Both were won by Biden in 2020 and have Frontline members defending their seats in Susie Lee and Susan Wild. If Democrats do well in both of these suburban/exurban districts, it will be a sign that they are likely close to hitting the necessary margins up-ballot in competitive Senate and Governor races as well. However, it may be an indicator of a bigger red wave election in the House if Republicans manage to capture these two seats, with severe implications for up-ballot races.

## **Five-Point Races**

There are ten districts that fit into this category: AZ-01, AZ-06, FL-07, FL-15, NV-01, NV-04, OH-01, OH-09, PA-01, PA-08.

Three of these Democratic incumbents are competitive Frontline members and two of the Republican incumbents are competitive Patriot members. All ten of these districts are in states with competitive Senate and Gubernatorial races.

Six of these races have Republican advantage PVIs, with only NV-01 (D+3 PVI, Democratic Rep. Dina Titus), NV-04 (D+3 PVI, Democratic Rep. Horsford), OH-01 (D+2 PVI, Republican Rep. Steve Chabot), and PA-01 (Even PVI, Republican Rep. Fitzpatrick) being more competitive for Democrats. Notably, NV-01 and NV-04 both have high concentrations of Latino VAPs (32% and 30%, respectively) and both swung marginally to the right in 2020. Democrats running for office statewide in Nevada need to focus significantly on reversing that trend in these districts if they are to have a chance at winning the state.

Democrats are also on the backfoot with Rep. Marcy Kaptur's OH-09 (R+3 PVI) and Rep. Matt Cartwright's PA-08 (R+4 PVI)—both have GOP partisan leans; both barely broke for Trump in 2020. Democrats will need to outperform Biden's 2020 numbers if they are to eke out either of these districts, but it may come down to whether non-college Trump voter turnout is at or below 2020 levels without Trump on the ballot. GOP wins here would be a good sign for their prospects statewide.

While it will be difficult for Democrats to flip or retain any of these five-point districts, if Democrats in Senate and Gubernatorial races get close to hitting Biden's 2020 margins in

Arizona, Nevada, or Pennsylvania, especially where there are stronger candidates, then they stand a chance at winning races down ballot in AZ-01, AZ-06, NV-01, NV-04, PA-01, and PA-08 as well.

## **Four-Point Races**

There are 23 districts that fit into this category: AZ-04, CA-40, CA-45, CO-08, FL-23, KS-03, MI-07, MN-02, NH-01, NH-02, NM-02, NM-03, NY-02, NY-18, OH-10, OH-13, PA-06, PA-10, PA-17, TX-23, VA-07, WI-01, WI-03.

Ten of the Democrats defending their seats in these districts are competitive Frontline members, and four Republican incumbents are competitive Patriot members—each outcome with outsized importance to determining the fate of the House. Eighteen of these races will have meaningful bearing in competitive Senate and/or Gubernatorial race outcomes.

Strong Democratic incumbents vacating their seats to run for higher office put several Democratic seats at risk this cycle, including Tim Ryan in OH-13 (R+1 PVI) and Conor Lamb in PA-17 (Even PVI).

Look to Sharice Davids in KS-03 (R+1 PVI) and Chris Pappas in NH-01 (Even PVI) as key bellwethers for which direction the Governor and U.S. Senate races go in their respective states. While it's not particularly competitive, look to TX-23, where the city of Uvalde resides, for any split-ticket movement against Texas Governor Greg Abbott in contrast with Rep. Tony Gonzales, who broke with his party to vote for bipartisan gun reform legislation in the wake of the massacre.

## **Three-Point Races**

There are 29 districts that fit into this category: CA-27, CA-41, CA-47, CA-49, CT-02, CT-05, GA-02, IA-01, IA-02, IA-03, IL-11, IL-14, MD-06, MI-03, MI-04, MI-08, MI-10, NC-06, NC-13, NE-02, NJ-05, NJ-07, NM-01, OR-05, OR-06, TX-15, TX-28, VA-02, WA-08.

Fourteen of these districts have outsized influence on competitive up-ballot races, with competitive Gubernatorial races in Connecticut, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Oregon, and Texas—Democrats are attempting to hold four of the Governor's mansions in these three-point race states. Democrats have 15 competitive Frontline members, while Republicans have four Patriot members up for re-election in this category.

Despite being on defense up-ballot, Democrats do have a marginal partisan advantage with Congressional races in this category. Only eleven of these districts have a Republican-leaning PVI, yet four of these R+ districts have Democratic incumbents—Rep. Cindy Axne in

IA-03 (R+3 PVI), Rep. Tom Malinowski in NJ-07 (R+1 PVI), Rep. Elaine Luria in VA-02 (R+2 PVI), and Rep. Dan Kildee in MI-08 (R+1 PVI). GOP wins in each of these districts will be key to retaking the majority in the House.

