

The 2022 Midterms: Why this may be another record setting election for women in the House of Representatives



Ahead of the midterm elections, [Samantha Pettey](#) analyzes open seats and the competitive races of this cycle to determine the potential gender makeup of the 118th House of Representatives and predicts that 129 women could win seats. She also takes a close look at how abortion is (or isn't) playing a role in toss-up races where women are on the ballot.

- Looking ahead to elections across the US in 2022, our mini-series, [‘The 2022 midterms’](#), explores aspects of elections at the presidential, Senate, House of Representative and state levels, and also reflects on what the results will mean for US politics moving forward. If you are interested in contributing, please contact Rob Ledger (ledger@em.uni-frankfurt.de) or Peter Finn (finn@kingston.ac.uk).

In a midterm election year that should, by historical standards, be [favorable towards Republican candidates](#), there are a couple questions to consider. First, is this a promising year for women to gain ground in the Republican Party? Secondly, how does abortion play a role? With the recent overturning of *Roe v Wade* by the US Supreme Court, abortion appears to be a [key voting issue](#) in this election cycle. This environment appears favorable to Democrats since

public opinion polls find [majority support](#) for abortion to be legal and [Kansas voters](#) recently upheld protections for abortion.

Representation of women in Congress now

The current proportion of women in Congress is at a historic high, with [women holding 27.5 percent of seats](#). In the House of Representatives there are 123 women, and they make up 28.3 percent of the total delegation. About 74 percent, or 91, of those women are Democrats, and 26 percent of women in Congress are Republicans. While both parties in the House have the highest number of women ever, the [GOP more than doubled](#) the number of women they had in the 116th Congress (2019-2021) from 13 to 32 in the 117th Congress.

A descriptive look at the candidates this year, by party, shows a similar picture to the past. Democrats are largely outpacing Republican women in running candidates for office. In total, there are 180 Democratic women candidates and 86 Republican women. The large share of women candidates that are Democrats is reflected in the partisan breakdown of women incumbents. There is a smaller gap, although still a gap, between the number of Democratic (33) and Republican (15) women running in open seats. Research finds [open seats](#) are a place where women can gradually [increase their numbers](#) in office.

Similar to [past prediction pieces](#) I've written here, I use candidate gender data from [The Center for American Women and Politics](#) and [FiveThirtyEight's Deluxe forecast model](#). I also use FiveThirtyEight's predicted model as of October 6th. The Deluxe forecast model has predictions for each race based on variables such as, polls, fundraising, candidate quality, expert ratings, etc. The model reports a candidate's likelihood of winning in terms of 100 simulated races. For my analysis I operationalize 'likely to win' as a candidate who has at least a 40 in 100 chance of winning.

Figure 1 below shows the predicted success rates for both parties. Democratic and Republican women are expected to win races at similar rates, with Democrats predicted to win about 53 percent of their races and Republicans predicted to win about 49

percent. A significant percent of these races includes incumbents who are expected to win reelection. This analysis suggests 96 percent of Democratic and Republican women are likely to win reelection.

