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Molly Reynolds
The Brookings Institution, mereynolds@brookings.edu

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The 2018 Midterms in the Mountain West

MOLLY REYNOLDS   SENIOR FELLOW IN GOVERNANCE STUDIES
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Abstract

The 116th Congress has begun with a bang, with a protracted government shutdown and promises of aggressive oversight from the new Democratic House majority. To understand how we got to this point—and where we might be going in 2020—a look back at the 2018 elections is valuable. As a region, the Mountain West—Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah—provides useful insights into broader national political dynamics across all levels of government, from Congress to state legislatures.

The Lay of the Land: The Mountain West before the 2018 Election

Entering the 2018 midterm cycle, the Mountain West—as a region—was decidedly purple. As we see in Table 1, of the region's 27 congressional seats, 12 were held by Democrats and 15 by Republicans in the 115th Congress (2017-18). The region's collective Senate delegation was similarly split, with four Democrats and six Republicans. Four of the five states had Republican governors, but control of the region's 10 state legislative chambers was evenly split across the two parties.

Political scientists have documented a well-established pattern of losses by the president's party in midterm elections, and have offered a number of different explanations for this pattern. One argument sees success for the president's party in Congress in a presidential year as driven by the top of the ticket, with no similar advantage in midterm years.[1] Another line of work emphasizes the way in which midterm elections function as a referendum on the president,[2] while a third body of research highlights the role of "exposure," or the notion that a party that already holds

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While much of the focus in 2020 will be on the presidential race, the Mountain West will also be home to a series of notable down-ballot contests, especially in the Senate.

Political science research suggests that the number of voters who split their tickets in presidential elections—that is, vote for a presidential candidate of one party and House and Senate candidates of the other—is at near historic lows.

a large number of seats will have more difficulty maintaining control of them.[3] A final argument involves "balance theory," whereby some midterm voters support the party not holding the White House because they are seeking more moderate policy outcomes.[4] Table 2 provides a decidedly mixed picture of President Trump's standing across the Mountain West heading in to the 2018 elections. In the first column, we see that he won two of the five states in the 2016 election, though in one (Arizona), he did so with by a relatively slim margin. His approval rating as of May 2018, displayed in the third column, suggests that he was quite unpopular in advance of the election in two states (Colorado and New Mexico) while doing no better than a two point net approval in the other three.[5]

Table 1
Partisan Control, Pre-2018 Election[6]

	House	**Senate**	**Governor**	**State House**	**State Senate**
Arizona	4 D, 5 R	2 R	R (Ducey)	25 D, 35 R	13 D, 17 R
Colorado	3 D, 4 R	1 D, 1 R	D (Hickenlooper)	36 D, 29 R	16 D, 18 R, 1 other
Nevada	3 D, 1 R	1 D, 1 R	R (Sandoval)	27 D, 14 R, 1 vacancy	10 D, 8 R, 1 other, 2 vacancies
New Mexico	2 D, 1 R	2 D	R (Martinez)	38 D, 32 R	26 D, 16 R
Utah	4 R	2 R	R (Herbert)	13 D, 61 R, 1 vacancy	5 D, 24 R
Total	**12 D, 15 R**	**4 D, 6 R**	**1 D, 4 R**	**139 D, 171 R, 2 vacancies**	**70 D, 83 R, 2 others, 2 vacancies**

Table 2
Trump Performance across the Mountain West[7]

	Trump Vote Share, 2016	**Number of Counties Won by Trump**	**Trump Net Approval, May 2018**
Arizona	51.9%	11 of 15	+2
Colorado	47.3%	42 of 64	-16
Nevada	48.7%	13 of 15	-2
New Mexico	45.4%	19 of 33	-14
Utah	62.4%	27 of 29	0

The second column of Table 2 displays the number of counties won by President Trump in each state in 2016. The fact that he won roughly 70 percent of the Mountain West's

counties (112 of 156) while carrying three of the five states suggests that Democrats in the region tend to be clustered in pockets of higher population density areas; this is a specific case of a broader pattern supported by political science research.[8]

Layered on top of this underlying distribution of voters are congressional district lines. The extent to which the line-drawing process—often referred to as gerrymandering— affects electoral outcomes is a source of significant debate.[9] But a basic understanding of the kinds of congressional districts that exist across the Mountain West provides a useful picture of the underlying electoral terrain on which the 2018 elections were fought.

