

October 31, 2017

Even as the Washington political-media complex remains acutely preoccupied with a now year-old election, voters in eight states will determine the outcomes of a handful of statewide ballot initiatives, a congressional special election, two governors' and attorneys' general races, and mayoral contests in three of the nation's largest and most prosperous cities.

Below, Dentons' public policy team breaks down the various races and what their likely outcomes will mean for the local and broader political landscape.

Congressional

Utah's 3rd: Open race, safe Republican

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Jason Chaffetz, who has held the seat since 2009, announced in April that he would decline a run for reelection in 2018, and, a month later, clarified that he would not complete his term, triggering the state's first congressional special election in 87 years.

Because the Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) rates the district among the safest Republican jurisdictions in the country, the most competitive aspect of the race to succeed Chaffetz came in the August primary between arch-conservative and former Utah state representative Chris Herrod, who had the backing of Senators Ted Cruz and Rand Paul and the Club for Growth PAC; establishment-aligned Provo, UT, Mayor John Curtis, a Democrat-turned-Republican who had the backing of Utah Governor Gary Herbert and the Salt Lake Tribune; and Tanner Ainge, a political newcomer who had the support of former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. Curtis won with 43 percent (to Herrod's 33 and Ainge's 24), and will face Democrat Kathie Allen, a medical doctor and former congressional aide.

That the establishment-backed Curtis cruised to a double-digit primary victory was striking, because in recent high-profile contests, the candidates perceived most conservative have been the most successful, including Chaffetz, who defeated incumbent Chris Cannon, and Senator Mike Lee, who defeated long-time Senator Bob Bennett.

Gubernatorial

New Jersey: Open race

Republican Governor Chris Christie, the state's first governor to serve two full terms since Tom Kean in the 1980s, won reelection in 2013 with a resounding 60 percent of the vote, but has since proven a drag on GOP hopes of retaining the seat. His approval rating fell to 15 percent in June, the lowest recorded level of any governor in the state's history, in part due to the "Bridgagate" scandal and the considerable amount of time he spent out of state last

year campaigning to be the Republican Party's presidential nominee.

Democrat Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive and Obama-era US ambassador to Germany, is leading Republican rival Kim Guadagno, the state's current lieutenant governor, by as many as 14 points in some recent polls.

Murphy has been buoyed by the state's shifting demographics—in 2007, when Christie was first elected, there were 200,000 more registered Democrats than Republicans, while today the spread has grown to 800,000, according to state records—as well as national Democratic interest in the race. Murphy's been endorsed by and campaigned with former President Bill Clinton, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Vice President Al Gore, and the state's two US senators, Cory Booker and Robert Menendez. Guadagno, meanwhile, has been tarnished in public polling by her association with Christie, despite her efforts to distance herself. Most political handicappers, including Cook, Rothenberg and Sabato, consider the race either “likely Democratic” or “safe Democratic,” according to the most recent ratings.

Virginia: Open race

While Governor Terry McAuliffe is only in his first term in office, Virginia is the lone state in the nation whose constitution bars governors from serving consecutive terms.

Republicans nominated Ed Gillespie, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee who lost to Senator Mark Warner in one of the 2014 cycle's most unexpectedly narrow contests, to take on Ralph Northam, Virginia's current lieutenant governor.

Northam, an Army veteran, has sought to cast the race as something of a referendum on Donald Trump, calling the election in a controversial mail piece an opportunity for commonwealth voters to “stand up to hate,” while Gillespie has struggled to navigate a complicated, not-quite-embrace of the president, who endorsed the GOP hopeful in a series of October tweets.

Cook, Rothenberg and Sabato have all rated the contest as “lean Democratic,” but, in a recent survey of likely voters, Gillespie, who defied expectations with his unexpectedly strong finish in his 2014 Senate bid, has climbed to a stunning eight-point lead over Northam, who had previously led the race by an average of six points. Despite the political class's projections, this race, like Gillespie's 2014 Senate bid, may prove to be the year's nail-biting stunner.