Figure 1 – Overall Prediction, by Party

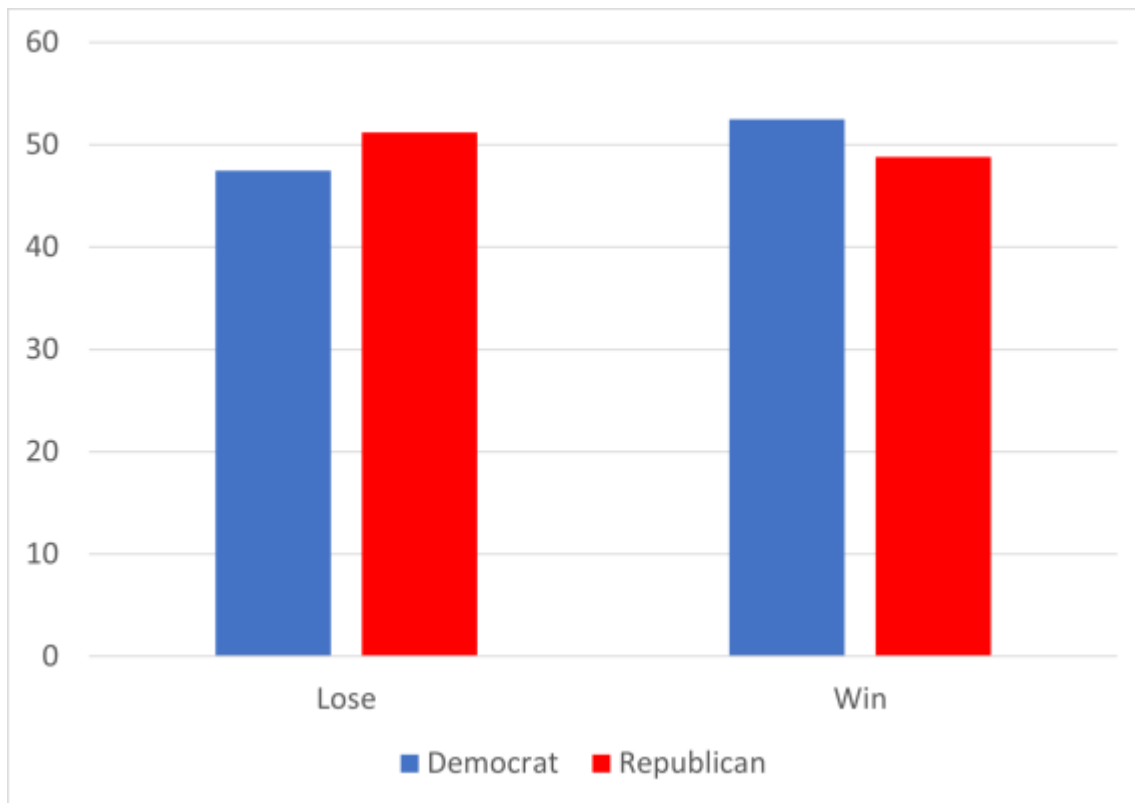
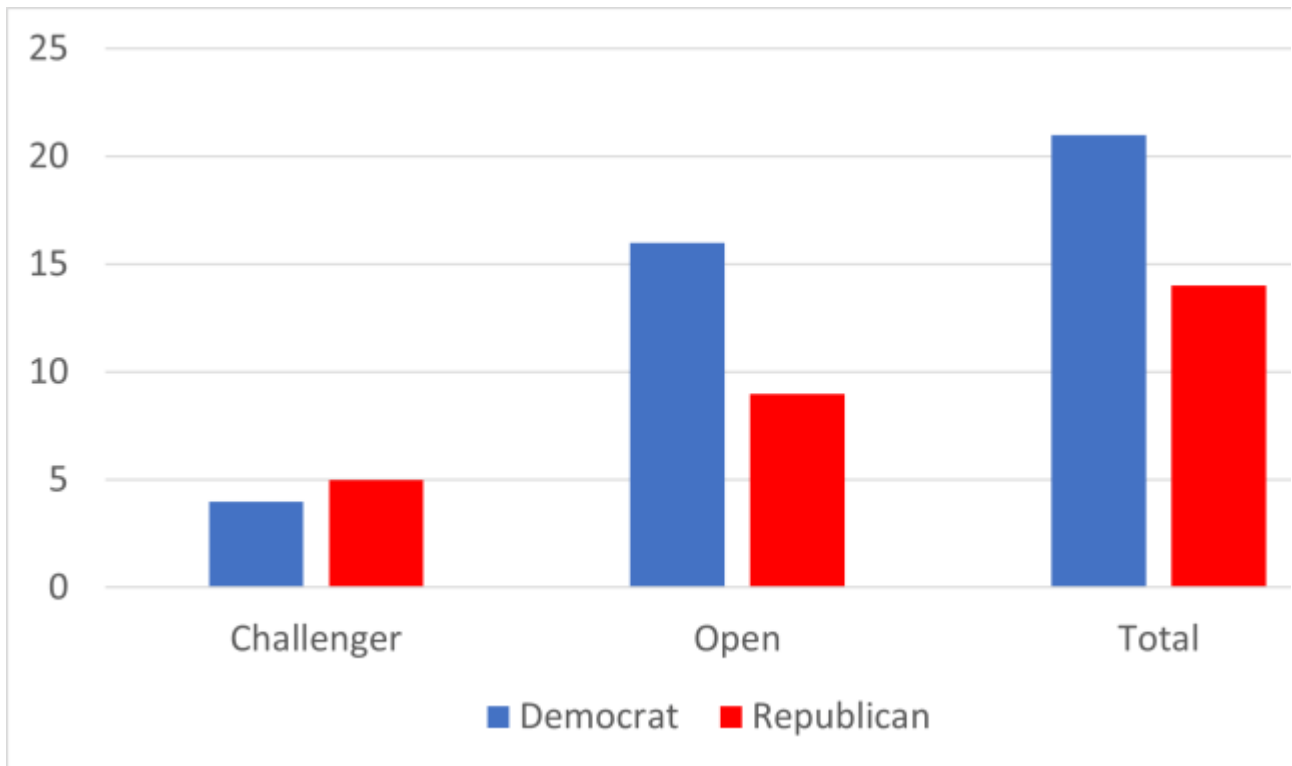


