10/22/24 / The Battle For Congress

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKSGyiT-o3o)*> Hurry hurry hurry to ring number two, see what they do in the Congress. Passin’ laws and jugglin’ bills, it’s quite a thrill in the Congress*

NOEL: Exactly two weeks from today, Americans will decide, not just who wins the presidency, but the makeup of our Congress.

SCORING IN – Fabulous Flying Merkins

NOEL: At present, Democrats control the Senate and Republicans control the House and that’s why nothing gets done. JKJKJK. But control of both houses and the presidency means a party, in theory, can get a LOT done, so Dems and Republicans are scrapping to the finish in a handful of critical, crucial, key races. And what are those? Ahead on Today, Explained.

[THEME]

NOEL: Matt Friedman covers New Jersey for Politico, and has been reporting on ONE of the dozen or so KEY races that will decide which party controls the House in January. New Jersey’s 7th District.

MATT: Well, this is one of those prototypical districts that is really heavily suburban and sort of upscale rural. It is the type of district that used to be solidly Republican. You could have counted on it being a Republican. But in the Trump era, when the demographics kind of shifted in terms of the party's supporters and the more educated, highly educated suburban, well-off voters started shifting to Democrats. This district is a competitive district in today's world.

NOEL: In the 2022 midterms you may recall, analysts predicted a RED WAVE. That the Republicans would trounce the Democrats, nationwide. That didn’t happen. Something subtler did. Some of those long-Republican districts that turned Blue as a reaction to Trump turned BACK to RED. One was New Jersey 7.

MATT: The seat is held by freshman Republican Tom Kean Junior. He has the name Tom Kean, which is a very popular name in New Jersey. Even today, his father, Tom Kean senior, was the governor from 1981 to 1989.

*<CLIP> TOM KEAN SENIOR, 1984: We feared a host of problems led by the worst economic times to face this nation since the Great Depression.*

MATT: The most popular governor of modern history in New Jersey.

*<CLIP> TOM KEAN SENIOR, 1984: now* *and this my second report on the state of the state. I can tell you that we have not only weathered the storm, but we have emerged with a fresh breeze in our sails.*

MATT: A moderate Republican. And that's the image his son has tried to project. But his son is not as gifted rhetorically and in a lot of political instincts as his father was.

*<CLIP> TOM KEAN JR: Thank you. It's great to be with you this evening.*

SCORING IN—TINY DETECTIVE AGENCY

MATT: He's really not a good public speaker.

*<CLIP> TOM KEAN JR: I ran for public office and for Congress because I won't be able to help people. One of the people I was able to help in the last year was a disabled veteran…..*

MATT: And he's not good at taking questions off the cuff. Never has been. He used to, though, be in a relatively safe legislative district. He didn't really have to worry as much about a gaffe throwing his whole election off. Now he has to worry about that. So he's been even more careful when talking to reporters and he's, I should say, careful. He's been hesitant. Rarely. He does occasionally talk to a reporter, but rarely will take off the cuff questions. He does not hold town hall events. There's a viral video clip of of one of our New Jersey reporters based in Washington, caught him in an elevator in there riding the elevator together. And he's just asking him question after question.

*<CLIP> REPORTER: Are you in favor of mass deportations in New Jersey. What about Ukraine? Do you think Trump will do enough to support Ukraine in the war effort?*

MATT: And Tom Kean is just staring ahead as if he doesn't hear it.

*<CLIP> REPORTER: You pick the topic. I'd love to talk to you about literally anything.*

MATT: It's extremely awkward and it's about something like 90s of this maybe more…

*<CLIP> ELEVATOR SOUND*

MATT: Which is funny because Tom Kean has a history of avoiding questions or trying to avoid questions by ducking into an elevator.

NOEL laughs

MATT: Way back in 2006, he was running for U.S. Senate against Bob Menendez, and it was in Atlantic City Casino. They were at an event together and reporters were trying to get Kane to answer some questions. And Kean said, well, thank you very much. And he ducked into an elevator. Reporters followed him into that elevator. And there was a little bit of awkward questioning.