There are several different typologies characterizing congressional districts by their population density. One, developed by Lang, Sanchez, and Berube, focuses on metropolitan areas, categorizing counties—and their voters—based on density and commuting patterns.[10] A second, related typology classifies each district by its mix of high- and low-density areas, ranging from "pure rural" to "pure urban."[11] As shown in Table 3, a majority of Mountain West districts—16 of 27—fall into two categories: "dense suburban" and "urban-suburban mix." The former is defined as "predominantly suburban, especially denser inner-ring suburbs," while the latter is "a mix of urban areas and inner-ring suburbs."[12]

Table 3
Types of Congressional Districts in the Mountain West

	Number of Congressional Districts
Pure rural	3
Rural-suburban mix	5
Sparse suburban	3
Dense suburban	10
Urban-suburban mix	6
Pure urban	0

Nationwide, both of these types of areas generally lean Democratic, with Democrats controlling 66 percent of "dense suburban districts" and 85 percent of "urban-suburban" districts prior to the 2018 elections.

The 2018 Election: Results and Implications

The House of Representatives
Perhaps the most watched component of the 2018 election was the battle for control of the House of Representatives. Democrats clearly entered the 2018 cycle with an

advantage as measured by factors like the generic ballot, the president's approval rating, and previous special election victories.[13] As of this writing, that advantage translated into a gain of 41 seats.[14] Ten percent of those gains (4 seats) came in the Mountain West, with Democrats picking up seats in Arizona's 2nd district, Colorado's 6th district, New Mexico's 2nd district, and Utah's 4th district. Given that the Mountain West contains roughly six percent (27) of the nation's 435 congressional seats, the region is slightly over-represented in the set of seats that generated the Democrats' new majority. As illustrated in Figure 1, these gains bring the total number of Mountain West seats held by Democrats (16) to the highest level under the current district lines, which first took effect for the 2012 elections. (Each colored component of each bar illustrates how the seats held by Democrats are distributed across the region's five states.)

Figure 1
Democratic Strength in Mountain West House Delegations, 2012-2018 Elections
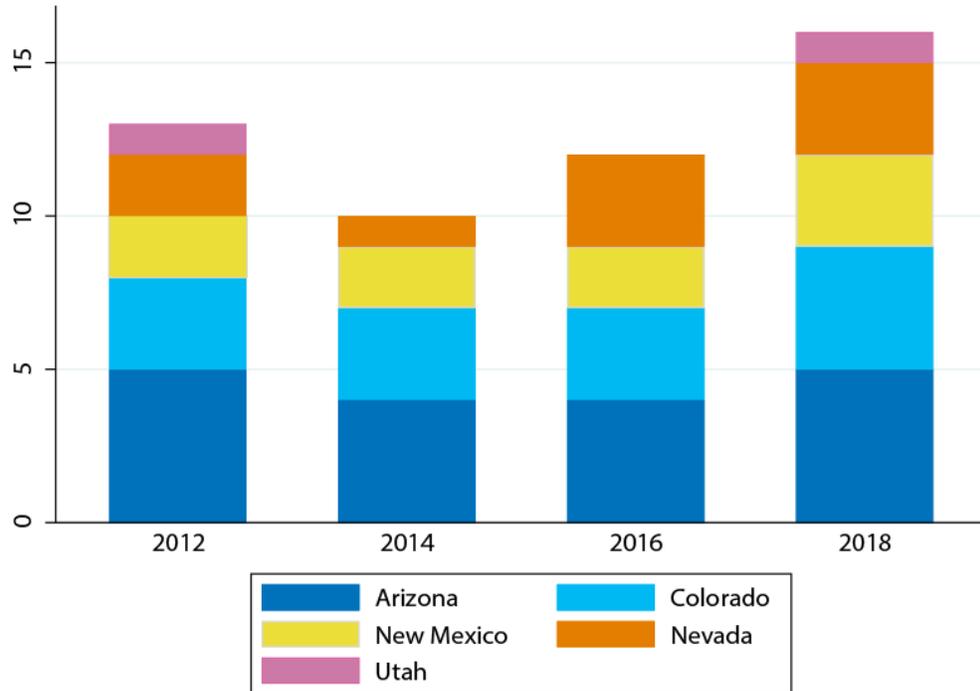
Examining the individual district-by-district results from the 2018 midterms also suggests that Democrats performed better in 2018 across the Mountain West. Using either 2012, 2014, or 2016 as the baseline measure, virtually all Mountain West congressional districts saw higher vote shares for Democratic candidates in 2018.[15] Only one district (Nevada's 4th) gave greater support to a Democratic congressional candidate in 2012 than 2018, and in only three (Arizona's 1st, Nevada's 1st, and New Mexico's 1st) did the Democratic candidate perform better in 2016 than in 2018.

