

2026 Midterm Elections (2)

81 Days Out: Upset in Wisconsin and Reassessing the “Ascendant Left”

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Election Dashboard

Bottom line

Voters lean Democratic, Republicans lead on money; In the House ratings, one Republican-leaning seat has become a close race, expanding the number of competitive districts to 19.

Presidential approval

Net, approve minus disapprove

-20.4

2nd-term low



Approve

Disapprove

Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 12 · line since Feb

Generic congressional ballot

National polling average

D +6.7

Democrats lead

Peak D+7.1 (Jun) → D+5.9 → recovering

Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 12 · line since Feb

Gas price, national average

Regular grade, AAA

\$4.04

Up 28% y/y

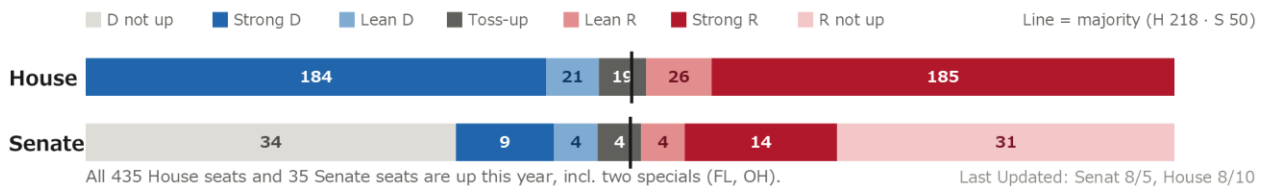
Mid-Jan \$2.83; spiked on the Iran war

AAA · Aug 12 · line since Feb

House and Senate race ratings

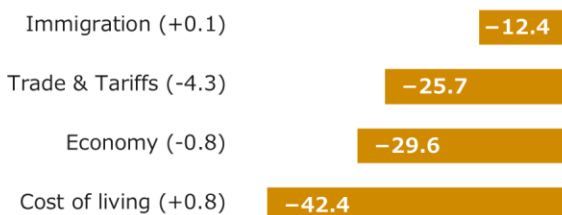
NEW: Revised 8/10: Lean R 27→26, Toss-ups 18→19

Cook Political Report



Approval by issue area

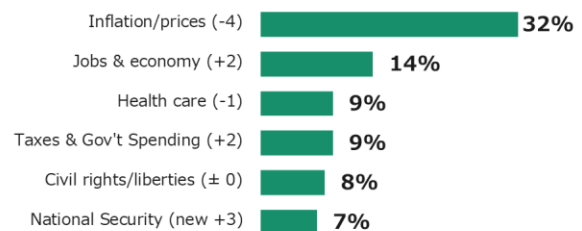
Net, Silver Bulletin



() denotes change from last update
Issue-area averages · Aug.12

Voters' most important issue

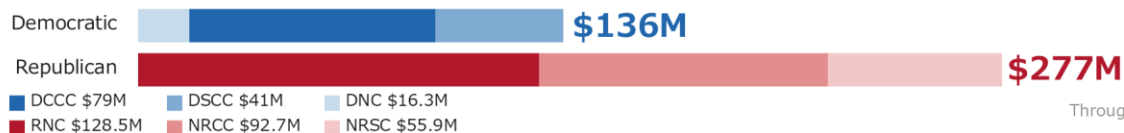
Economist/YouGov



() denotes change from last update
Aug 7-10 · registered voters

Party committee cash on hand (six national committees)

FEC filings



*For each party, the total combines the national committees (DNC/RNC), House campaign committees (DCCC/NRCC), and Senate campaign committees (DSCC/NRSC). Republicans hold roughly twice as much. The DNC separately reports \$18.5 million in debt.

Next up

Next major primary: Aug 18 Florida (Senate special, governor) and Aug 25 South Carolina Republican runoff for Senate.

