

The 2022 Midterms: Why races with celebrity candidates are interesting for both academics and journalists



There are many close electoral races in this year's midterm elections, but a handful have captured the imagination of the public, academics, and the media in the US and abroad. [Caroline Leicht](#) looks at why races in Alaska, Pennsylvania and Georgia have come to the forefront of reporting about the midterms and argues that the celebrities taking part hold the name recognition that encourages both media reporting and academic research. This dual focus ensures a level of public awareness that may not be found in races where celebrities are not running.

- Looking ahead to elections across the US in 2022, our mini-series, '[The 2022 midterms](#)', explores aspects of elections at the presidential, Senate, House of Representative and state levels, and also reflects on what the results will mean for US politics moving forward. If you are interested in contributing, please contact Rob Ledger (ledger@em.uni-frankfurt.de) or Peter Finn (finn@kingston.ac.uk).

In August, Democrats celebrated the surprise win of Mary Peltola in the special election for the House seat in Alaska's At-Large District. The race received substantial attention from journalists and academics alike, not least because of the involvement of former Alaska Governor and 2008 Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. But what drives interest in such "celebrity races"?

The Palin Factor in Alaska

I covered the 2020 US Election as a journalist and am now watching the 2022 Midterms as an academic. As a journalist, my interest in the Alaska election in August would have been driven by name recognition and the novel nature of the election and the running candidate. First, Palin is a well-known political and public figure and news audiences outside of the United States are familiar with her. Second, this was the first time Alaska used its new [ranked choice voting](#) system in an election that featured Peltola: the first Indigenous Alaskan to serve in Congress, the first woman to represent the state in the House, the first Alaska representative to have been born in the state, and the first Democrat to win the Alaska House seat since 1972.

As an academic, I looked at the election from a slightly different perspective, but my interest arose from similar areas. My research focuses on gendered media representations of candidates and on political satire's role in elections. The Alaska special election saw two women and two men competing for the House seat, thus generating a good sample for analysis of gendered media representations.

Second, Palin's celebrity was a factor here too. When Palin was the Vice-Presidential candidate in 2008, she was parodied by Tina Fey on the US sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). The portrayal became widely popular and has been [linked to unfavorable views of Palin](#). In the run-up to the Alaska election in August, public discourse quickly turned to the [infamous SNL portrayal](#), recalling characteristics attributed to Palin by Fey. Many American voters also took to [social media](#) to call for Fey to reprise the role on SNL.

Georgia and Pennsylvania: Celebrity Races to Watch

The Alaska special election is not the only "celebrity race" to watch this year. In the upcoming US Midterm Elections, two races have gained particularly high attention: The Senate races in Georgia and Pennsylvania.

In Georgia, incumbent Raphael Warnock (D) is running against Republican Herschel Walker. Both candidates are celebrities in their own right. Warnock helped flip the Senate blue with his win in the 2021 Georgia runoff election and had previously been well-known as a senior pastor in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church where Martin Luther King, Jr. was a pastor. Walker's celebrity status has less to do with politics. He is a former NFL player and competed in the 1992 Winter Olympics on the American

bobsleigh team. Former President Donald Trump has endorsed Walker in the Senate race.



["Sarah Palin"](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [Gage Skidmore](#)

In Pennsylvania, Democrat John Fetterman is running against Republican Mehmet Oz. Like Warnock, Fetterman brings political celebrity to the table. Since 2019, he has served as Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania and received national attention when Trump alleged election fraud in the state in 2020. Oz is known as a regular guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the lead in the popular yet widely criticized *The Dr Oz Show* which ran from 2009 to January 2022. Like Walker, Oz has received Trump's endorsement for the Senate race.

What Drives News Interest in Celebrity Races?

A month before Election Day, the FiveThirtyEight Election Forecast had Warnock winning in [Georgia](#) with an estimated 50.2 percent vote share and predicted a popular vote share of 50.7 percent for Fetterman in [Pennsylvania](#). But they are not the only [close races](#). So, why are these "celebrity races" receiving so much attention?

From a journalistic perspective, these races tick many of the boxes for determining

newsworthiness. First, Walker and Oz are celebrities from sports and television and may thus already be known by many. Second, Trump, who is not only the former president but a polarizing political figure who remains in the headlines with new controversies every so often, has endorsed the Republican candidates in both races.

While [research in political science](#) suggests that such endorsements may not hold as much weight as journalists tend to give them, they still matter. In this example, an endorsement from Trump gives the candidates – and, in turn, the races – international name recognition. News consumers in Europe, for instance, may not necessarily be familiar with or interested in state-level candidates in the United States, but they are certainly familiar with Trump and have a continued interest in news about him.

Finally, both Walker and Oz hold a celebrity status that is comparable to that of Trump when he ran in 2016. For journalists this is a recipe for newsworthiness: will this new brand of celebrities-turned-politicians prevail? Are public figures from sports and television more appealing to voters than career politicians? How much is an endorsement from Trump worth and will Trumpism hold firm?

The Academic Perspective and the Journalistic Perspective: (Not) Worlds Apart?

Of course, such questions are also relevant from an academic perspective, but in a different manner. In the simplest terms, the academic approach would be more analytical and explanatory whereas the journalist approach would be more descriptive and observational. Journalists tend to cover a wider variety of topics over the course of a campaign but with slightly less depth and usually without theoretical frameworks or extensive data analysis.

Questions such as the ones above might appear as a hook, a headline or a provocative prompt at the end of a news article, but they would not be definitively answered in the way we would expect them to be answered in academic research. Journalism and academia have different approaches, but there are certainly similarities in what journalists may deem newsworthy and what academics may deem worthy of research. And with implications beyond 2022, the “celebrity races” in the Midterms may just be of interest to both.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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