A comparison with the last midterm election in 2014, however, is most useful; those results are displayed in Figure 2, with blue bars indicating seats now held by Democrats in the 116th Congress and red bars designating Republican-held ones. Data suggests that recent midterm electorates have tended to be older than in presidential years. In 2010, 64 percent of the electorate was over 45, as compared to 53 percent in 2008. In 2014, meanwhile, 65 percent of voters were over 45 as compared to 55 percent in the previous presidential election in 2012. We saw a similar dynamic in 2018, as the midterm electorate nationally was again older than in 2016 (65 percent over 45 as compared to 56 percent). Even with this pattern, Democrats still generally performed better in Mountain West districts in 2018 than in 2014. In only one district—Utah's 1st congressional district— did the Democrat garner a greater share of the two-party vote in 2014, and the difference between the party's performance was quite small (1.4 percentage points).

Figure 2
Change in Democratic Vote Share, Mountain West Congressional Districts, 2014 vs. 2018

%−Point Change in Democratic Vote Share, 2014 vs. 2018
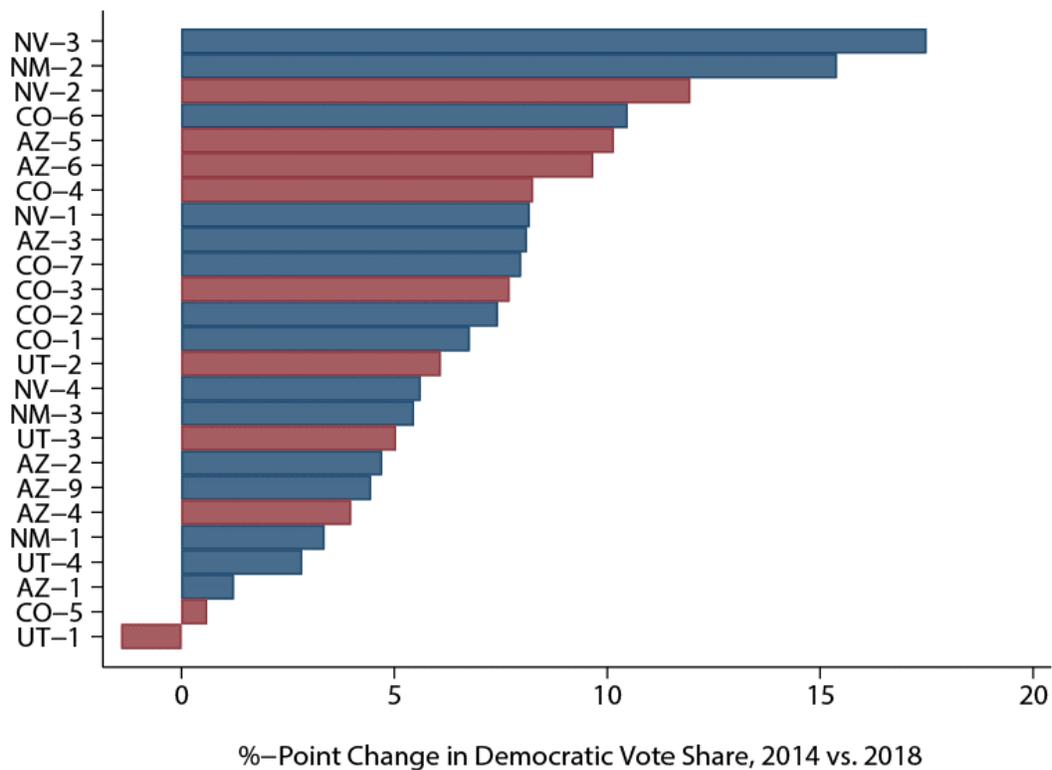
Importantly, however, it's not just that blue districts got bluer since 2014. Of the ten districts that saw the largest swing in favor of the Democrats between 2014 and 2018, four are currently held by Republicans: Nevada's 2nd district, Arizona's 5th and 6th districts,