Figure 2 shows the number of candidates, by party, who are likely to win as challengers and in open seats. Democrats are predicted to win an additional 21 seats while Republicans are predicted to win about 14 seats.

Figure 2 – Number of Expected Winners: Open seats and Challengers, by Party



Women versus women races

Adding the raw numbers of winners above to make a prediction for the 118th Congress fails to acknowledge the number of women versus women races. Given I operationalize likely to win as more than 40 percent chance, both women in competitive, close races against other appear in the raw numbers from Figure 2. In this election cycle, there are 34 women versus women races, or about eight percent of the total. But most of these seats are not competitive.



United States House of Representatives or Office of the Speaker of the House, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

To analyze the competitive seats, I use the [Cook Political Report](#), which designates 30 races as “toss-up” this year, or a race in which either party has a good chance of winning. In other words, it’s their classification of the 30 most competitive races in the House. In this election cycle, there are 25 women running in these toss up seats, making women present in many of these races. And, tying this back to the figure above to determine a potential number of women in the 118th Congress, in 16 candidates (or eight seats) are women running against other women in competitive seats where both are operationalized as likely to win.

For example, Alaska has one House seat, a toss-up, in which voters will use a [newly enacted Ranked Choice Voting](#) (RCV) system to pick a winner. There are [four candidates on the ballot](#) and two are women. The seat just held a special election (and primary) and elected Democrat [Mary Peltola](#), who now has incumbency status, for the general election. Also on the ballot, and running as a Republican, is former Vice-Presidential candidate [Sarah Palin](#). Palin placed second after the [second round](#) in the state’s RCV system.

Is abortion a key issue in these women versus women toss-up races?

A [quick glance](#) at [recent headlines](#) leads one to think [abortion is a key issue](#) in this election cycle and [perhaps one that could help Democrats win](#) key races around the county. So how might the recent *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) decision might be playing a role in women versus women toss-up races? I examined the eight women versus women races that Cook Political Report lists as Toss-ups. Given abortion is an important issue nationally for voters, examining policy stances on abortion, especially on the GOP side given the narratives cited above, can shed more light on predictions for the toss-up races.

Using each candidate's official website, I examined the content to determine whether the candidates are signaling a position on abortion. For some candidates, positions are clearly mentioned on their "Issues" or "Policies" tabs. Others, largely incumbents, feature small media releases about votes they supported.

