

Explainer

2026 US MIDTERM ELECTIONS: KEY ISSUES & DEBATES

Namat Abulebada

WHAT ARE THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS & WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

On November 3, 2026, the United States (US) will hold its midterm elections. Held two years into a president's four-year term, the elections mark the halfway point of a presidency. They provide voters with the opportunity to elect the members of the two chambers of Congress - the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Congress plays a central role in shaping US domestic and foreign policy, given their mandate of passing laws, approving government spending, and exercising oversight over the executive branch. In many ways, the midterms also serve as a review of the incumbent president's first two years in office.

As such, the party that controls the two chambers of Congress would have considerable influence on any president's plans. The extent of this influence, however, depends on how many seats each party holds in the two chambers. The House of Representatives has 435 seats, while the Senate has a hundred. The House representatives serve two-year terms, meaning that all seats are contested during the midterms. As for the second chamber, Senators serve for six years, which means that only around one-third of Senate seats are contested. The 2026 midterms will thus be held for all 435 seats of the House and 35 Senate seats.

For a clear majority in the House, a party needs to acquire at least 218 seats, while for the Senate, 51 seats are required. The Republicans currently control both chambers, holding a narrow majority of 219 seats in the House and 53 seats in the Senate.

While the current balance of power gives Republicans an advantage, historical precedent shows that the party in power usually tends to lose seats in the midterms. This precedent, combined with the lack of coherent and consistent messaging from the White House, puts the Republicans in a challenging position as voters head to the polls in the coming weeks.

CAN REPUBLICANS & DEMOCRATS HOLD THEIR PARTIES TOGETHER?

The midterms are taking place against a paradoxical backdrop: both the Republican and Democratic parties remain highly polarized against one another, while also experiencing significant tensions internally within their own parties as well. It remains difficult to decenter President Trump and his policies from the future trajectory of the Republican Party, despite growing internal opposition against tariffs and involvement in wars abroad, as well as the rising costs of living as a result. The Democrats, on

the other hand, remain fractured and without clear leadership capable of rallying the different factions of the party together.

Despite Trump's grip over the party, Republicans are increasingly split between choosing to continue to support him publicly, which will risk their prospects in the 2028 elections, and deciding to break away completely to spearhead a future revival of the party instead. The MAGA movement continues to command strong support among many voters, but tensions have emerged within the movement, with more influential voices willing to challenge the president's agenda. These disagreements have made it harder for Republicans to have a more united policy agenda ahead of the midterms.

The Democratic Party faces a different kind of internal fracture. One of its central disagreements is over what the party should stand for, and how progressive it should be. The main divide is largely between the moderate centrists, the progressives, and the democratic socialists. This friction has become increasingly visible in the Democratic primaries, where progressive and democratic socialist candidates have made gains in several states. For example, in August, candidate Abdul El-Sayed won the Michigan Democratic primary for the Senate, defeating Haley Stevens who had the backing of much of the Democratic establishment. While El-Sayed's victory demonstrated the growing influence of the progressive wing, the narrow margin of his win also highlighted how closely divided the Democrats remain.

WHAT ISSUES ARE LIKELY TO SHAPE THE ELECTIONS?

The Economy & Cost of Living

The current state of the economy is the most defining issue, with 47% of registered voters stating that the cost of living will be the main deciding factor of who they endorse in the elections.¹ While inflation has indeed fallen since Trump took office, the cost of goods remains high, with gas prices at almost their highest levels since 2022, and consumer prices 3.4% higher than in August 2025.

For Republicans running in the midterms, their campaigns have focused on framing the Trump administration's economic policies, including tax cuts, investments, and efforts to support American businesses, as wins. However, the administration itself still faces the challenge of convincing voters that these policies are actually improving their day-to-day lives. Trump has sought to address affordability directly, promising a \$5,000 payment to all adults if Republicans win the midterms, in a highly controversial move.

On the other hand, Democrats have made the need for better affordability a central

part of their campaign. Their candidates have focused on the pricing of food, housing, healthcare, and energy, seeking to center the election around household finances rather than simply headline measures of economic performance.

