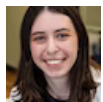
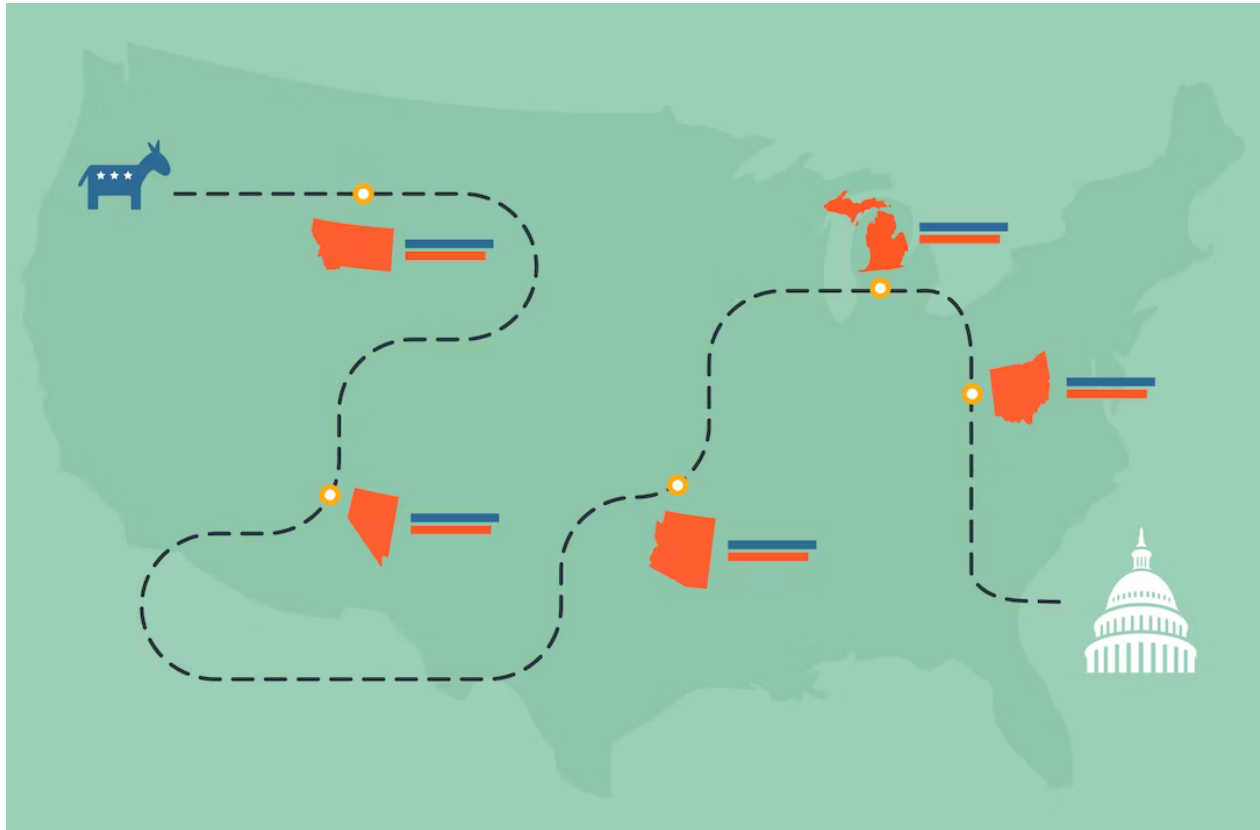


Senate Democrats Must Win Conservative-Leaning States—Especially in 2024



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Democrats are still celebrating their unexpectedly strong showing in the 2022 midterms, especially in the Senate. Since 1994, the president’s party has lost the national popular vote in every midterm election except one, and they have typically lost by over 6 percentage points. So Democrats’ narrow loss in the House and gains in the Senate are certainly notable.

These successes come into even sharper relief when putting the Senate map into context. Democrats consistently win red-leaning states in the Senate, an absolute necessity given the Senate’s rural bias. While some states, like Michigan and Nevada, often get billed as Democratic leaning, in reality they are to the right of the nation’s overall partisanship, with higher turnout among self-identified Republicans than Democrats. Democrats’ current Senate majority is built on their ability to win red-leaning states and even some deep-red states that harbor huge Republican advantages.