<*CLIP> REPORTER: Do you plan on changing the campaign tactics.*

*TOM KEAN: we are focusing on the issues that are important to the people of the state of NJ*

MATT: Not much answering. And you said, okay, bye, I got to go now. And he left the elevator.

*TOM KEAN: I am proud of both my record and my vision for the future of the country. Thank you very much…..*

MATT: And then it became apparent the elevator had never left the floor. He had not moved.

NOEL LAUGHS

Scoring out

MATT: He’s avoided… one of my colleagues at Politico has tried to ask him questions. He's ducked into an elevator. So? So he has he does have a history with elevators.

NOEL: What kind of Republican is Kean?

MATT: Tom Kean stresses himself as a moderate Republican. And in many ways, he is on the moderate side of today's Republican Party.= You could argue that the party has gone so far right, in a lot of ways that moderate doesn't mean the same thing as it did 20 years ago. But he calls himself pro-choice, though he has also expressed support for the Dobbs decision.

*<CLIP> TOM KEAN JR I have a 21 year record of supporting pro-choice positions, and I would oppose a national abortion ban.*

MATT: He has not really bucked the party on the important votes. One of the key things here is even though he calls himself a moderate and is pro-choice, he he did vote for Jim Jordan for speaker during that whole speakership crisis that went on for days, weeks, months.

*<CLIP> HOUSE CLERK: “Kean of New Jersey? Jordan.”*

MATT: And that's really been something that his Democratic opponent has has sought to use against him to prove he's not really a moderate when it counts.

*<CLIP> SUE ALTMAN: You could have been a leader in Congress. You could have been someone who from the get go, stood up to Trumpism. You could have not voted for Jim Jordan. You could have not voted for Mike Johnson. You could have not endorsed Donald Trump.*

NOEL: All right. So Tom Kean, the Republican, holds the seat today. Who is the Democrat that's challenging him this year?

MATT: Her name is Sue Altman.

*<CLIP> SUE ALTMAN: I am Sue. I'm a former professional basketball player, turned teacher turned anti-corruption advocate who fought both parties in Trenton…..*

SCORING IN—UNICYCLE FLIPS

MATT: She is a former executive director of the New Jersey Working Families Alliance, now called the New Jersey Working Families Party. That is really how she made her name in New Jersey politics. Now, we know the Working Families Alliance is sort of like, you know, one of the more farther left organizations that's involved in in a lot of mainstream politics. And it was how she really made her name in New Jersey, though, was not as much as going for the causes. It was still active in a lot of causes that organization supports and criminal justice reform, things like that. But really, how she made her name was as an anti-corruption activist. Altman's most famous for her criticism of George Norcross, New Jersey's most powerful Democratic political boss.

*<CLIP> NJ SPOTLIGHT: The aftershocks are still rippling through the state after South Jersey Democratic powerbroker George Norcross was indicted on 13 counts of racketeering yesterday.*

MATT: During a hearing in the state Senate, which was really a softball hearing designed to look good for Norcross. Altman was among the protesters there.

*<CLIP> PROTESTORS: [milling around.]*

MATT: Someone made some noise. Altman wound up getting singled out and dragged out by state police, as I recall, by her elbows.

*<CLIP> PROTESTORS: Shame, shame, shame.*

MATT: And that actually became sort of a defiant look. The way it was came across in New Jersey was actually pretty positive for Altman in the coverage, but it's actually been used by Kean in negative advertisements, the image itself without the surrounding context.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: All right. So let's talk about the arguments that each is making. Altman is a progressive. What is her argument to the people of New Jersey? What's what's what's got her running so close?

MATT: Well, Altman is a progressive historically. She's not emphasizing that now, you know, in a sort of moderate district. I would say her number one issue, as in most of these swing districts, is abortion.

*<CLIP> SUE ALTMAN AD: Jr is nothing like his dad. He has a secret anti-abortion agenda, and I don't like that.*

MATT: She will use the Jim Jordan vote or some of the other maybe procedural votes, the things that, you know, really when the chips are down, he has gone with his party. He has not really been one to stand up and actually disrupt his party.