and Colorado's 4th district. None of the four are likely to be flipped to Democratic control anytime soon. Of the four, the Cook Political Report determined that only one district (AZ-6) rated as at all competitive in the final race ratings of 2018,[16] and the Democratic share of the vote in the four districts ranged from 39 percent to 45 percent. But as we look forward to future statewide races, as well as the 2020 presidential election, increasing support for Democratic candidates in a wider range of geographic areas may be consequential.

An examination of the competitive congressional districts in the Mountain West also reflects Democrats' stronger performance in 2018. Between 2012 and 2018, the Cook Political Report rated 12 different congressional districts as competitive before the relevant election.[17] In only one case—Colorado's 3rd district—was Cook's appraisal of the seat better for Republicans in 2012 (when it rated "lean Republican") than in 2018 (when it was evaluated as "likely Republican"). Two seats (Arizona's 9th district and Colorado's 7th district) moved into "safe" territory after 2012 and 2014, respectively, and have remained there since. The Cook Political Report found six more seats at least as likely to be won by Democrats in 2018 as they were in 2012, including four that moved from "toss-up" or better for Republicans in 2012 to at least leaning Democratic in 2018.[18] (Democrats won all four of these seats in 2018.) Three additional seats, in Arizona's 6th and 8th districts and New Mexico's 2nd district, were rated as competitive for the first time in 2018.

The Senate
While Democrats entered the 2018 race for control of the House with a distinct advantage, the opposite was true in the contest for a majority in the Senate. Of the 35 seats on the ballot in 2018, Democrats held 26, including 10 in states where President Trump won in 2016. Commentators called this map "horrible," "brutal," and "almost impossible" for Democrats.[19]

Despite the structural disadvantage Democrats faced, their net losses in the Senate were ultimately limited to two, thanks in large part to the only two Democratic gains in the Senate. Both of these—Kyrsten Sinema's victory in Arizona and Jacky Rosen's win in Nevada—occurred in the Mountain West.[20] Sinema's success in the race to succeed retiring Republican Jeff Flake marked the first time a Democrat won a Senate seat in Arizona since Dennis DeConcini last won re-election in 1988. Rosen's defeat of incumbent Republican Dean Heller, meanwhile, gave Nevada a unified Democratic Senate delegation for the first time since Richard Bryan retired in 2000. In addition, Rosen's performance in 2018 (52.6 percent of the two-party vote) was slightly stronger than Cortez Masto's in

2016 (51.3 percent); Rosen also fell just shy of the share of the vote received by Senator Harry Reid (53.0 percent) in 2010 against a significantly weaker opponent in Sharron Angle.

In addition to the two new Democratic senators from the Mountain West, the region will also see two new Republican senators in the 116th Congress: Mitt Romney, who succeeded retiring incumbent Orrin Hatch in Utah, and Martha McSally of Arizona. McSally lost to Sinema in the race to succeed Flake, but was appointed to serve the duration of the term left open when John McCain died in August 2018.[21] The region, then, has a relatively junior Senate delegation. Of its ten members, six—the four elected in 2018, plus Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) and Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)—are in their first term. The delegation's two longest serving members, Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and Tom Udall (D-N.M.), have served approximately the same number of years (10) as the average member of the chamber as a whole.

