

All The Elections To Watch In 2021

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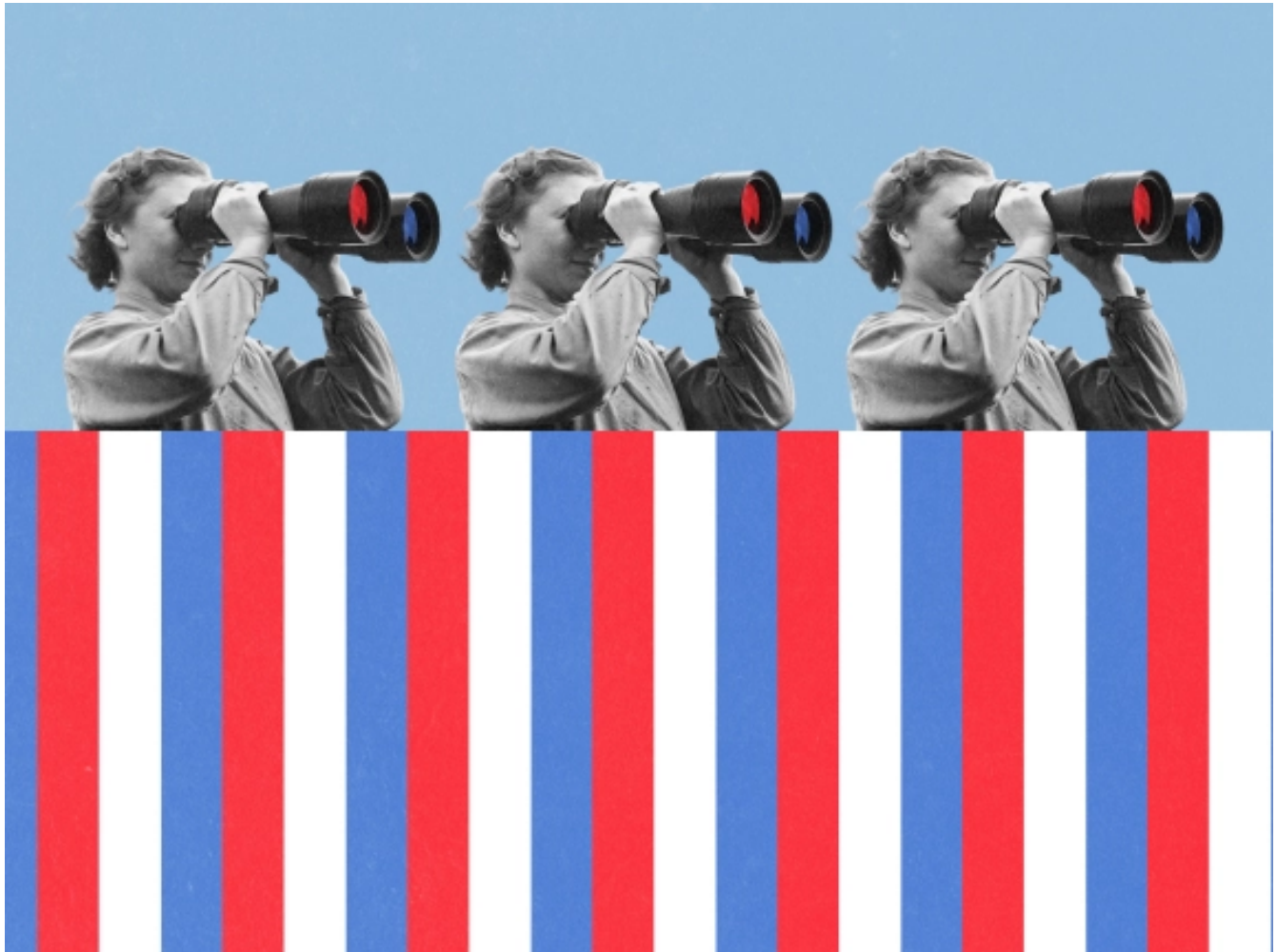


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The wheels of democracy never stop turning — even in odd years. Between the presidential race of 2020 and the midterm elections of 2022, hundreds of elections will be held in 2021 in states and cities whose election calendars don't sync up with most of the rest of the country. There will also be at least four special elections for the U.S. House that not only could affect Democrats' narrow [eight-seat majority](#) but also give us an [early clue](#) as to the political environment in 2022.