Attorneys General

New Jersey: Open race (appointed, serves concurrently with the governor)

Under New Jersey's constitution, the state attorney general is an appointed member of the governor's executive cabinet. The term is served concurrently with that of the governor, and is currently held by Christie-appointed Chris Porrino. But with the likely ascension of a Democrat to the governor's mansion, though, the party of the attorney general is expected to shift as well.

Virginia: Democratic-held

Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring, who assumed office in 2014, was expected to forgo reelection in favor of a bid at the governor's mansion, but doing so would have committed him to a divisive primary with Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam. Instead, he became the state's first attorney general in almost 30 years to seek reelection.

Republicans, who nominated former Assistant US Attorney John Adams, have charged Herring with injecting politics into the office, pointing to his high-profile decision to decline to defend the commonwealth's traditional marriage amendment in federal court shortly after taking office in 2014.

Attorney General Herring leads rival Adams by double digits in most polling.

Mayoral

Atlanta, GA: Open race, non-partisan

It's been half a century since Atlanta, the birthplace of the American civil rights movement, last elected a white mayor, but the trend, threatened by a dramatic reshuffling of local demographics amid a surge of younger, white voters to the capital city's urban center, is poised to boomerang.

The race to succeed Kasim Reed as mayor is among the most crowded in the modern era, with as many as 10 candidates still vying in the non-partisan election. In 2009, a mere 714 votes denied the job to Atlanta City Councilwoman Mary Norwood, a self-identified independent, after a bitter head-to-head runoff with then state Senator Reed. But today Norwood possesses a formidable lead over the entire field, garnering between 25 and 29 percent of the vote in most polls, and leading her closest rival, fellow Councilwoman Keisha Lance Bottoms, a self-identified Democrat, by more than 10 points.

The two top vote-getters will advance to a December runoff. Front-runner Norwood, who is white, has already cemented her place in a runoff, and Lance Bottoms, an African American, consistently polls as second although a smattering of closely tracking rivals are biting at her heels, including City Council President Ceasar Mitchell, Councilman Kwanza Hall, former Council President Cathy Woolard, former Chief Operating Officer of the city of Atlanta Peter Aman, former Fulton County Commission Chairman John Eaves and former state Senator Vincent Fort.

In 1973, the year after the city's last white mayor lost reelection, Atlanta became a majority-black city. By 1990, black residents constituted 67 percent of the city. But 20 years later, the 2010 census put the city's black population at 54 percent. Today, as young, white millennials move into the city and families leave the suburbs for the conveniences of the perimeter, some political handicappers believe the percentage of black residents has fallen below the halfway mark.

For decades, the mayor of Atlanta has resembled the city's largest voter bloc. It's a proposition that has had far-reaching implications for Georgia's capital city—and one that will be tested thoroughly at the ballot box later this month and likely again in December.

Boston, MA: Non-partisan, incumbent-held

Boston Mayor Marty Walsh's bid for reelection has been endorsed by fully 10 of the city's 13 city council members. Of the three who have remained neutral, one councilmember is married to an employee of the mayor. Another, Tito Jackson, is challenging the mayor himself.

The city's establishment has lined up to support Walsh, who has maintained an excellent working and personal relationship with Massachusetts's popular GOP governor, Charlie Baker. The mayor, who has been buoyed by his cross-aisle relations, won the endorsement of the *Boston Globe's* editorial page and consistently polls above the 50-percent mark in head-to-head matchups with Jackson, who earns just 22 percent of the vote share in recent polls. Walsh is expected to handily cruise to reelection.

New York, NY: Democratic-held

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is seeking a second term in Gracie Mansion and enters the final leg of the race with formidable advantages over his two closest rivals in polling and campaign cash-on-hand.

De Blasio is the choice of some 61 percent of likely voters, according to a recent Quinnipiac poll, while Republican

challenger Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis has the support of just 17 percent. A Reform Party candidate garnered eight percent in the poll.

While the mayor's war chest dramatically outstrips that of his GOP challenger (\$2.3 million compared with \$760,000), he has recently trailed in new fundraising receipts. For the period between Sept. 19 and Oct. 2, Malliotakis collected \$107,566 compared to the mayor's \$83,414.

Despite the recent fundraising metering, the race is considered "safe Democratic" by handicappers.

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