Election Day: Tue, Nov 3 · 81 days out

Sources: Silver Bulletin (approval, generic ballot) · Cook Political Report (ratings) · Economist/YouGov (top issue) · AAA · FEC

Prepared Aug 13, 2026

- David Crowley, the Milwaukee County Executive, defeated Democratic Socialist Francesca Hong in Tuesday night's Democratic primary for Wisconsin governor. Despite trailing Hong in the polls by as much as 20 points, Crowley, backed by Gov. Tony Evers, pulled off a stunning upset, winning by just 4,000 votes, or 0.5 percentage points.
 - Despite this setback, it may be premature to count out progressives as an ascendant force in Democratic politics. On the same night, progressive Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan defeated moderate Rep. Angie Craig in the Democratic Senate primary in neighboring Minnesota, following a progressive victory in Michigan's Democratic Senate primary last week. Separately, Luke Bronin, the former Democratic mayor of Hartford, defeated longtime incumbent Rep. John Larson in Connecticut's 1st Congressional District, highlighting a separate dynamic within the party: generational change.
 - On the Republican side, the primary to fill the seat of the late Sen. Lindsey Graham was the main event. With Trump's endorsement, Graham's sister, Graham-Nodone, finished first with 32.7% of the vote and will advance to an August 25 runoff against Rep. Ralph Norman. In Minnesota, meanwhile, Trump-backed CEO Mike Lindell lost the Republican Senate primary, raising questions about the limits of the president's influence in GOP primaries.
 - Overall, the result in Wisconsin, while throwing into question the narrative of the "ascendant left" it does not negate it. A virtual unknown state representative, without the endorsement of nationally recognized progressive figures was able to close the margins to 0.5% shows that the progressive movement still has momentum. The question now becomes, whether the Democratic Party can coalesce heading into the general elections in November.
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What was Behind the Upset in Wisconsin

(1) Moderate Victory Stops the Progressive Winning Streak, For Now

The August 11 Democratic gubernatorial primary saw Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley defeat state Representative Francesca Hong, a democratic socialist. With 95% of the vote counted, the margin stood at roughly 4,000 votes, or 0.5 percentage points. Despite trailing in the polls for weeks, Crowley pulled off a stunning upset with the backing of Governor Tony Evers. The Associated Press called the race the following morning at 3:34 a.m. EDT, and the outcome became final when Hong declined to request a recount, an option available when the margin is below 1%, and conceded. Should Crowley win the general election in November, he would become Wisconsin's first Black governor, as well as the first in the Midwest.

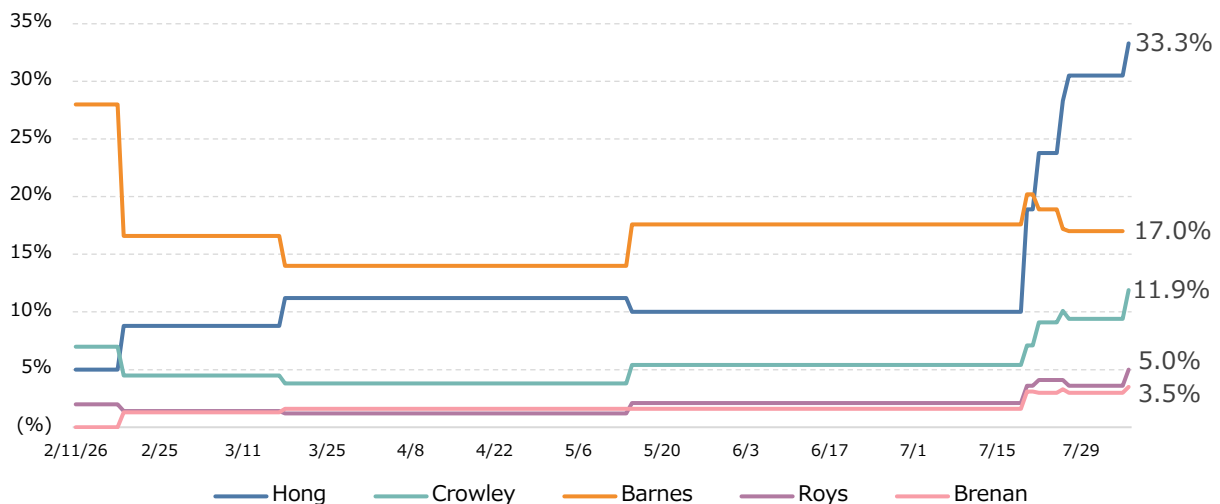
The primary initially drew seven candidates after Evers announced that he would not seek reelection. In July, the Democratic establishment coalesced around Lieutenant Governor Sarah Rodriguez, but she withdrew in mid-July amid a campaign finance scandal. Crowley, who had dropped out a week earlier and endorsed Rodriguez, reentered the race with Evers' backing following her withdrawal. Former Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes was initially considered the frontrunner, having come within 1 percentage point of unseating incumbent Senator Ron Johnson in 2022. But Barnes also withdrew less than two weeks before the primary following allegations of improper conduct. By the final stretch, the race had effectively become a two-way contest between Hong and Crowley.