Here's a primer on the main races to be aware of this year — and if that's not enough to whet your electoral appetite, you can subscribe to my [Google Calendar](#) of obscure elections for an even more complete schedule.

Governor and other state-level elections

The biggest election of 2021 is probably for governor of **Virginia**. This once-red state has zoomed to the left in recent years — President Biden won it by 10 points in 2020, and it hasn't elected a

Republican to *any* statewide office [since 2009](#) — so Democrats start out as the favorites to win, but the race could be close if the national environment gets more favorable for Republicans.

Additionally, because Virginia governors can't run for reelection, there are competitive contests for both parties' nominations that largely [mirror the national divides in each party](#). The Democratic front-runner, former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, channels Biden as a moderate white man with plenty of experience and name recognition. But just like in the 2020 presidential primary, more progressive and demographically diverse candidates (including two who would each be the first Black female governor in U.S. history) are making the case for a new generation of leadership. The Democratic primary is set for June 8. Republicans, meanwhile, are figuring out how closely they want to tie themselves to former President Donald Trump and balance prevailing grievances like “cancel culture” with traditional Republican messaging. A multi-site convention on May 8 will decide whether their nominee is former state House Speaker Kirk Cox, [pro-Trump pariah](#) state Sen. Amanda Chase or two self-funding businessmen (or one of the other minor candidates). The general election will be Nov. 2.

The only other state with a regularly scheduled gubernatorial election in 2021 is **New Jersey**, a race Democrats should win easily. Biden won New Jersey by 16 points, and Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy (who is running for reelection) has a 59 percent to 36 percent approval/disapproval rating, per a recent [Stockton University poll](#).

However, there will very likely be at least one other gubernatorial election, added to the calendar under unusual circumstances. Activists in **California** have gathered [2.1 million signatures](#) in support of recalling Gov. Gavin Newsom; if at least 1,495,709 of them are found valid, a recall election will be held sometime this fall. Judging by the [rhetoric so far](#), the campaign would likely be a knock-down, drag-out affair, but Newsom [starts it in good shape](#): Despite his mediocre approval ratings, 56 percent of Californians in a [recent poll](#) said they wouldn't go so far as to vote him out of office. That might be because, so far at least, all the major candidates running to replace him — such as former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer and 2018 gubernatorial candidate John Cox — are Republicans, and California is a solidly blue state. That's not the only potential off-cycle gubernatorial election we could see in 2021: There is still a decent chance the [long-simmering recall campaign](#) against **Alaska** Gov. Mike Dunleavy will [qualify for the ballot](#) this year too.

While governors' races will likely be the highest-impact state-level elections of 2021, there are also noteworthy races this year for [lieutenant governor](#), [attorney general](#), [state superintendent of public instruction](#),¹ [state legislature](#), [judgeships](#) and [ballot measures](#). Keep an eye on the **Virginia** House of Delegates in particular. If Republicans can flip the six seats they need to take control of the chamber, they will break Democrats' total control over Virginia state government even if Democrats win the governorship.

Special House elections

There are currently four vacant seats in the U.S. House of Representatives left to be filled by special election: the Louisiana 2nd District on April 24, Texas 6th on May 1,² New Mexico 1st on June 1 and Ohio 11th on Nov. 2.

The **Louisiana 2nd District** and **Ohio 11th District** are both safe Democratic seats, but they could elect very different *kinds* of Democrats. The Louisiana race is a runoff (the [first round of voting](#) took place last month) between state Sens. Troy Carter and Karen Carter Peterson (no relation). Carter is a moderate Democrat, while Peterson has embraced more progressive policies. And in Ohio, the front-runner in the Aug. 3 Democratic primary is [arguably former state Sen. Nina Turner](#), the president of Our Revolution who became a nationally recognized progressive leader as co-chair of Sen. Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign. Turner’s main establishment-aligned foe is Cuyahoga County Council Member Shontel Brown, but there are also five other candidates in the running.

