

## The Sweep: Decision Day in CA

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September 14, 2021

It's Election Day in California, where Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is facing the fight of his political life to stave off a GOP-led recall effort. So if you think this is the best SNL skit of all time, please go vote!

### Campaign Quick Hits

**With a Side of Recall:** Assuming Newsom is retained after the votes are counted, you're going to hear a lot of 'what does this mean' for 2022. My own take is: not much. If Newsom had been recalled despite the lack of a more viable alternative than Larry Elder, I would have said that showed a higher level of frustration with the left than would be expected in the run up to a normal midterm election with a Democratic administration and Congress. But if Newsom beats back the recall efforts, that doesn't tell us much of anything. Larry Elder is a candidate with low name ID and no ability—or desire—to run a campaign that appealed to the political realities of his state. (Chris has his own, like, super smart thoughts below to keep in mind as results come in tonight.)

**Another Temperature Check:** Aaron Blake over at the Washington Post wrote his latest column on the state house special elections from the last few months, finding that these races indicate “something close to a neutral-to-GOP-leaning environment” heading into 2022. He cited two state legislative seats that changed parties last month; one went from R to D in New Hampshire and the other went from D to R in Connecticut. One deep dive that compared the results of these types of races to the presidential numbers found “Republicans improving on their 2020 margins by an average of about three points in the races for which they have presidential data.” Not huge, but not nothing. Add in the effects of redistricting and retirements, and I think we're back where we started.

**He's Running:** Former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie spoke at the Reagan Library last week, laying out the case for Republicans to abandon Trumpism (and Trump). “All this lying has done harm to our nation, to our party, and to each other,” he said, “We need to quit wasting our time, our energy, and our credibility on claims that won’t ever convince anyone of anything.” There’s very little question that Christie will run against Trump for the 2024 GOP nomination, but the better question is: Will anyone else? Does a Ted Cruz or Tom Cotton or Ron DeSantis jump in the race if Trump has already announced? If Trump waits until late 2023 to announce, would they drop out? These are the questions that will make or break Christie’s candidacy. Every candidate from 2016 thought they could beat Trump as soon as they got to face him one on one. But—thanks, John Kasich!—they never did.

**School Boards Turn Partisan:** After years of encouraging people to run for local office, I’ve been thrilled to see that school board races are ground zero for politics this year. These used to be largely non-partisan races, but not anymore. This poll data stuck out to me: “Most Americans have no opinion about critical race theory, according to a POLITICO/Morning Consult poll — but most Republicans do, and 42 percent see it very unfavorably. A quarter of independents felt the same way, while only 5 percent of Democrats shared that viewpoint.” Even Ilya Shapiro, a vice president at the Cato Institute, has thrown his hat in the ring here in Northern Virginia—not exactly known as a bastion for libertarian education policy. I think we are watching the birth of a new wedge issue.

**Stop Trying to Make Fetch Happen:** Another day, another magazine profile of once and future candidate Beto O’Rourke. This sentence contains multitudes: “It’s a testament to O’Rourke’s celebrity, and also the relative weakness of the Democratic Party in Texas, that a politician who lost a U.S. Senate race in 2018, bottomed out in the presidential primary less than two years later and now would count it a victory if you simply came to the door is the party’s best hope to take the governor’s seat next year.” Indeed. If you think Texas’s new abortion law is a game changer for the “turn Texas blue” crowd, maybe you’re right. But ask Wendy Davis how her abortion-centered campaign turned out in 2014. She spent \$36 million dollars and lost by 21 points.

## The internal battle for the soul of the Democratic Party, in one poll question:



**Will Saletan** @saletan

"Do you think the Democratic Party should move more to the left and embrace more liberal policies, move more to the center and embrace more moderate policies, or ... stay where it is?"  
White Dems: 39 move to center, 32 move to left Black Dems: 41 move to center, 23 move to left  
September 4th 2021

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**162 Retweets****900 Likes**

Check out those “move to the left” numbers. One in three white Democrats want their party to move farther to the left. But fewer than one in four black Democrats feel the same way. This is how political parties begin to realign. College-educated white voters move to the Democratic Party pushing it to the left of the party’s black voters on social and even race issues. The result will be an education divide that is more pronounced between the parties and a racial divide that is less so.

Nate Cohn described the effect for the *New York Times* last week: “Yet even as college graduates have surged in numbers and grown increasingly liberal, Democrats are no stronger than they were 10, 30 or even 50 years ago. Instead, rising Democratic strength among college graduates and voters of color has been counteracted by a nearly equal and opposite reaction among white voters without a degree.”

I’d quibble with his point on increasing strength with voters of color—just check out Trump’s performance with Latino voters in Texas and Florida from 2020. But he’s certainly right that since the post-Reconstruction era, the two parties have always maintained equilibrium even as their voters have shifted dramatically. In 1992, Bill Clinton won West Virginia, Louisiana, and Montana as the parties were once again in the final throes of their last major realignment.