After reentering the race, Crowley's support grew rapidly. His fundraising reached nearly three times the pace of the year before his withdrawal, though he still trailed by roughly 20 points in the final days of the campaign. Evers' endorsement changed the game. With the sitting governor's backing, "electability" became the key theme of the primary, and establishment votes consolidated behind Crowley. Hong, by contrast, never secured endorsements from national progressive leaders like Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), who had backed El-Sayed in Michigan. Hong essentially

fought the race without large-scale organizational support. The fact that a virtually unknown state representative surged in late July demonstrated real momentum behind Hong's candidacy, but there was limited time to convert that sudden support into a durable campaign organization.

The consolidation of "anti-Hong" votes carried Crowley. Hong's final vote share was 39%. Not far off the average of the final three polls (42.7%). Polling itself was not wrong. What shifted was the moderate coalition. The support base of withdrawn candidates Barnes and Rodriguez and others shifted to Crowley. Combining the pre-election polling support for these candidates roughly equals with Crowley's actual vote share. Looking at county results, Crowley performed strong in rural areas. Progressive support failed to expand beyond the urban areas and college towns. This tracks a familiar pattern.

Chart: Wisconsin Democratic Gubernatorial Primary – Polling Over Time



Source : Decision Desk HO

Another likely factor contributing to the result was candidate and organizational quality. Cook Political Report avoided comparing Hong's rise with El-Sayed's success in Michigan, writing that "she lacked El-Sayed's political skill or a disciplined campaign infrastructure". Her decision to appear on national media backfired too. Rather than boosting her name recognition, it exposed her past social media posts which called for the cancellation of Thanksgiving, defunding police, and abolishing prisons. Material that that Republicans were planning to use in the general election instead surfaced during the primary, contributing to her late decline.

(2) What Happens to the "Ascendant Left" Narrative?

Analysis by Cook summarized Tuesday's primaries this way: "Even as our politics has become much more nationalized, not every candidate or campaign fits into a nice, neat narrative." In Wisconsin, a moderate narrowly defeated a challenger from the left. In neighboring Minnesota, a progressive wins the Democratic nomination for an open Senate seat. And the prevailing dynamic in Connecticut's 1st district was generational change, not ideology or a progressive insurgency.

It's also premature to conclude from Wisconsin that the narrative of an "ascendant left" was overblown. Hong, a virtual unknown state representative, ran a campaign without support from national organizations and came within 4,000 votes to winning the nomination for a governorship in one of the country's most important battleground state. After democratic primaries in New York City, Colorado 1st, senate seats in Michigan and Minnesota, Hong's performance should be taken as further evidence of momentum on the left.

This race also highlighted the difficulty of polling low-turnout summer primaries. Many voters are checked out until late in the campaign. That makes polling particularly challenging. Using the large discrepancy between polling and the eventual result in Michigan's primary, the Crowley campaign argued that Hong's lead in Wisconsin was similarly overstated. Campaign officials contended that state polling often overemphasized voters between the ages of 18 and 45, resulting in a younger sample than the electorate that likely votes. While their internal polling showed that Hong was leading Crowley 42% to 25%, adjusting for age groups to better reflect the voter demographic from the last midterm in 2022, they maintain, results in a tie.

