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On Election Day, Here's What Higher Ed Should Watch For

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Here we go again. Tuesday’s midterm elections might be, first and foremost, a referendum on the presidency of Donald J. Trump, but voters will also have their say on a broad range of issues affecting higher education, including the free-college movement and Betsy DeVos, the nation’s education secretary. Here’s *The Chronicle’s* guide to the races and trends to watch for as the returns roll in on

Tuesday night.

What's next for the free-college and college-affordability movements?

In the final weeks of the campaign, health care and immigration have been the dominant themes. But higher education has emerged as an issue in several closely watched gubernatorial races, with candidates campaigning on free-college and College Promise programs.

In **Maryland's** race for governor, the Democratic challenger, Ben Jealous, [has proposed](#) free community college for the state's residents. Jealous also wants to make college free for students who plan to enter in-demand professions, and has said he would seek to eliminate the need for student loans at all four-year public colleges.

Shortly after Jealous announced those proposals, the Republican incumbent, Larry Hogan, proposed expanding Maryland's tuition-free program, originally centered on community colleges, to include four-year institutions as well.

In **Arizona**, the Democratic candidate, David Garcia, [has proposed](#) making community-college tuition free for students who

remain on track to receive a two-year degree. And if he becomes **Connecticut's** next governor, Ned Lamont, a Democrat, [wants the state](#) to pay for the first two years of community college for any Connecticut residents who commit to living and working in the state after they graduate.

Democrats have certainly become more vocal on the issue since Sen. Bernie Sanders's run for president in 2016. A [review](#) by *Inside Higher Ed* found that nearly 10 Democratic gubernatorial candidates are running on some kind of free-college plan.

But the free-college movement isn't just in the hands of governors. In **Seattle**, voters [will be asked](#) if property-tax revenue should be allocated to a free-college program for graduates of the city's public schools.

Will voters give "Education Governor" Scott Walker a third term?

Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, became a darling of the right for his successful push to change collective-bargaining rules in the state. His hard-fought victory made him plenty of enemies on Wisconsin campuses; his subsequent proposals to cut \$300 million from the University of Wisconsin's budget, and to remove tenure protections from state law, ruffled even more feathers.

Now Walker faces a sharp challenge from the state's school superintendent, Tony Evers, a Democrat. So the governor has tried to transform himself. As the [Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel](#) [explains](#): "Knowing he would be under attack on the issue, Walker proclaimed himself 'the education governor' and has aired ads touting a \$649 million increase in funding for public schools that

the governor proposed.”

On higher ed, Walker [has bragged](#) to voters about freezing tuition at campuses in the Wisconsin system over the last six years. But Evers says those freezes, as well as a \$250-million cut in funds for the UW system in 2015, are “destroying higher education in Wisconsin.” Will Walker’s rebranding work? The race is close, but [many analysts think](#) Evers has the upper hand.

Other gubernatorial races to watch.

In **Illinois**, the Democratic nominee, J.B. Pritzker, has hammered the Republican governor, Bruce V. Rauner, for deep cuts in higher education that occurred during a protracted stalemate between Rauner and lawmakers over the state budget. Rauner’s opponents say the loss of appropriations [led nearly 20,000 Illinois students](#) to seek higher education outside the state in 2016 alone.

Pritzker [wants funding](#) for the state’s universities and community colleges to be returned to the levels prevailing before Rauner’s election. For his part, Rauner [has championed](#) greater collaboration between the business community and universities in Chicago. He has said a booming economy will stimulate greater tax revenue, thereby enabling the state to spend more on higher education. Polling throughout the race has put [the incumbent far behind](#).

In **Oregon**, the Republican candidate, Knute Buehler, [told The Oregonian](#) that the Democratic incumbent, Kate Brown, hadn’t done enough to raise college-going rates. Brown said she is proud of her work in reforming the state’s college-funding formula to reflect performance rather than enrollment.

And in **Ohio**, the former chief of the U.S. Consumer Financial

Protection Bureau, Richard Cordray, wants voters to elect him the state's next governor. Cordray has [run on his record](#) as a watchdog at the CFPB, which frequently [tussled with student-loan companies](#). Seeking to counter that image, Cordray's Republican opponent, Mike DeWine, has cast Cordray as a Washington insider who mismanaged the agency. The current governor, John R. Kasich, is barred from running for re-election by a term-limits law.

Did students have trouble voting?

With close races being contested at the federal and state levels across the country, election watchers will pay special attention to students' ability to vote. An early-voting location at **Texas State University** [was closed](#) just three days after it began operating, but it has since [reopened after an outcry](#). In **Florida**, early-voting stations on college campuses [almost didn't open](#) because of a [ban on campus locations](#) imposed by Ken Detzner, the Republican secretary of state. A court order striking down the ban eventually opened up the polls closer to where students live and study.

Similarly, a judge [struck down a law](#) in **New Hampshire** that would have required students to prove they lived in the place they were voting. And in **North Dakota**, college students, in addition to Native Americans, could [find it more difficult to vote](#) because of a new voter-identification law.

This year's ballot measures include questions of funding, the culture wars, and an unusual amendment in Florida.

Along with the free-college ballot initiative in Seattle, other governments are seeking direct input from voters on issues of higher education. In [Maine](#), [New Jersey](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Rhode](#)

[Island](#), voters will decide on bond measures financing construction projects on their states' colleges campuses, as well as for career-development programs.

In [Montana](#), voters will be asked — as they are every 10 years — if they wish to continue taxing real estate and personal property to support the Montana University system for another decade. (They've voted “yes” in every decade since 1948.)

In [Maryland](#), a measure would use revenue from video lotteries to support “opportunities for career and technical education programs that lead to a job skill or certificate, and allow students to obtain college credit and degrees while in high school at no cost to the student.”

In [Massachusetts](#), voters will have the option of repealing a law enabling transgender people to access areas, such as bathrooms and locker facilities, based on their gender identification. The [most recent polls](#) have indicated that more than 70 percent of voters want to defeat the measure and keep the law on the books.

And in [Florida](#), a sprawling measure will first ask voters if Floridians should provide death benefits to the spouses of first responders and active-duty members of the military. The measure does not mention that those benefits are already codified into law at various levels of government.

Those obviously popular provisions are accompanied by two other proposals that would have [a real impact on higher ed](#). The first: Public colleges would be able to increase tuition only with a “supermajority” vote of their own Board of Trustees and another one by the state's Board of Governors. The second would enshrine the structure of the state's system of higher education in the

Florida Constitution.

Academics on the ballot.

More than two dozen current and former academics are [running for election](#) in federal and state legislatures against incumbent representatives. Here is a list of races to watch. Let us know if there are others we missed.

On civil-rights policy, it may be House Democrats vs. Betsy DeVos.

If Democrats retake control of the U.S. House of Representatives, their current ranking member on the Committee on Education and the Workforce, Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, would probably be selected as the committee's chairman. Scott's background as a former civil-rights lawyer [has led to speculation](#) that he would exercise his oversight powers to examine the Education Department's civil-rights policies, which have been changed — softened, critics say — under DeVos.

Democrats have [sought to tie](#) the unpopular DeVos to their Republican opponents. In **California**, Katie Porter, a Democrat, has [tried to cast her opponent](#), U.S. Rep. Mimi Walters, as in league with DeVos on issues like the rollback of Obama-era Title IX policies. Other candidates have [produced similar ads](#).