Whenever Donald Trump is on the ballot, things don’t go according to plan. It may only be fitting for a year such as 2020 that we’re staring at a strange combination of election results and reaction.

Republicans are taking victory laps while Trump is about to become the first incumbent president to lose re-election in 28 years, Democrats maintained their House majority and gained at least one seat in the Senate. Yet the post-election mood within the Democratic Party is largely funereal.

The GOP euphoria is fueled by potentially keeping the Senate and dramatically overperforming expectations in the House. Those expectations were set by a majority of national, state, and district level polls (partisan and nonpartisan, public and private) which showed the president severely underperforming in nearly every part of the country. With the benefit of election results, it’s clear that the data underestimated Trump’s support once again.

Rather than taking President-elect Joe Biden’s victory as a reason to turn the page from Trump, most Republicans are grateful for how the current president boosted the party’s prospects down the ballot. Meanwhile the progressive and pragmatic wings of the Democratic Party are back to fighting with each other after accomplishing their collective mission of preventing Trump from getting a second term.

From a 30,000-foot level, our projection that the most likely outcome was a Democratic trifecta in the White House, Senate, and House is still a possibility and won’t be known until early next year. Democrats have to win both competitive and expensive runoff races in Georgia on January 5 to gain control of the Senate.

In the race for the White House, Biden is on pace to win all of the states Hillary Clinton carried four years ago and five states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia) that Trump won in 2016. That would give Biden 306 Electoral College votes— the same number Trump received four years ago.

Republicans outperformed expectations in the congressional races. Trump’s stronger-than-expected presidential performance shut off virtually all of Democrats’ paths to control of the Senate, leaving the party with a lone route to control through Georgia. In the House, Republicans could see a double-digit gain of seats but fall a handful of seats short of the majority, which is a stark contrast to pre-election projections of a double-digit Democratic gain in the House.

Even though control of the Senate has not been decided, it’s clear that Washington will be functionally divided next year and there will have to be some compromise when addressing any of the major challenges the country faces.
It All Comes Down to Georgia for Senate Control

Following Election Day, we know the 2021 US Senate will have 50 Republicans and 48 Democrats. With Vice President-elect Kamala Harris set to take office as President of the Senate, that means Democrats need to win two more seats to claim control of the chamber.

They will have the opportunity to do just that on January 5, when both of Georgia’s Senate seats are on the ballot. One is a regularly scheduled election between GOP Sen. David Perdue and Democratic documentary filmmaker Jon Ossoff. The other is a special election featuring appointed GOP Sen. Kelly Loeffler and Democrat Raphael Warnock, senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Because no candidate in either race received an absolute majority of the vote in November, under Georgia law the top two vote-getters in each contest have to compete in a January runoff. Georgia’s general election runoff law dates back to the mid-1960s, and in the modern era the system has been largely unknow to Democrats.

Georgia’s Secretary of State website keeps records of all statewide elections going back to 1988. In those 30 years, there have been eight statewide general or special election runoffs. Democrats have won just one of them. Moreover, before Joe Biden’s likely victory, Democrats had not won a single statewide election in Georgia since 2006. But that doesn’t guarantee GOP success this time.

Much of the initial confidence in GOP chances of winning the runoffs is based on the history of Georgia runoffs and the assumption that Georgia is still a Republican state. But Biden’s performance poked a hole in that thinking. Fundamentally, it looks like two Republican senators are going to be running for election in a Biden state. Based on the lack of ticket-splitting nationwide, the November results point to two very competitive and expensive races in Georgia.

The biggest questions surround turnout, which historically has dropped sharply in runoff elections. How motivated will Republican voters be when President Donald Trump is not on the ballot? Will the GOP base still show up after party officials, including Sens. Loeffler and Perdue and all incoming Republican members of Georgia’s congressional delegation, keep sowing seeds of distrust about the entire election system? And how engaged will Democratic voters be after they completed their mission to stop a second Trump term?

Considering how close the races were on November 3 and the questions surrounding turnout on January 5, these races should be considered toss-ups at the outset.