*<CLIP> SUE ALTMAN: And Congressman, you seem like a really nice guy. But right now, what we need is political courage. We need someone who will stand up to Trump. We need someone who will stand for women's rights…*

MATT: Kean's really tried to hit Altman, as, you know, tie her to the positions that the Working Families Party took while she headed its New Jersey chapter.

*<CLIP> KEAN JR AD: Radical Sue backed tax hikes, defunding the police and supports decriminalizing all drugs, including heroin and fentanyl.*

MATT: Another big one was the defund the police saying. She once in 2020 did tweet something in terms of there are a couple of political machine sheriffs there. And she said, hey, if you want to hashtag defund the police, start here with these two sheriffs in New Jersey. That's also been used. That's really one of the Kean campaign's top, top hits against her.

NOEL: hmm.

*<CLIP> KEAN JR AD: Radical Sue attacked cops and firefighters, even moderate Democrats, because Altman is no centrist. She's a radical liberal activist who threatens your future.*

MATT: And she's actually gone to great lengths to try to explain her what she meant by that. And she's actually apologized for using the hashtag because she says it really was a reductive kind of thing and not what she intended to say. But it's definitely a political liability for her.

NOEL: What do you think this race will be decided by?

MATT: Well, this is really a test of whether this realignment we've seen with suburban better off voters economically and women, especially former women Republicans, have gone really firmly into the Democratic column or whether Republicans can, uh still make inroads with these groups that they used to be able to count on election after election.

SCORING IN—TOOTHBRUSH DRONE

If Altman wins the political realignment we've seen with suburban better off voters economically, women voters will see that new coalition has really helped Democrats potentially take control of Congress and we'll see at the top of the ticket. If not, then Trump still has some sway, even with the traditional Republican voters before 2016, who could have always been counted to vote Republican before the Trump era.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL TURN: Politico’s Matt Friedman. Coming up: America has a Bicameral congress. What’s going on with the other cameral?

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: Back with Burgess Everett, Burgess is Semafor’s Congressional Bureau Chief. Burgess what’s at STAKE this year in who will win control of the senate?

BURGESS: So much because when you have a new president coming in, the fact that you need Senate control to really feel good about being able to confirm your cabinet nominees, your judges, Supreme Court nominees, you really need a Senate majority and you really need like a little bit of wiggle room on your Senate majority which, you know, maybe people don't really care about in the stakes of the election, but it's super important and actually getting the government to function.

Noel: In the first half of the show, we heard about how close the House races are this year. Could go to either party. What's going on in the Senate?

BURGESS: The Senate races are different than the House races just structurally. Only a third of the seats are up every two years because there's six year terms and they're staggered. And so what that means in a year like this where the House and the presidential race are toss ups, the Senate races are not quite toss ups. And the reason why is Democrats only have a 51-49 majority. Joe Manchin's retiring; that gives Republicans a 50th seat. And so now Democrats really have no room for error unless they can take a surprising pickup opportunity in a red state~~.~~

NOEL: Where do the Democrats have hope?

BURGESS: Yeah, so we call these pick up opportunities in the Senate parlance and they are going into Texas today pretty heavily and they've also made an attempt in Florida. Florida's kind of moving away from them structurally. They haven't won there since 2012 and Texas is moving toward them but not fast enough and there's been a million think pieces about how Texas is moving towards the Democrats and that's true Ted Cruz is in a close race but I would still be really surprised if he lost.

NOEL: Tell us what's going on in Texas, because you're right. Every year for the past several years, the Democrats have said, this might be the year that we get Texas, and they still haven't. What's the state of play right now?

BURGESS: Yeah, I mean Ted Cruz only won by about three points in 2018

SCORING IN – Neutral Mordecai

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFW7aA982R4)*> Ted Cruz: This was an election about hope and about the future, and the people of Texas rendered a verdict that we want a future with more jobs and more security and more freedom. CHEERS*

BURGESS: you know, his presidential run and everything that led up to that made him one of the most conservative senators in the country.