The Iran War

The conflict's economic consequences have made the issue of the war particularly significant for voters. Disruptions to energy markets and higher oil prices have added to existing concerns over the economy. For voters, the issue is not mainly about foreign policy and national security, but about the price they are forced to pay for a conflict that is increasingly impacting their everyday lives. Democrats have criticized the administration's policy on Iran, questioning the war's objectives, costs, duration, and broader consequences. They have also criticized Trump's launching of the war without gaining prior congressional approval.

Meanwhile, some Republicans stand firmly with the Trump administration on this file, viewing the war as a historic opportunity to combat Iran's ability to harm US interests, as well as to dismantle its nuclear program. However, the unplanned consequences of the war, including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on US bases, have led to divisions within the Republican Party itself. The inconsistency in the White House's approach has caused further polarization on the issue, given early promises of the war taking no more than a few weeks back in March currently culminating in a dangerous stalemate of neither war nor peace. Some Republican Senators, including Thom Tillis, voted alongside the Democrats to advance a resolution aimed at limiting Trump's powers on Iran. Republican representative of the state of Kentucky, Thomas Massie, has also attempted to impeach current Secretary of War Pete Hegseth over the war.

ICE & Immigration

Immigration remains one of the Republican Party's most prominent priority issues. Many Republicans have praised and backed the Trump administration's immigration enforcement policies, including the expanded use of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In August 2026 alone, over 50,000 people were arrested across the US. However, the issue has also exposed some internal divisions. Republican Representative Maria Salazar has criticized aspects of current immigration policies, underscoring that enforcement has "gone too far."

Meanwhile, Democrats have sought to appeal to their voters by highlighting the humanitarian and legal consequences of the administration's policies. Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, who is set to be House Speaker if the Democrats win a majority, has strongly criticized the Trump administration's use of ICE, arguing that taxpayer money should be used to make life more affordable instead. More recently, Democratic

representative Delia Ramirez proposed a bill which calls for the dismantling of the US Department of Homeland Security and the elimination of ICE.

Artificial Intelligence & Data Centers

The rapid expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) infrastructure, and the subsequent construction of large data centers, has become a point of contention, bringing the issue into local and national politics. Voters are concerned about the impact of data centers on household costs, water and land use, jobs, and the environment. The issue is particularly significant in states experiencing rapid construction, pushing voters to weigh the economic and technological benefits of AI infrastructure against its costs.

The majority of Republicans, including Trump, have promoted data centers as essential to maintaining US leadership in AI to remain ahead of China. Notably though, Republicans in states experiencing rapid development have called for greater regulation, particularly over their impact on electricity prices. Democrats have also raised questions about the rapid expansion of data centers and their costs on local communities. These concerns have interestingly attracted bipartisan support in Congress, with the House passing legislation aimed at protecting households from additional electricity and grid costs associated with large data centers.

Healthcare

With about 82% of voters emphasizing the importance of candidates addressing healthcare costs in the last few weeks of campaigning, both parties have sought to present themselves as better positioned to do so.

Democrats have made healthcare affordability and coverage a central part of their campaigns. Their candidates have emphasized the need to protect access to healthcare and preserve programs such as Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act (ACA). They have also criticized Republican policies, stating that they could increase the cost of prescription drugs and warning that higher prices would place additional pressure on households. The Democrats' position has prompted some Republican-leaning voters to consider supporting the Democrats in the midterms.

Republicans have increasingly centered their healthcare message on combating fraud in government programs. They have argued that reducing fraud would help safeguard the different federal programs while ensuring that funds reach the people those programs are intended to serve.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS IMPACT TRUMP'S DECISION-MAKING?

The outcome of the midterms will shape the political landscape in which Trump gov-

erns during the remaining two years of his second term. The impact will depend on which chamber each party will control, as the House and Senate have different constitutional powers.

If Republicans retain control of the House, Trump would have greater support for his legislative agenda, particularly on taxation and government spending. Additionally, a Republican Senate would give him a clearer path to confirming cabinet officials, ambassadors, and federal judges. If Republicans control both chambers, Trump would face fewer obstacles in Congress and have greater ability to coordinate legislation, spending, and appointments till the end of his term.