Democrats are attempting to keep OR-05 (D+2 PVI) where a more progressive candidate in Jamie McLeod-Skinner primaried the moderate incumbent Kurt Schrader. This district swung 6-points to the left in the 2020 presidential and Biden won it by 9-points, but it may be a bellwether for the competitive under-the-radar gubernatorial race taking place in Oregon, where the GOP hopes to flip the Governor's mansion.

Longtime Congressman Sanford Bishop's district in GA-02 (D+3 PVI) is the only competitive district in all of Georgia. With a 49% Black voting-age population (VAP) that went for Biden by 10-points in 2020, this district will be an indicator if Bishop and up-ballot Democrats have effectively retained their gains with exurban and rural Black Georgians, and whether they have managed to turn out the 2020 Biden-Warnock voters in mid-sized cities.

Democrats have a couple major pickup opportunities in this category—one being Republican Rep. Mike Garcia's district of CA-27 (D+4 PVI), which Biden won by 12-points in 2020 and has a diverse Latino and college-educated electorate. Michiganders in MI-03 (D+1 PVI), MI-04 (R+5 PVI), MI-08 (R+1 PVI), and MI-10 (R+3 PVI) and North Carolinians in NC-06 (D+4 PVI) and NC-13 (R+2 PVI) all have outsized influence on the statewide elections for Governor and U.S. Senate. Despite each district swinging to the left between 2016 and 2020, the GOP has the advantage in four of these suburban/exurban districts and will likely need to reverse the college-educated voter exodus if they are to win in the Michigan districts and resoundingly win in the North Carolina districts.

Meanwhile, enormous attention has been given to the Latino-dominated Rio Grande Valley seats in Texas, particularly TX-15 (R+1 PVI) and TX-28 (D+3 PVI), where the vote swung right by 16-points and 12-points, respectively, in 2020. Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar is favored in his re-election of TX-28 and the GOP nominee is slightly favored in TX-15, but the key question after election night will be: how much did these districts move relative to 2020? And while it is outside of the realm of this PVI-based analysis, how much did the supposedly safe Democratic TX-34 (D+9 PVI) move?

## **Two-Point Races**

There are 17 districts that fit into this category: CA-03, CA-09, CA-22, CO-07, IL-06, IN-01, NC-01, NJ-02, NJ-03, NY-01, NY-03, NY-04, NY-17, NY-19, NY-22, OR-04, WA-03.

Three of these districts have outsized influence on races up the ballot. Democrats have four competitive Frontline members and Republicans have two competitive Patriot members up

for re-election in this category.

CA-22 (D+5 PVI) is seen as one of the few pickup opportunities for Democrats this cycle as they attempt to oust GOP Rep. David Valadao. The district has 69% Latino VAP and swung 3-points to the right in 2020, but Central Valley California Latinos are not like Texas or Florida Latinos and will likely be swing voters that lean; however, Valadao is a strong incumbent, and if he manages to hold on, House Democrats will have many more questions to answer about their Latino persuasion efforts going into 2024.

## **One-Point Races**

There are four districts that fit into this category: CA-13, IL-13, IL-17, RI-02.

All four of these districts are open seats, but none will have particular influence on the outcome of competitive statewide races. However, Democrats will likely need to win these districts to have a shot at retaining the House or limiting their losses in 2022. RI-02 (D+4 PVI) stands out as a surprisingly competitive pickup opportunity for the GOP this cycle, despite being a district that swung 6-points to the left in 2020. A Republican win here would be detrimental to Democrats' chances of holding back a red wave election.

## **Conclusion**

While this ranking analysis is not intended to say which races are most important, it is clear, based on PVI and prior election results, that House Democrats are at a significant disadvantage heading into the midterms, given how many more competitive districts they must defend and how unfavorable the partisan lean is for those seats left vacated going into election day. Cook Political Report in its midterm House ratings has ranked 15 open Democratic seats as toss ups and just four open Republican seats as toss ups. Republicans start with 187 solid R districts (R+6 PVI or greater) and Democrats have 162 Solid D districts (D+6 PVI or greater). Ten of the 87 competitive districts analyzed have Democratic incumbents but are Republican-leaning, while only five Republican held seats are Democratic-leaning. While the incumbency advantage may give Democrats a couple points of wiggle room against their challengers, Republicans only need to win five of those seats held by Democrats to retake the majority.

Voters in many of these districts will play an integral role in deciding which party controls the Governors mansions, the U.S. Senate, and the House. In the final weeks, these could be particularly high priorities for investment on either side of the aisle.

---

## ENDNOTES



1. “DCCC 2022 Frontline Members,” DCCC, n.d. Accessed Sept. 30, 2022. Available at: <https://frontline.dccc.org/>.

“NRCC 2022 Patriot,” NRCC, n.d. Accessed Sept. 30, 2022. Available at: <https://nrcc.org/candidate-type/patriot/>.

2. Cohn, Nate, “Why Republicans Could Prevail in the Popular Vote but Lose in the House,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/11/upshot/repUBLICANS-midterms-house-analysis.html>.