Despite the relatively junior nature of the Mountain West delegation, several of its members will be worth watching in the 116th Congress. Cortez Masto received a seat on the influential Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over taxes and a wide range of entitlement programs, including Social Security and Medicare. Republicans assigned McSally to the Senate Armed Service Committee—a position she likely sought based on her career as an Air Force colonel. Romney, meanwhile, received a spot on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Both of these panels are among the so-called "Super 'A'" or "Big Four" committees that are viewed as the chamber's most important.[22]

In addition, we should expect that the senators from the Mountain West who are up for re-election may behave differently when they are "in-cycle" over the next two years. Udall of New Mexico, Gardner of Colorado, and, in a special election to fill out the remainder of McCain's term, McSally of Arizona will all be on the ballot in 2020.[23] Political science research has documented the ways in which senators may change their behavior in the two years preceding their run for re-election.[24] Indeed, Gardner's behavior in the opening weeks of the 116th Congress reflects this tendency. Gardner—along with fellow in-cycle colleague Susan Collins (R-Me.)—was among the first Republican senators to come out in favor of ending the partial government shutdown that began in later 2018 without providing additional funds for a physical wall along the southwestern border.[25]

Governors and State Legislatures
Nationally, Democrats gained seven governorships, including two in the Mountain West, in Nevada (Steve Sisolak) and New Mexico (Michelle Lujan Grisham). A Republican

incumbent (Doug Ducey) won re-election in Arizona, while Colorado elected a new Democratic governor (Jared Polis) to succeed a term-limited incumbent of the same party (John Hickenlooper). Democrats also saw significant state legislative gains nationally, picking up 344 seats; 26 of these gains occurred in Mountain West states.[26] Of the nine state legislative chambers in the region holding elections in 2018, Democrats saw gains in eight of them, including a new majority in the Colorado State Senate.[27]

Importantly, these results bring unified Democratic control to three states—Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada. Both Colorado and New Mexico achieved unified Democratic control relatively recently (2014 and 2010, respectively), but in Nevada, the party last controlled the House, Senate, and governorship in 1992. With Republicans holding House and Senate majorities as well as governorships in Arizona and Utah, all five Mountain West states have so-called "trifectas" for one party.

Nationwide, there is now only one state (Minnesota) where one chamber of the state legislature is controlled by Democrats and the other by Republicans, though in 12 states one party controls both chambers of the legislature while the other holds the governor's mansion. The last time only one state had split control of its legislature was in 1914, and as many as 16 states did in the early 1990s.[28]

Beyond party control, 2018 also brought notable changes in the representation of women in state legislatures. Nationwide, women state legislative candidates won nomination in record numbers in 2018,[29] and ballots cast in November brought a record number of women into state legislatures.[30] In the Mountain West, women now hold an overall majority in the Nevada state legislature, with 32 of 63 seats; this represents an increase of roughly 13 percentage points over the pre-election composition.[31] In addition, women comprise the majority of members in both the Nevada Assembly and the Colorado State House, marking the first time women have held the majority in two state legislative chambers at the same time.[32]

Looking Ahead to 2020

While much of the focus in 2020 will be on the presidential race, the Mountain West will also be home to a series of notable down-ballot contests, especially in the Senate. Political science research suggests that the number of voters who split their tickets in presidential elections—that is, vote for a presidential candidate of one party and House and Senate candidates of the other—is at near historic lows.[33] The overall shape of the presidential contest, then, is likely shape the congressional outcomes.

Three Senate seats in the Mountain West will be on the ballot in 2020 and two will draw particular attention. Gardner and McSally are seen as two of the Republican Party's most vulnerable incumbents. One major election forecaster rates both seats as "Toss-Ups,"[34] while a second categorizes them as only "leaning" Republican.[35] In addition Cortez Masto will serve as the chair of the Democrats' Senate campaign arm, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), for the 2020 cycle when Republicans will be defending 22 seats versus 12 for Democrats.