Democrats' success in conservative-leaning states is not an accident—it is thanks to disciplined candidates who have stayed squarely in the mainstream to match their constituents and made it difficult to caricature them as far left or extreme. But their job will be even tougher in 2024, when Democrats in eight Republican-leaning states are up for reelection. Democratic candidates will have to rely on their appeal to moderate and even some conservative voters to keep the Senate majority in the party's hands come 2025.

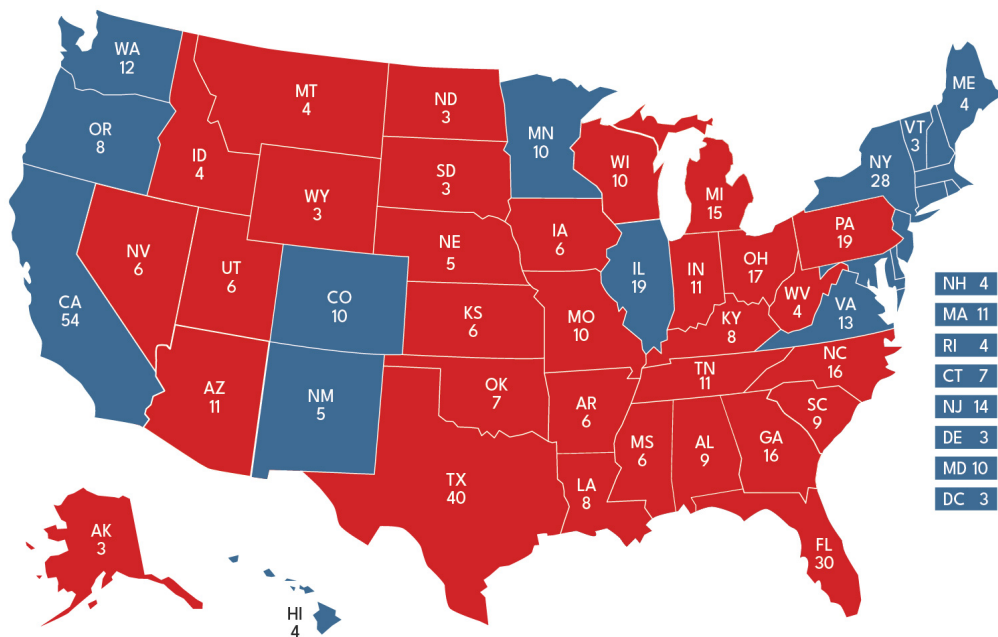
How many Democratic-leaning Senate seats are there, really?

Democrats do not have the option to win the Senate holding only seats in blue states (by contrast, Republicans can indeed hold the Senate winning seats only in red states). Nationwide, a large majority of states trend to the right of the nation's overall partisanship, as more-populated states mainly favor Democrats and less-populated states tend to favor Republicans.

A paltry 19 states have a Cook PVI of D+1 or more Democratic, while 31 states have a PVI of R+1 or more Republican. At the Senate level, if Democrats only won left-leaning states, they would hold 38 Senate seats to Republicans' 62 seats, giving Republicans a supermajority with wiggle room. And given Susan Collins' consistent reelection in blue-leaning Maine (D+2), Democratic seats fall to 37, with Republicans at 63.



Red-Leaning Senate States Far Exceed Blue-Leaning States



Source: 2022 Cook Partisan Voting Index.

So, what makes up Dems' Senate majority now?

Democrats have long won conservative-leaning states at the Senate level. More Republicans turn out to vote in these states than Democrats, and Democrats win by fielding superior candidates who make across-the-aisle appeals and assemble an ideologically broad, winning coalition.

In 2018, 2020, and 2022, Democrats won Senate races in states that slightly favor Republicans, including Nevada (R+1), Michigan (R+1), Pennsylvania (R+2), Wisconsin (R+2), Arizona (R+2), and Georgia (R+3). Holding 11 of the 12 Senate seats in these six red-leaning states, in addition to the 19 states that do actually favor Democrats, netted Democrats 48 Senate seats, factoring in Susan Collins' victory in Maine.