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This week, Chris turns his lonely eyes to ... Gavin Newsom.

**Catching the Redeye From California**

If the latest polls in California's gubernatorial recall election are right, we may know tonight whether Gavin Newsom will get to serve out the last year of his term. The final polling average from *FiveThirtyEight* shows retention ahead of removal by 17 points. Even though it will take days for the biggest counties to count all their ballots, a lopsided win like that would be obvious when initial results are reported after voting closes at 8 p.m. on the West Coast.

More than 7 million ballots had already been returned as of Monday morning. That's about a third of all potential votes, with more coming in by the hour. We don't know what turnout will be like in this first-ever vote-by-mail recall election, but it is very reasonable to guess that more than half of ballots were in hand and ready for counting at the end of the day Monday. In some counties, elections officials have been tabulating for a week. Big counties like Los Angeles and San Francisco will be ready with massive data dumps of early ballots as soon as voting ends.

Since polls consistently show red-hot intensity among Republican voters and with practically everyone voting by mail, I wouldn't expect much, if any, of the Democratic skew that we've historically seen in early/mail voting. Big Republican-friendly locales like Orange and Riverside counties have already reported substantial returns, and Orange in particular is flexing on its vote counting skills, promising "all ballots (with the exception of late-arriving mail ballots) will be counted by midnight on Election Day." If "retain" is up more than a dozen points at the end of the first day of counting, there won't be some big cache of Republican ballots that could still sink Newsom.

The reasons to believe this will be how it goes are many. California polling has actually been pretty good of late, and we have experience with the coronavirus all-mail format from 2020. The final recall survey from the Public Policy Institute of California shows "retain" ahead by 19 points. The same outfit actually *understated* Democratic support in 2020 but still came admirably close, predicting a 26-point Joe Biden win in the Golden State instead of the actual 29-point margin. That poll and others in the closing days tell the same story: Many voters weren't paying much attention until the final month. When their ballots arrived in the mail about the same time that radio host Larry Elder emerged as the Republican frontrunner, Democrats toying with skipping the whole thing or voting "remove" because Newsom was not progressive enough got serious. When ballots went in the mail on Aug. 17, "retain" was up in the average by 1.2 points. Two weeks later, it was 5.6 points. Two weeks after that, the margin more than doubled again.

There are, however, some reasons to believe that may not be how it goes. While we do have experience with California mail-in voting, a recall election is very different. Forecasting the outcome of a contest that has no direct precedent is a queasy business. The aforementioned Public Policy Institute poll, for example, says that 75 percent of Democrats believe that the outcome of the election is “very important” compared to 67 percent of Republicans who said the same. But Republicans lead by 14 points on the question of being “more enthusiastic than usual about voting.” That’s a serious gap. How many Democrats unhappy with the whole affair and the cuckoo recall system will have simply neglected to mail their ballots—especially with Newsom heavily favored?

Plus, the mail-in voting format may draw in “remove” voters who otherwise wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of in-person voting or requesting an absentee ballot for a long-shot effort. Checking two boxes and dropping a postage-paid envelope in your mailbox is so easy, there may be lots of low-propensity voters who participate.

Former President Donald Trump and other Republicans have denounced the mail-voting system, with Trump calling it a “scam.” It’s understandable that he would grind that point since his claims of fraud in his own defeat rest heavily on the allegation that mail voting is more vulnerable to mischief. Republicans also cling to the false belief that higher turnout favors Democrats. In this case, the mail-in format is a boon for the GOP. It can be a real hassle to get working-class men to vote, especially in an off-year election. But the state of California has solicited all of them who are registered to participate from the comfort of their homes. As Republicans become more dependent on male voters without college degrees, convenience voting will be increasingly important to the party’s chances in non-presidential elections.

If all that adds up to a Newsom loss, Katie bar the door. Such an outcome would send a shock through the political world and deliver an urgent message to Democrats in Washington that a tsunami was shaping up for 2022. I would expect President Biden to dramatically change course on his policies and messaging and for congressional Democrats to shelve the most ambitious parts of their agenda. If the biggest blue state—the home of the speaker of the House and vice president—can boot its Democratic governor in favor of a talk radio host, big trouble would be brewing.

But the result may be something else: Newsom narrowly survives. If it takes days to count late-returning ballots and the incumbent only prevails by a few points, it will be no confidence

booster for Democrats. It will also tantalize Republicans about their future in the state – especially the four California congressional seats the GOP is targeting in 2022. But it will also encourage the kooks and charlatans on the red team selling voter fraud claims. As the Georgia Senate runoff this year shows, Republican sore loserism is a dead letter with the college-educated suburban voters who will decide the midterms, and theft claims only discourage the low-propensity working-class voters on whom the GOP seeks to build a new coalition.