Overall, 56 percent, or nine of the 16 candidates (four Democrats and five Republicans) have some mention of reproductive health which specifically and clearly signals their position on abortion. On the flip side, 44 percent, or seven of the 16 candidates (four Democrats and three Republicans) do not mention abortion at all on their websites. The sample here is clearly small, but the candidates seem to be signaling each other— if one of the candidates has a transparent stance, it's more likely their competition has one, too. For example, in five of the eight races, both candidates either have a position reported or none. This leaves only three races in which one candidate in the race stakes a position and the other does not. Further, in a similar analysis of women running in the toss-up races against males, six out of ten (two Democrats and four Republicans) included stances on reproductive health and two candidates prominently featured the issue on their homepage (one Democrat and one Republican).

While [many Republicans](#) in close races are [removing information](#) from their websites about abortion, these toss-up races with women running, especially the women versus women races, do not align with this finding. Contrary to the previous reports, Republicans in this sample are not 'toning down' their pro-life positions, at least relative to the extent their Democratic counterparts are emphasizing their position on abortion. Most Republican women in these races signal a clear pro-life position, in which life starts

at conception. For example, [Sarah Palin's official site](#) lists "Life" amongst her top issues and signals clear support to ensure abortion is not codified at the federal level. In comparison, [Mary Peltola's official website](#) also offers a position on abortion under the issue "Choice" in which she signals the desire to federally codify abortion. Yet, Peltola's website never uses the word abortion, and the framing is more around choice and reproductive health. This is likely because Peltola was the first Democrat to win a statewide election in Alaska since 2008 and therefore Peltola's framing around the issue of abortion is likely a good strategic move. Especially given [FiveThirtyEight classifies](#) Alaska as a state that has a +14.6 Republican partisan lean.

In [Colorado's 8th](#), which is a new district [apportioned to the state](#) determined after the population increase in the 2020 census, candidates [Yadira Caraveo](#) (D) and [Barbara Kirkmeyer](#) (R) do not have any language on their sites about abortion. A comparison of Colorado (+6.4 Democratic lean) and Alaska (+14.6 R lean) is interesting since both state governments protect the right to abortion. In Colorado, the governor signed "[The Reproductive Health Equity Act](#)", which creates a [legal right](#) to abortion. And in Alaska, abortion is [protected by the state's constitution](#). Alaska and Colorado have [some of the most liberal policies](#) on abortion in the country. So, in two (essentially) open seat races with states that protect abortion, the candidates are choosing different strategies. In Alaska, both candidates signal a clearly defined position but the candidates in Colorado have no positions about abortion on their websites.

Abortion is not the focus of many women candidates

The biggest takeaway from this closer look at the women versus women races is that despite the national narrative and public opinion polls, abortion is not a prominent issue for any of these candidates. While the issue is present and visible in just over half the candidate's websites, abortion is not a 'headline' issue on any of the official websites. For each site in the women versus women toss-ups that reported a stance, the information was on corresponding tabs, and not the landing page. This analysis has its limitations, as I have not considered campaign ads or any other information a candidate makes public. But I argue that if a candidate has total control over the message they give voters via their website, this is a good signal as to what the candidates are likely focusing on in other areas of their campaign.

For a year in which [federal precedent on access to abortion changed](#) drastically after decades, and [Democratic voters are being urged to vote](#) with this issue in mind, abortion in the competitive toss-up races does not appear to be playing a prominent role. My analysis suggests the 118th Congress will break records for women, but with a small gain, rather than the larger ones we saw in 2018 and 2020. Given the forecast models discussed here, and considering the eight women versus women races, I think we could see 129 women winning seats up from 123, or close to about 30 percent of the total House delegation.

- [Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)
 - *Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*
 - Shortened URL for this post: <https://bit.ly/3yTYVRG>
-