Hong's defeat also reignited a broader debate inside the Democratic Party about the strengths and weaknesses of its progressive wing. Moderates argue that while voters support the economic populism by the left, they are wary of some of the cultural positions associated with its activist wing. The contrast between the Democratic primaries in Wisconsin and Minnesota is clarifying in this respect. Flanagan, focused on economic policy and attacked the Trump administration's immigration policies, while Hong was forced to defend past comments on defunding the police, cancelling Thanksgiving, and abolishing prisons that made her less electable in November. Yet, drawing conclusions from this contrast risks falling into the trap identified by Cook: different candidates running in different states under different circumstances do not necessarily add up to a single national ideological verdict.

So the broader takeaway, then, is not that the "ascendant left" narrative has been disproven, but that progressive momentum does not automatically translate into electoral victory. Hong's campaign demonstrated that a candidate can tap into considerable enthusiasm from the left while still falling short without the political experience, organizational infrastructure, and message discipline needed to navigate the particular challenges of a statewide battleground race. Simultaneously, Flanagan's victory in Minnesota complicates the theory that progressive strength is inherently an "urban" phenomenon. In other words, this ascendant left is neither an unstoppable force nor one Democrats can afford to ignore. Its electoral strength will depend on candidate quality, the political environment on which each race is fought.

(3) November Election: Can Democrats Unite?

The stage is now set for the November elections. Crowley will face Trump-endorsed Rep. Tom Tiffany. Initially, viewing Hong as the easier opponent to defeat, the Republicans poured considerable money to boost her. With Crowley's win, that plan failed. In response, election rater Larry Sabato changed the race from "toss-up" to "lean Democrat".

The challenge for the Democrats now is coalescing around Crowley. In her concession speech Hong said "we have built something that will change politics forever", vowing to continue her involvement in politics. Crowley, meanwhile, called for expanding the coalition beyond party lines. The challenge now for the Democrats is harnessing the enthusiasm generated by Hong and the progressive left and converting that energy into votes in November.

Other Races

(1) Overview of August 11 Primaries

Overall, the August 11 results did not point to a clear advantage for either the Democratic establishment or the progressive wing. Progressives lost the most-watched Wisconsin gubernatorial primary but won decisively in Minnesota's Senate primary. The establishment staged a late comeback in Wisconsin, but prevailed by just 0.4 percentage points. In Connecticut, a push for generational change rather than ideology unseated a longtime incumbent, while on the Republican side, Trump's endorsement was not

enough to decisively settle a closely contested primary. The results suggest that rather than a single national narrative of “establishment versus left,” outcomes continue to depend heavily on candidate quality, campaign organization, and the political circumstances unique to each state and district.

Chart : Key Results from August 11 Primaries

Race	Winner/First Place	Loser/Runner-up	Overview	Result
WI Governor (D)	Crowley	Hong	Statewide race in a battleground state. Gov. Evers backed Crowley in the closing stretch.	Establishment victory
MN Senate (D)	Flanagan	Craig	Statewide race in a battleground state. Open seat following Sen. Smith's retirement.	Progressive victory
MN Governor (R)	Demuth	Lindell	Open seat following Gov. Walz's decision not to run. General election rated “Solid Democratic.”	Establishment victory
CT 1st District (D)	Bronin	Larson (incumbent)	Safe Democratic district. Centrist challenger campaigned on generational change.	Incumbent defeated
SC Senate (R-Special)	Graham-Nodone	Norman	Race to succeed the late Sen. Graham. Top two advance because no candidate won a majority.	Advances to August 25 Runoff

Note: Wisconsin results are based on 98% of the vote counted. The AP called the race early on August 12 after Hong conceded. In South Carolina, state law requires a runoff between the top two candidates when no candidate receives a majority; the runoff will be held on August 25.