If Democrats win the House, they would gain greater power to investigate the administration and block parts of Trump's legislative agenda. A Democratic House would also increase the chances of Trump's impeachment, since the chamber has the constitutional power to impeach officials. A Democratic Senate could slow or reject presidential appointments. If they control both chambers, Trump would face substantially greater opposition and scrutiny through congressional investigations.

However, impeaching Trump himself for a third time may not be the Democrats' most effective strategy.² Trump was impeached twice during his first presidency but was acquitted by the Senate both times. Alternatively, Democrats could focus on impeaching members of Trump's cabinet. Democrats have already indicated that they would pursue investigations into the Trump administration if they gain control of the House.

The results could also affect Trump's foreign policy agenda. A Republican-majority Congress would generally give the administration more freedom to pursue its priorities, including major defense agreements and arms sales. A Democratic House or Senate, however, could subject military operations and arms deals to greater scrutiny, using congressional procedures to challenge proposed weapons sales.³ This could also affect Trump's approach to ongoing or potentially new wars.

A divided Congress, with each party controlling one chamber, would create a more complicated balance of power. Trump could retain support for some policies while facing opposition on others, depending on which party will control which chamber.

KEY STATES TO WATCH

Traditionally, US elections have been fought over a relatively small number of swing states. The 2026 midterm elections are proving to be less predictable, with Democrats competing in states that Trump won easily in 2024, and Republicans defending seats where they would normally expect to be on safer ground.⁴

One prominent example is Texas, where Democratic candidate James Talarico

appears to be making gains in a state that is considered a “Republican stronghold.” Republicans are being forced to spend huge sums of money not only in competitive states, like Pennsylvania, but also in traditionally safe territory.⁵ Other key states in which Democrats are advancing include Iowa, Kansas, and Alaska.⁶

In several Midwestern states, including Ohio and Michigan, polls have historically underestimated Republican support, leading to surprising results. There is also a possibility that some Republican voters, who are considering voting Democrat out of frustration, could ultimately vote in favor of their own party.⁷ While the numbers make it difficult for Republicans to control the House, the Senate remains more competitive. Republicans need to retain just 50 seats to maintain control, as the Vice President (VP) could cast the deciding vote in a 50–50 Senate.

The overwhelming expectation is still that Republicans will suffer significant losses in November. However, with only a few weeks until the elections, Democrats cannot afford to slow down. If they fail to maintain their momentum in key states, they could end up with a much narrower victory than current expectations suggest.⁸

HOW WILL THE RESULTS IMPACT THE 2028 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS?

Although the 2026 midterms are primarily about control of Congress, the elections will also be an early test for the politicians competing for the presidency in 2028.

For Republicans, much of the attention is on Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Vance is still closely aligned with Trump and has emerged as one of his leading potential successors, while Rubio has built a broader national and global profile through his different roles in the administration. However, their close association with Trump could also become a liability, particularly if Republicans perform poorly in the midterms. Neither has much incentive to challenge Trump before the elections, but both will need to demonstrate that they can appeal beyond his core supporters going forward.⁹

As for the Democrats, former Vice President Kamala Harris remains a potential traditional candidate, while figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) represent a more progressive direction. Some reports have even speculated that Harris may run for president alongside AOC as her vice president. California governor Gavin Newsom is also another possible candidate for the Democrats. Newsom has been outspoken against Trump, which has positioned him as a potentially strong candidate. His most recent comment on invoking the 25th Amendment after Trump suggested that Iran could “take out” Los Angeles and San Diego, highlights his rising profile as an opposition figure.

The 2026 midterms may be the first real contest of the 2028 presidential race, shaping the political environment in which the next presidential campaign will unfold. The results could determine which party enters 2028 with greater momentum, while forcing both sides to reassess their strategies, leadership, and appeal to voters.

About the Author



Namat Abulebada is a Research Associate at Fiker Institute. She holds an MA in Middle Eastern Studies as well as a BA in History from the American University in Cairo. She has published on conflict, migration, and defense. Her research interests include international security, migration, and foreign policy.

ENDNOTES

1. Adam Ramey, interview, conducted by Namat Abulebada and Shurouq Jaradat, October 2, 2026.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

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Author: Namat Abulebada
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