In addition, the kinds of seats that drove Democratic gains in 2018 are well-represented in the Mountain West. CityLab found that roughly 75 percent of the seats picked up by Democrats in 2018 were in "dense" and "sparse" suburban districts.[36] As discussed above, roughly half of congressional districts in the Mountain West fall into one of these two categories; 10 are characterized as dense suburban, while three are sparse suburban. Currently, the districts that fall into these two categories are evenly split across the parties—seven are held by Democrats and six are held by Republicans. To the extent that we see similar voting patterns in 2020 as we did in 2018, then, Democrats may be positioned to perform well in the region again.

Endnotes

[1] James E. Campbell, "The Presidential Surge and its Midterm Decline in Congressional Elections, 1868–1988," *Journal of Politics* 53.2 (May 1991): 477–487

[2] Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 122.1 (Spring 2007): 1–24.

[3] Bruce I. Oppenheimer, James A. Stimson, and Richard Waterman, "Interpreting U.S. Congressional Elections: The Exposure Thesis," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11.2 (May 1986): 227–247.

[4] Joseph Bafumi, Robert S. Erikson, and Christopher Wlezien, "Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics* 72.3 (July 2010): 705-719.

[5] Net approval is calculated by subtracting the share of respondents indicating they disapprove of the president's performance from the share approving of his performance; as a result, negative numbers indicate that more respondents disapprove than approve.

[6] Data for House and Senate is drawn from Vital Statistics on Congress (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2018). Data for governors and state legislatures is drawn from the National Conference of State Legislatures and reflects partisan composition as of October 9, 2018.

[7] Data for Trump vote share and number of counties won by Trump is drawn from the *CQ Voting and Elections Collection.* Data for Trump approval is from Morning Consult, as summarized in Perry Bacon Jr. and Dhrumil Mehta, "How Trump's Popularity is Holding Up by State," *FiveThirtyEight* 15 June 2018 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-trumps-popularity-is-holding-up-by-state/>.

[8] Jowei Chen and Jonathan Rodden, "Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8 (2013): 239-269; Clayton Nall,

"The Political Consequences of Spatial Policies: How Interstate Highways Facilitated Geographic Polarization," *Journal of Politics* 77.2 (April 2015): 394-406.

[9] This literature is voluminous, but for selections, see Jowei Chen and David Cottrell, "Evaluating Partisan Gains from Congressional Gerrymandering: Using Computer Simulations to Estimate the Effect of Gerrymandering in the U.S. House," *Electoral Studies* 44 (December 2016): 329-340; Nicholas Goedert, "Gerrymandering or Geography? How Democrats Won the Popular Vote but Lost the Congress in 2012," *Research & Politics* 1.1 (May 2014): 1-8; Nicholas Goedert, "The Case of the Disappearing Bias: A 2014 Update to the 'Gerrymandering or Geography' Debate," *Research & Politics* (October 2015): 1-6.

[10] Robert E. Lang, Thomas W. Sanchez, and Alan Berube, "The New Suburban Politics: A County-Based Analysis of Metropolitan Voting Trends Since 2000," in Ruy Teixeira, ed., *Red, Blue, and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008): 25-49.

[11] David Montgomery and Richard Florida, "How the Suburbs Will Swing the Midterm Election," *CityLab* 5 October 2018 <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/10/midterm-election-data-suburban-voters/572137/>.

[12] Montgomery and Florida 2018.

[13] Nate Cohn, "What to Keep in Mind When Thinking About the Midterms," *The Upshot* 26 April 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/upshot/what-to-keep-in-mind-when-thinking-about-the-midterms.html>.

[14] This figure is calculated by subtracting the number of seats held by Democrats on the first day of the 115th Congress in 2017 from the first day of the 116th Congress in 2019 and includes the House seat in western Pennsylvania picked up by Democrat Conor Lamb in a special election in March 2018.

[15] In each analysis, only districts that had a major party candidate running in both years are included.

[16] It was rated as "likely Republican." See "2018 House Ratings," *Cook Political Report*, 5 November 2018.

[17] The analysis in this paragraph uses the final ratings released by Cook before the relevant election.

[18] The six races that were at least as likely to be won by Democrats in 2018 as in 2012 are AZ-1, AZ-2, CO-6, NV-3, NV-4, and UT-4. Of those, AZ-1, CO-6, NV-3, and NV-4.