To exceed 50 Senate votes, Democrats also currently hold Senate seats in three deeper red states that Trump won by wide margins: Ohio (R+6), Montana (R+11), and West Virginia (R+22). West Virginia is the second-reddest state in the nation, and Montana is deeper-red than Mississippi. Yet both currently send Democrats to represent them in the Senate.

Democrats hold 14 red-leaning states in the Senate

State	PVI	Dem Seats Held
Nevada	R+1	2
Michigan	R+1	2
Pennsylvania	R+2	2
Wisconsin	R+2	1
Arizona	R+2	2
Georgia	R+3	2
Ohio	R+6	1
Montana	R+11	1
West Virginia	R+22	1
Total		14 Red-Leaning Seats

Source: 2022 Cook Partisan Voting Index.



In Ohio, 22% of voters identify as liberal compared to 37% who identify as conservative and 35% who identify as moderate. In Montana and West Virginia, these numbers are even more stark; a mere 17% of voters identify as liberal.

Republicans also have significant turnout advantages in these states. In West Virginia, Republicans led by 34 points in 2020. In Montana, 20 points, and in Ohio, 13 points. Republicans also led voter turnout in purple states in the last Presidential election cycle; in Michigan in 2020, Republican voters outpaced Democratic voters 48%-46%. In Nevada, 48-47%. In Wisconsin, a wider 51-44%.

In 2020, Republicans held turnout advantages in 9 states that have Democratic Senators

	Republican 2020 Turnout Advantage
Nevada	R+1
Michigan	R+2
Pennsylvania	R+3
Wisconsin	R+7
Arizona	R+11
Georgia	R+8
Ohio	R+13
Montana	R+20
West Virginia	R+34

Source: 2022 Cook Partisan Voting Index.



The Electoral College is biased. The Senate is worse.

To put the uneven Senate playing field into further perspective, we can compare it to the bias of the Electoral College when it comes to the principle of one voter, one vote. It is common knowledge that the Electoral College is biased towards Republicans; the past several election cycles have thrown that into sharp relief. Democrats are likely to continue winning increasingly large popular vote victories, accompanied by nail-biting Electoral College results.

And yet the Senate bias against Democratic voters is worse. To win the Electoral College, Dems need to win four states to the right of average: Nevada (R+1), Michigan (R+1), Pennsylvania (R+2), and Wisconsin (R+2).

To win the Senate, Democrats have an even taller order. Today, they must win seven states to the right of the nation's average, given Ron Johnson's recent reelection and Susan Collins' electoral strength.

If Dems lose WV or MT, is there a bluer alternative?

Progressives routinely express frustration with Senate Democrats who do not consistently align with the most progressive policies and values. They dismiss moderate Democratic senators as “Democrats in Name Only” and call for challenges from the left.

These calls beg the question of what Democrats' alternatives might be if they were to lose these Senate seats held by moderates. In 2024, are there bluer states that Democrats might win if West Virginia or Montana prove out-of-reach?

The best available alternatives are Florida (R+3), where Rick Scott is up for reelection in 2024, and Texas (R+5), where Ted Cruz is up for reelection as well. These are hardly blue bastions; Texas and Florida pose challenges for Democrats, particularly as the Latino population has trended away from Democrats. Given Ron Johnson's recent reelection, Democrats' best hope for exceeding 51 seats is to hold their current seats, make a play for Texas and Florida with strong, moderate candidates, and hope Susan Collins might retire from her blue-leaning seat in 2026.

Conclusion

Democrats are aware of the Senate bias; activists on the left have even made calls to “abolish the Senate” or reform it to make it fairer. But the reality is that the Senate and its finger on the scale for small, less-populated states is here to stay, and barring a major shift in American politics that reverses Republican advantages in small states, Democrats will have to learn to live with it. This means recognizing that Democrats must win red-leaning states at the Senate level to hold 50 seats in the chamber. And it means acknowledging that Democratic candidates in red states may need to use different rhetoric, emphasize different values, and support different policy positions from Democrats in deep blue states.