(2) Minnesota: Progressive Landslide

In Minnesota, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, a progressive, defeated establishment-backed Rep. Angie Craig 59% to 39% in the Democratic Senate primary to succeed retiring Sen. Tina Smith (D). Contrary to expectations of a close race, Flanagan won by 20 points. A major factor was the backlash over immigration enforcement in the state. During the Trump administration's “Operation Metro Surge” last winter, U.S. citizens Renée Good and Alex Pretti were killed in shootings involving immigration enforcement officers, triggering widespread protests across the Twin Cities despite subzero temperatures. The operation was terminated in February amid public pressure, but its political repercussions continued through the primary.

Craig's vote in early 2025 for the Laken Riley Act, which expanded immigration detention, became a major liability. At the time, the vote was politically understandable for a House member representing a competitive district. After Operation Metro Surge, however, it became much harder to defend. Craig reversed course after the shootings, writing in a local newspaper that she “regretted” her vote, but the move failed to restore her support. With immigration dominating the campaign, Flanagan's own vulnerabilities, including a major fraud scandal involving state social welfare programs and her close

association with Gov. Tim Walz, receded into the background.

The Minnesota result carries two implications. First, Flanagan becomes the second progressive after Michigan's Abdul El-Sayed to win a Democratic Senate nomination in a statewide race in a battleground state. At least in Democratic primaries, it is becoming harder to argue that progressives cannot win statewide. Second, the Trump administration's aggressive immigration enforcement may have intensified the backlash among Democratic voters, shifting the party's internal dynamics in favor of progressives. If Gaza played that role in Michigan, immigration enforcement may have done something similar in Minnesota.

Meanwhile, Sen. Amy Klobuchar won the Democratic gubernatorial primary by a wide margin. On the Republican side, MyPillow founder Mike Lindell, whom Trump endorsed over the objections of the state party, lost to state House Speaker Lisa Demuth. The Cook Political Report rates the general election "Solid Democratic," meaning Republicans already faced an uphill battle. Given longstanding doubts about Lindell's general-election viability, Cook characterized his defeat as "good news for Republicans."

(3) Connecticut: Generational Change

In Connecticut's 1st Congressional District, Rep. John Larson, 78, lost to former Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin, 47, after 28 years and 14 terms in office. Bronin was not challenging Larson from the left; he was a centrist who made generational change, rather than ideology, the central argument of his campaign. Larson's defeat therefore does not fit neatly into the establishment-versus-left framework within the Democratic Party. He becomes the seventh Democratic House incumbent to lose a primary this cycle and the tenth across both parties. Amid a broader pattern of incumbent defeats, generational change proved to be the decisive factor in Connecticut.

(4) South Carolina: Trump's Influence Over Republicans Faces a Runoff Test

The biggest Republican contest was the special Senate primary in South Carolina. Following Sen. Lindsey Graham's sudden death in July, Gov. Henry McMaster appointed Graham's sister, Graham-Nodone, to fill the vacancy, and she took office as interim senator on July 14. President Trump personally urged her to run and endorsed her candidacy. Ten candidates competed in the August 11 primary, with Graham-Nodone finishing first at 32.7%, followed by Rep. Ralph Norman at 24.6%. Rep. Russell Fry and former Gov. Mark Sanford were eliminated. Because South Carolina requires a majority to win, the top two candidates advance to an August 25 runoff. A super PAC supporting Graham-Nodone spent more than \$1.2 million, compared with less than \$50,000 in outside support for Norman. Democrat Andrews will contest the general election, but given South Carolina's overwhelmingly Republican lean, the runoff winner is likely to become the state's next senator.