On the other side of the coin, either party could win the **Texas 6th District**, although Republicans are probably favored: According to [Daily Kos Elections](#), Trump won the district 51 percent to 48 percent in 2020. But under Texas’s unusual special-election rules, [all 23 candidates](#) will run on the same ballot, and if no one gets a majority of the vote, the top two finishers — regardless of party — will advance to a runoff election. [Polls suggest](#) that Republican Susan Wright, the widow of the late Rep. Ron Wright (whose death created the vacancy for this seat), is the front-runner. The likeliest Democrat to snag the second runoff slot is probably 2018 candidate Jana Lynne Sanchez, but a Republican like state Rep. Jake Ellzey could also do well enough to lock Democrats out of the second round entirely.

The fourth special election — for the **New Mexico 1st District** — probably won’t be the source of much suspense: Democratic state Rep. Melanie Stansbury is the heavy favorite to defeat Republican state Sen. Mark Moores in a district Biden won by 23 points. However, it will still be worth noting the final margin between the candidates, in this and in all the other special elections this year. Again, it’s generally a [good sign for a party’s prospects in the midterms](#) if it regularly punches above its weight in special elections leading up to them. For example, even though they didn’t always win, Democratic candidates [consistently outperformed their districts’ normal partisan leans](#) in 2017-18 special elections, presaging the 2018 midterms in which they gained a net of 40 House seats and seven governorships.

Mayoral elections

Finally, countless cities and towns will hold municipal elections in 2021, including [at least 548](#) that are electing mayors. The most consequential such election (in terms of [number of people](#) affected), and [undoubtedly one of the most interesting](#), is taking place in **New York City** on June 22. (The winner of the Democratic primary that day will be a heavy favorite in the Nov. 2 general election in the deep-blue Big Apple.) The field to replace outgoing Mayor Bill de Blasio is ideologically, occupationally and demographically diverse: Technocrat and 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang leads in the polls; City Comptroller Scott Stringer and attorney Maya Wiley are fighting over the mantle of “most progressive”; Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams has a regional base from his years of experience in local politics; and former Wall Street executive Ray McGuire has raised [at least \\$7.5 million](#). Making things even more unpredictable, the race will be conducted using ranked-choice voting for the first time.

There are too many other competitive mayoral races to preview, but a few deserve a brief mention. Two huge Texas cities feature stark left-versus-right clashes — rarities in modern urban politics. In **San Antonio** (the nation’s seventh-largest city, with a population greater than Hawaii’s), conservative Greg Brockhouse is [seeking a rematch](#) with progressive Mayor Ron Nirenberg after losing the 2019 race by just 2 percentage points. And up Interstate 35, **Fort Worth** Mayor Betsy Price is one of only two Republican mayors left in the nation’s 25 most populous cities,³ but [her retirement this year](#) has prompted the [first open-seat race there in 10 years](#). The result could be a barometer for how durably blue Texas’s urban and suburban areas have become in the Trump era and, in the event of a Democratic flip,⁴ solidify the national trend of cities becoming uniformly Democratic. Both races take place on May 1, and each will go to a runoff if no one gets a majority.

On the other end of the spectrum, the only question about **Seattle**’s next mayor is whether he or she will be left-leaning or *very* left-leaning. The field includes former City Council President Bruce Harrell, whom the Seattle Times [called](#) “a swing vote between the council’s activist and moderate wings”; former state Rep. Jessyn Farrell, a [transit and environmental activist](#) who is close to organized labor; City Council President Lorena González, a [progressive](#) who has [frequently clashed](#) with outgoing Mayor Jenny Durkan; and Seattle Club Executive Director Colleen Echohawk, a Durkan ally. González and Echohawk would also both be the first women of color to lead Seattle. The field will be narrowed to two candidates on Aug. 3, with a second round of voting on Nov. 2.

Across the country, a city with a [dark history of racism](#) also has the chance to make history with its mayoral race on Sept. 21 (preliminary election) and Nov. 2 (general election). **Boston** has never elected a mayor who is not a white man, but the [five main contenders so far](#) are all people of color, and three are women. Kim Janey, a Black woman who [became acting mayor](#) when ex-Mayor Marty Walsh resigned to become Biden’s secretary of labor, is also still [mulling a campaign](#) and would immediately become one of the race’s heavyweights if she goes for it.

Footnotes

1. In fact, the race for Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction is happening today!
2. Although as we’ll explain, this race will likely go to a runoff on a to-be-determined date.
3. The other is Mayor Lenny Curry of Jacksonville, Florida, whose seat won’t be up until 2023.
4. The race is officially nonpartisan, but many candidates [identify](#) with political parties.