MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Following Election Day results? Here's what a Minnesota political scientist says to watch 01M6HCWS5K2JBCBNK48FGY1RAC

HOST: All 435 seats in the US House are up for grabs, along with 35 Senate seats and dozens of governor's races. Republicans are trying to hold on to their majorities in Congress, while Democrats are hoping to take control of at least one chamber to put a check on President Donald Trump. Here to talk about the biggest races and what we're seeing from voters and what these results could mean is Larry Jacobs, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota. Welcome back to the program, Larry.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

HOST: Larry, what is your overall sense for the national mood going into Election Day?

LARRY JACOBS: Nervous and angry. I mean, I think there are a lot of people who see this election as unusually important, and frankly, that's across the full spectrum. And I'm hearing and seeing a very strong turnout. So that tells me it's very competitive. People feel like their vote matters, which it does. And this is not one of those elections that people sleep through. They're on their toes, and I have a hunch there's going to be a lot of people staying up late trying to figure out how it turns out.

HOST: We've seen this already record early voting. The midterms are often described as a referendum on the President at any time. From what you're seeing, how much is this election about President Trump, and how much is it about these candidates and the issues and issues that pertain to individual states and districts?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, we're going to say something general, which is yes, it is a referendum on the President. And this President in particular has strong disapproval ratings, and they're held pretty intensely by half the population or more. So that's significant. It's creating a lot of headwind for Republican candidates.

But I think the states and their partisan balance. In Texas, there's a very strong Republican tilt. In Florida, it's equally strong. So their kind of animosity towards Donald Trump is going to have less effect. In Minnesota, where you might expect it to be more influential. We are seeing some influence with regards to fraud and slowing down the momentum that Peggy Flanagan might have had.

HOST: Yeah. Let me ask you about that. Because here in the state of Minnesota, there are a couple of issues. Fraud has been a big issue. Immigration a spotlight definitely on Minnesota in the past year or so. How does Minnesota compare with other states when you are talking about some of these trends across the country? Is Minnesota different just because of the sheer amount of attention that issues here have gotten?

LARRY JACOBS: Yes. And I think that to some extent, the Senate race was a sleeper. And about two weeks ago, the country woke up and said, whoa, this is a really close race. It's a toss up. And that appears to be related to the fact that Peggy Flanagan is perceived to be ideologically extreme and because she was Lieutenant Governor.

And so there you've got an example of pretty big pushback on Donald Trump in the state of Minnesota. But in that race, it's being counteracted to some extent by concerns about the candidate for the Democratic Party.

HOST: We talked a lot about some of the early voting numbers. We've talked about how polls can be kind of wrong in the past, because maybe as many Republicans don't respond, or sometimes, maybe the Democrats are showing up to early vote, but then Republicans just show up the day of. And so how are you looking at this idea of this record early voting?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think those questions are very legitimate. And we don't know, for instance, as you're implying, whether a lot of the early voting is by Democrats who were concerned about interference on election day. So they wanted to get out early before there would be any interference and cast their ballot. So I think you're absolutely right.

And we have seen across the country, in many states, a significant advantage where we have the data in terms of Democratic turnout over Republican turnout. But I think that we have to take that to be interim, and we need to see all the ballots cast.

HOST: Let's talk about the governor's race for a moment with Speaker Lisa Demuth and Senator Amy Klobuchar. What are you going to be watching today?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I'm very interested in the turnout in the Twin Cities. For the Democrats to win, they need a very large turnout in the urban core. That is the foundation of any winning coalition they're going to have statewide. Then they're going to want to pick up a majority in the suburbs. And then hold down their defeats in greater Minnesota, where Republicans will do much better.

Amy Klobuchar is, according to the polls, losing Greater Minnesota to Lisa Demuth but not as badly as, for instance, Peggy Flanagan. And she appears to be, Klobuchar appears to be doing, according to the polls, well, in the urban core. So that has been the formula for Democrats. Do really well in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Hennepin and Ramsey. Win the suburbs. And that has been very hard for Republicans to counteract.

On the other hand, I think if you look at the campaign, for instance, by Michele Tafoya, she is clearly trying to prevail in the suburbs. She's pitched herself as a kind of more moderate, independent Republican who's pro-choice. And I think that's very much geared to the more independent-minded suburban voter.

HOST: So we know that there are these issues that a lot of people have started to associate with Minnesota because of how much it's been talked about during the campaign when you talk about immigration or fraud. But we also that the economy and the cost of living is just really tough for a lot of people right now.

And we know that the candidates, from the Senate race, Michele Tafoya, Peggy Flanagan, talked a lot about affordability, talking about life stories and not being able to afford things growing up and just what that's like. Senator Klobuchar and Speaker Demuth have talked a lot about accountability getting people to get some of their money back and how to save and root out fraud. So where does the economy fit into this picture as it relates to Minnesotans?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think all over the country, the economy and inflation, cost of fuel has really been the top issue. For instance, a poll last week by Survey USA showed that there is 39% listed inflation affordability as the top issue. That's almost 4 out of 10.

Whereas those talking about fraud, it was much less. It was 9%. And if voters are casting their ballots with the issue of affordability in the front of their minds, and that's the referendum is on that, it's going to work to the Democrats' advantage. Whereas voters are going and casting their ballot with fraud as their top concern, that would work against Democrats.

HOST: Larry, are there a couple of other just national races that you think Minnesotans should be really keeping a close eye on?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I mean, the big national story is going to be what happens in the Senate. The Democrats need to pick up net four seats. So for instance, if the Democrats lose the race in Michigan, which has had quite a controversy in the last 48 hours, that's going to set them back. So what's going to happen in Michigan? And how are the Democrats going to do in states like Iowa and Texas, where there's very close races. And it's really going to come down to probably a tiny percent. We may not those results for days because it's going to be that close.

HOST: Yeah. Tell us more about that. Just to give a summary for folks of the Michigan situation of a primary Democrat candidate after losing and endorsing the Republican candidate instead the one from her own party. And we won't get into that whole situation. I just wanted to give folks an idea because you said there was a controversy there. But it might not be something that we understand the makeup of Congress. What is this going to look like for a few days or even longer. What are you thinking?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, again, because the races look like they're going to be so close, I think in the Senate, it will probably be a good part of this week before we know. It's going to come down to the ballots being cast tonight. But then they're going to be counted, and then ballots that have to be open because of maybe they're overseas ballots cast by folks in our military services. So that's going to take time.

I think, for the US House, we'll probably sooner, maybe even later tonight because it looks like the Democrats are going to do better there. And they may well get the majority and won't be a squeaker.

HOST: All right, Larry, we really appreciate your time as always. Have a great night.

LARRY JACOBS: OK. Thanks a lot.