The runoff, however, should not necessarily be treated as a formality. In South Carolina's gubernatorial primary in June, Trump-endorsed Lt. Gov. Evette finished first in the initial round but was overtaken by Attorney General Wilson in the runoff. Wilson quickly consolidated support from eliminated candidates and, in the closing stretch, even secured an unusual endorsement from Trump of both remaining candidates. Norman, 73, is a prominent member of the House Freedom Caucus who angered Trump by backing former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley in the 2024 presidential race. He also ran in June's gubernatorial primary, finishing third. The key questions in the Senate runoff will be where supporters of the eliminated Fry and Sanford migrate and whether Trump personally travels to the state to campaign for Graham-Nodone during the remaining two weeks.

The runoff will also provide another test of how much electoral influence Trump retains within the Republican Party as he enters the final stretch of his presidency. Across the cycle as a whole, Trump-endorsed candidates have maintained a high win rate in Republican primaries, making it difficult to argue

that his influence within the party has substantially diminished. At the same time, his candidates have suffered several notable setbacks in competitive races. Lindell lost Minnesota's gubernatorial primary, while Evette was overtaken in South Carolina's gubernatorial runoff. There are also cases such as Wisconsin's Tom Tiffany, who secured the nomination without serious opposition. The more relevant question, therefore, is no longer Trump's overall endorsement win rate, but how decisive his backing remains when Republican primaries are genuinely competitive. The August 25 runoff will offer the next test.

(5) Alabama: Republican Redistricting Effort Bears Fruit

Alabama held special primaries following the Supreme Court's April decision in *Louisiana v. Callais*, which narrowed the scope of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. In a special session, the state legislature effectively reinstated the 2023 congressional map that had previously been invalidated as racially discriminatory, redrawing the 1st, 2nd, 6th and 7th districts. As a result, the May 19 primary results were voided, producing the unusual situation of holding a second set of primaries within the same election cycle. There will be no runoff this time; the candidate receiving the most votes becomes the party nominee.

In the 1st District, former Rep. Jerry Carl, who lost his seat following the 2024 redistricting, won the Republican nomination in his bid to return to Congress. In the 2nd District, which Republicans redrew in an effort to reclaim the seat from Democratic incumbent Rep. Shomari Figures, state Rep. Marks secured the GOP nomination. The November contest in the 2nd District will therefore test whether a more Republican-friendly map actually translates into a seat pickup. With Trump's encouragement, Republican-controlled states have increasingly pursued mid-decade redistricting ahead of the midterms. With control of the House potentially coming down to only a handful of seats, these "map wars" are emerging alongside candidate selection as a major factor that could determine the outcome in November.

What to Watch Going Forward

After the August 11 primaries, Democrats head into the fall with a mixed slate: progressive Senate nominees in Michigan and Minnesota and a moderate gubernatorial nominee in Wisconsin. This was not an outcome engineered by the party leadership, but one produced by state-specific political conditions and differences in candidate quality. Our assessment from the previous report that the progressive left is not the majority within the Democratic Party but remains a minority that cannot be ignored still stands. What can now be added is a clearer picture of the variables separating progressive victories from defeats: organizational strength and candidate quality, the presence or absence of national support, and the ability to expand beyond an urban base.

There are two lessons on the Republican side. First, Trump's endorsement can effectively secure nominations in uncontested or one-sided races, but there are increasing instances in which it fails to provide the decisive advantage in closely contested primaries. The August 25 South Carolina runoff will be the next immediate test. Second, the mid-decade redistricting represented by Alabama is emerging as another electoral battlefield alongside the primaries themselves, reshaping the arithmetic for control of the House. The battle for the House majority in November will be determined not only by voters' choices, but also by the maps on which those choices are made.

Three developments warrant particular attention over the next two weeks. First are the August 25 South Carolina runoff and Florida primaries. Second is the initial effort to reunify Democrats in Wisconsin. Of particular interest will be whether national progressive figures such as Sanders and AOC endorse Crowley and whether Hong's supporters rally behind him. Third are potential changes in ratings by major election forecasters. Following Sabato's upgrade of the Wisconsin gubernatorial race, further reassessments—including of the Minnesota Senate race—are likely. Beginning with the next report, changes from the previous edition can be incorporated into the dashboard using directional arrows.

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