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Less than three weeks away US elections still unclear

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My 17 September Daily Asian Age article on the state of the US elections emphasized the still uncertain outcome. A little less than a month later, they're still not clear, but some definite trends appear to be emerging. Although, as I noted in my last article, polls have been notoriously inaccurate in measuring President Donald Trump's support;

many commentators see the race so clearly tilted in favor of former Vice President Joe Biden that they believe the gap is too large for the President to close it in the time remaining. Since 2016 pre-election measures and predictions almost uniformly predicted a Hillary Clinton win, many wonder if we are seeing the same "Trump effect" in 2020. The Presidential contest, however, is not the only one this year, and this article looks at races for the United States Senate.

The United States Constitution provides for three co-equal branches of government that are to act as "checks and balances" on one another provide layers of protection against autocracy. The Executive Branch is comprised of the President, Cabinet Members, and agencies under their direction; its function is to enforce the law. The Legislative Branch, is a bi-cameral or two chamber body, the Senate and the House of Representatives; its function is to pass legislation or make the law.

The Judicial Branch contains the court system, sitting on top of which is the nine-member Supreme Court; its function is to interpret the law and at times rule that actions of either of the other two branches are null and void because they are contrary to the US Constitution. The Senate is the "senior body" of the Legislative Branch.

Here's why the Senate races are even more important this year. Getting a law passed in Washington almost always requires that both the House and the Senate pass it and that the President signs it. Usually, the House and the Senate will pass their own versions of the bill, after which it goes to a "conference committee" that negotiates a final bill, which is then passed by the Senate and House separately before going to the President for his signature. If the President does not agree, he can veto or reject the bill, which then goes back to the legislature where by two-thirds of both the Senate and the House have to pass it to override the President's veto.

I like divided government where by each major party controls at least one of those three bodies. Divided government helps keep one party from imposing its agenda and philosophy on the nation. Divided government also forces the parties to "sell" their programs in the marketplace of ideas to the American people who only periodically give either party control of all three of those bodies.

The last US President whose party controlled both houses of Congress during his entire term was Democrat Jimmie Carter from 1977-1981. It's instructive given that power monopoly, many Americans consider Carter's presidency among the most ineffective. Moreover, he was resoundingly rejected in his re-election bid; and the next two Presidents, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush both Republicans, ruled without their party's control of either the House or Senate during their entire tenures. Republican George W. Bush had a Republican controlled Congress twice, due in part to national unity after the 9/11 attacks.

Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump had it only once each. Right now, Democrats control the House, Republicans the Senate; and President Trump is a Republican. No credible model suggests that Republicans will win control of the House this election; and with the possibility of Republicans losing the White House, Republican control of the Senate could be our only chance for divided government.

Senators can serve for an unlimited number of six year terms, compared to House members whose terms are only two years. On a rotating basis, one third of the Senate is up for re-election every two years. This year, 34 states are voting for a new Senator or to return the current one to office, most of which are not competitive. For instance, in Massachusetts, pollsters predict that Democratic Senator Ed Markey will defeat his Republican challenger, Kevin O'Connor by 34.1 percentage points.

Similarly, in Idaho, Republican Senator Jim Risch is expected to defeat Democrat Paulette Jordan by 21.3 points. After reviewing most major polls, especially those with a track record of accuracy and a lack of political bias, as well as other sources; I feel confident in saying that the outcome eleven of those 34 races appear to be in doubt to small or larger extents.

Senate seats in Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, and North Carolina, all currently held by Republicans, are rated as even or leaning toward the Democrat. (When a pollster says a race is leaning toward one party, it signals a tight race with no clear leader). In general, Arizona has become difficult to peg for either party, and the Senate race is trending toward the Democratic challenger.

I see former astronaut, Mark Kelly, picking up that seat for the Democrats. If President Trump has a strong showing in Arizona, Republican Senator Martha McSally still might eke out a win; but I do not consider that likely. Georgia remains more closely tied to Republicans, and I believe Iowa Republican Senator Joni Ernst retains strong support in this farm state, next door to my own. Similarly, Michigan is getting tight, but I believe its Democratic history will keep that seat from falling to Republicans. North Carolina is tough to call.

Sexual scandals involving the Democratic challenger have not moved the polls toward Republican Senator Tom Tillis as much as initially expected, and I believe this race will hinge on who carries it in the Presidential contest. If I had to pick a winner, I'd provisionally go with Tillis. Republican held seats in Alaska and Montana, rated as leaning Republican, should remain as they are. Many people are beginning to suggest that South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham-one of the most powerful people in Washington-might be ousted.

I don't think so, but if he is, take it as a sign that Democrats will have a big night. Former Colorado Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper is slightly ahead of incumbent Republican Senator Cory Gardner, and I believe Hickenlooper will grab the seat. Longtime

Maine Republican Senator Susan Collins also seems headed for defeat, however she has survived serious challenges before. And, finally, former football coach Tom Tuberville is well on his way to taking back Alabama's Senate seat for Republicans.

Headed into the elections, Republicans held a 53-47 advantage in the Senate but had to defend 22 of the 34 seats decided next month. My current projections would have Democrats picking up Republican seats in Arizona, Colorado, and Maine, and Republicans taking Alabama from the Democrats. That means a net pick up of two seats for Democrats, which would leave the Senate under Republican control, even if former Vice President Joe Biden wins the White House and gives his party the tie-breaker in a 50-50 vote. As I did two years ago, I will re-visit these predictions after the election to see how well I did.

The writer is an American scholar and a geopolitical expert.



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