*<CLIP> TED Cruz: We will repeal every word of Obamacare CHEERS*

It also made him pretty polarizing. A lot of Republicans didn't like him because of his tactic and the way he kind of criticized Republican leadership.

*<CLIP>LINDSAY GRAHAM: IF you killed Ted Cruz on the floor of the Senate and the trial was in the senate, nobody could convict you… LAUGHS*

And that stuff's not really changed, even though, you know, obviously he's made good with Donald Trump and he's not running for president. So there's just this baked in sort of vulnerability with swing voters for Ted Cruz.

*<CLIP> WFAA: Republican Senator Ted Cruz says members of his own party are voting against him…*

*<CLIP> TEXAS JUDGE: Look at how he’s siding with Trump. And look at how disrespectful Trump was of his wife and his father*

The question just is have the demographics moved enough for Democrats? I think one thing that's happened there is some of Latino voters have been voting more Republican, which has sort of short-circuited, I guess, a quick flip of the switch in Texas.

SCORING OUT

But I would also say like 10 years ago, I never would have told you there'd be two Democrats holding seats in Arizona and Georgia. So these are the kind of things you just got to pay attention to and don’t get too fixed in your beliefs about what is going to happen.

NOEL: Hmm. Tell us about the man who's running against Ted Cruz, Colin Allred. What's his appeal?

BURGESS: Yeah, he's kind of a different candidate than Beto O'Rourke. Beto O'Rourke was this charismatic stand on a table, unabashedly progressive candidate.

*<CLIP> BETO: Hell yes we’re gonna take your AR 15 your AK 47 we’re not going to allow it be used against our fellow Americans anymore…*

Allred is a former football player.

<CLIP> ALLRED AD: I”ve taken down a lot tougher guys than Ted Cruz. So let’s get on the field and find out

He got into the house by winning a battleground seat in a Republican district. So he's running his campaign a little bit more traditionally than Beto O'Rourke.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCGq1wJqg78)*> ALLRED: I know what it's like to go through the grocery store line and swipe your debit card and just say a little prayer and hope that this week you can afford it. That's why I've been so laser focused on lowering folks' costs, on lowering the cost of your prescription drugs, on your health care, on your childcare…*

And we won't know until election day whether he improves on the margins of Beto O'Rourke or not. But I would say he's raising a ton of money. He's been impressive on fundraising.

Allred's message is Ted Cruz is not looking out for you, if I had to boil it down And I watched some of the debate. He talked about, the trip to Cancun, which got a ton of press back in the day.

*<CLIP> Allred: He's never there for us when we need him. When the lights went out in the energy capital of the world. He went to Cancun.*

Colin Allred's not really running to anywhere other than the middle. And he's emphasizing his bipartisanship.

*<CLIP> ALLRED: I was named by an outside group, the most bipartisan Texan in Congress. This is something I've worked at, not just in an election year like he's trying to change his image in this election year. I've done it over the course of my six years in Congress.*

Senator Cruz is kind of doing a little bit of an attempted rebrand in the sense that he's emphasizing his bipartisan deals, which I would not say is something that he's known for, but that's what happens campaign season.

*<CLIP> CRUZ: In my time in the Senate, I have authored and passed 101 different pieces of legislation, two different bills to create new interstates, I-14 from West Texas to East Texas all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. That was Raphael Warnock and me, a liberal Democrat, Cruz Warnock. We passed it. That's going to produce thousands of new jobs…*

NOEL: Alright, so opportunity in Texas for the Democrats. What about in Florida? What's the pickup opportunity there?

SCORING IN – Richard Goes Skating

BURGESS: Yeah, Rick Scott doesn't have the same national profile as Ted Cruz, but he sort of has definitely in Washington has a big profile. He challenged Mitch McConnell for leader.

*<CLIP> SCOTT: We need a sea change. I talked to Trump about this today. He said it's exciting. I'm getting into the race. Think about it. Debt, the border, everything. We we've been allowing this to happen. I am I'm a change agent.*

BURGESS: He ran the National Republican Senatorial Committee and got a lot of criticism for the way that he did that in 2022.