[19] Nathaniel Rakich, "Democrats' Horrible Senate Map Couldn't Have Come at a Better Time," *FiveThirtyEight* 1 May 2018; Burgess Everett, "Reeling Democrats Confront Brutal 2018 Senate Mao," *Politico* 17 November 2016; Tim Reid, "Democrats Face 'Almost Impossible Map' to Retake U.S. Senate," *Reuters* 24 August 2018.

[20] The four seats Democrats lost were in Florida, Indiana, Missouri, and North Dakota.

[21] Jon Kyl, a former Arizona senator, was appointed to the vacant seat initially, but he resigned from the temporary position as of December 31, 2018.

[22] Judy Schneider, "Senate Committees: Categories and Rules for Committee Assignments," *Congressional Research Service* 19 December 2014.

[23] The next election for a full term in Arizona will be in 2022.

[24] See, for example, Sunil Ahuja, "Electoral Status and Representation in the United States Senate: Does Temporal Proximity to Election Matter?" *American Politics Research* 22.1 (January 1994): 104-118; Kim Quaile Hill and Patricia A. Hurley, "Symbolic Speeches in the U.S. Senate and Their Representational Implications," *Journal of Politics* 64.1 (February 2002): 219-231; and Kenneth A. Shepsle, Robert P. Van Houweling, Samuel J. Abrams, and Peter C. Hanson, "The Senate Electoral Cycle and Bicameral Appropriations Politics," *American Journal of Political Science* 53.2 (April 2002): 343-359.

[25] Anna Staver, "Colorado's Cory Gardner Breaks Ranks with Senate Republicans, Calls for End to Government Shutdown," *Denver Post* 3 January 2019.

[26] Aggregate calculation was performed by subtracting the number of seats held by Democrats as of October 26, 2018 from the number of seats held by Democrats as of December 10, 2018; both figures are from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

[27] The Arizona Senate is the lone exception. State senate seats in New Mexico were not on the ballot in 2018.

[28] Seth Masket, "Only One State Legislature is Now Under Split Party Control," *Pacific Standard* 13 November 2018.

[29] Kelly Dittmar, "By the Numbers: Women Candidates for State Executive and State Legislative Office in 2018," *Center for American Women and Politics*, 14 September 2018.

[30] Geoff Mulvihill, "Women Elected in Record Numbers in State Legislative Races," *Washington Post* 15 November 2018.

[31] Data from "Women in State Legislatures for 2019," *National Conference of State Legislatures* <http://www.ncsl.org/legislators-staff/legislators/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2019.aspx> and "Women in State Legislatures for 2018," *National Conference of State Legislatures* <http://www.ncsl.org/legislators-staff/legislators/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2018.aspx>.

[32] Mulvihill 2018.

[33] Gary C. Jacobson, "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections," *Journal of Politics* 77.3 (July 2015): 861-873.

[34] "Senate Ratings," *Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales,* 4 January 2019.

[35] "2020 Senate Race Ratings," *Cook Political Report*, 4 January 2019. Cook also rates the Maine seat currently held by Collins as "lean R."

[36] Geoffrey Skelley, "The Suburbs—All Kinds of Suburbs—Delivered the House to Democrats," *FiveThirtyEight* 8 November 2018.

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About the Author

Molly Reynolds is a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. She studies Congress, with an emphasis on how congressional rules and procedure affect domestic policy outcomes. She is the author of the book, "*Exceptions to the Rule: The Politics of Filibuster Limitations in the U.S. Senate*," which explores creation, use, and consequences of the budget reconciliation process and other procedures that prevent filibusters in the U.S. Senate. Current research projects include work on oversight in the House of Representatives, congressional reform, and the congressional budget process. She also supervises the maintenance of "*Vital Statistics on Congress*," Brookings's long-running resource on the first branch of government. Reynolds received her Ph.D. in political science and public policy from the University of Michigan and her A.B. in government from Smith College, and previously served as a senior research coordinator in the Governance Studies program at Brookings. In addition, she has served as an instructor at George Mason University.