*<CLIP> RICK SCOTT: Hi, Rick. Scott here with some breaking news for our Republicans. The Republicans civil war has been canceled.*

I would say his opponent, Debbie Mucarsal-Powell, is not quite as polished or successful or well known as Colin Allred. She's a former House member. She lost her seat and she's not raising quite as much money.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/debbieforfl/videos/donate-now-to-hold-the-senate-majority/1598757680529087/)*> Debbie Mucarsel-Powell: Please rush in $5. $10 right now to help me flip Florida Blue and restore reproductive rights nationally.*

That's not to say she totally has no chance. I just think if you were doing a hierarchy of which race Democrats feel like could more likely go their way on a surprise in November, it would probably be Texas.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: All right, so the Democrats have pick up opportunities in Texas and Florida. They're staying out of the race in Nebraska. TheDems are on the run in Montana. It is not looking good for Jon Tester there. Where else are the Democrats playing defense this year?

BURGESS: Yeah, it's a pretty big defensive map

SCORING IN – Trees grow While You’re Sleeping (w drums)

I would kind of rank after MontanaOhio is the other red state where they're playing defense.

*<CLIP> The U.S. Senate race in Ohio is in a dead heat with the latest polls showing that incumbent Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown is statistically tied in the race against Republican challenger Bernie Merino.*

Sherrod Brown is running for reelection there for a fourth term. Super interesting race. He's running against a guy who made a lot of money in car sales And Bernie Moreno who just is one of these, you know, motormouth attack machine candidates

*<CLIP> Moreno: there's a lot of suburban women. A lot of suburban women that are like abortions it. If I can't have an abortion in this country whenever I want, I will vote for anybody else. Okay. A little crazy, by the way, but especially for women that are like past 50 I’m thinking to myself…*

Sherrod Brown for your listeners is definitely like a pretty pugnacious person himself.

<CLIP> BROWN: *Bernie Moreno literally stiffed all his stiffed workers out of his own, workers out of $400,000. By taking their overtime, he had to pay it back.*

Sherrod Brown has not had a challenge like this before because in 2012, when he ran, President Obama won the state of Ohio, which obviously is not going happen this time around. So he needs also needs all these Trump voters to come to his side to win re-election. And I wouldn't count them out. mean, think everybody has their little maps about which races are going which way. And I would say that's like the true toss up.

SCORING OUT

After that it's really traditional battleground states and the Blue Wall states all have a Senate race there. Bob Casey's running for reelection in Pennsylvania. Tammy Baldwin's running for reelection in Wisconsin. There's an open seat in Michigan with Alyssa Slotkin, a congresswoman, taking on Mike Rogers, a former congressman.

And then there's two races out west which haven't really come online for the Republicans. The Democrats aren't really sweating them in Nevada and Arizona.

NOEL: If you ask reporters who are covering the presidential campaign who's gonna win this year, you will not get a straight answer. It's just too close, nobody wants to make a prediction. What does your reporting tell you about who's likely to win in the Senate? Or is it not worth playing that game?

BURGESS: No, mean, it's because of the way that the map is structured. You have to say that Republicans are favored to win the Senate. It doesn't mean they're definitely going to win the Senate. What it would require for Democrats is either a surprise in one of those offensive states that we had or like a massive polling error in Montana. And it's not unheard of. Susan Collins was left for dead politically in 2020. The polls showed that she had no chance. I will tell anyone this because I think it's important to be honest with yourselves. I'm from Maine and I thought she was going to lose and I got it horribly wrong. But until we see the election results, you know, you can't say that's definitely gonna happen.

SCORING IN – Bees

It's a rolling battle for the Senate and every seat matters.

NOEL:That was Semafor’s Burgess Everett.Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan and Peter Balonon-Rosen. It was edited by Amina al-Sadi and fact-checked by Matthew Collette, Amanda Lewellyn and Laura Bullard. Our engineers are Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]