

The Critical Importance of the Midterms Elections

Making Waves for Democracy March 29, 2026

Dr Jeanne Miranda

In the United States House of Representatives, the transition from minority to majority status is a shift from being nearly powerless to holding nearly total control over the legislative machinery. Because the House is governed by "simple majority" rules, the majority party effectively runs the chamber.

Powers of the House Majority

The majority party controls the leadership, the calendar, and the committees.

1. Setting the Legislative Agenda

The Speaker of the House, elected by the majority party, decides which bills reach the floor for a vote and which "die in committee." If the majority leadership does not want a bill to be heard, it is almost impossible for it to move forward.

2. Committee Dominance

- **Chairmanships:** Every committee and subcommittee is chaired by a member of the majority party. Chairs have the power to call hearings, choose witnesses, and prepare legislation.
- **Numerical Advantage:** The majority party maintains a majority of seats on every committee, ensuring they can vote bills out of committee and onto the House floor.
- **Subpoena Power:** Committee chairs can unilaterally (or via committee vote) issue subpoenas for documents and testimony, giving the majority the power to conduct oversight and investigations into the executive branch. (i.e. calling Hilary rather than anyone accused of sexual abuse in Epstein case.)

3. The House Rules Committee

Often called the "traffic cop" of the House, this committee is heavily weighted in favor of the majority (typically a 9-to-4 ratio). They set the "rule" for every major bill, determining:

- How long the bill will be debated.
- Which amendments (if any) are allowed to be offered.
- Whether the bill can be changed at all on the floor.

Constraints on the Minority Party

While the minority can speak and protest, their procedural options are extremely limited.

1. Inability to Force a Vote

In most cases, the minority cannot force a bill to the floor. Their only tool is a **Discharge Petition**, which requires a majority of the entire House (218 members) to sign. This is rarely successful because it requires members of the majority to break ranks against their own leadership.

2. Limited Amendment Participation

The minority is forbidden from offering any amendments to a bill.

3. Oversight Limitations

Without the chairmanship, minority members cannot schedule hearings or compel testimony. They can request information from federal agencies, but those agencies are not legally required to comply with requests from individual minority members in the same way they are for a committee subpoena.

Response to ICE aggressive tactics as majority versus minority party in the House

The aggressive tactics of ICE, as well as the arrest and deportation of our neighbors and friends, have been horrifying to many of us. The deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis should have led to investigations and corrective actions over federal authority, the use of force, and the rights of U.S. citizens and immigrants alike.

Because the President holds broad executive authority over federal agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the ability of Democrats to act depends entirely on which party holds the gavel in Congress.

Here is a breakdown of what Democrats can do now, and how their leverage would change under different electoral scenarios.

1. What Democrats Can Do Now (As the Minority)

With Republicans controlling both the House and the Senate, Democrats have very few legislative tools to stop operations or force policy changes. Instead, they are relying on public pressure, legal challenges, and procedural maneuvers:

- **Leveraging the "Power of the Purse":** While they cannot pass laws on their own, Democrats are using the threat of a filibuster in the Senate or united opposition to prevent funding the Department of Homeland Security, as they are doing now. They are pushing to include language that defunds certain aggressive tactics, requires agents to wear body cameras, and prohibits agents from wearing plainclothes or masks during operations. It is not at all clear that this will lead to true differences in ICE management.

2. If Democrats Win a House Majority (Divided Government)

Capturing the House of Representatives would not allow Democrats to rewrite immigration law without the Senate and President, but it would hand them massive procedural weapons to disrupt current operations:

- **Subpoena Power and Public Hearings:** Democratic chairs of the House Judiciary and Homeland Security Committees could issue legally binding subpoenas to top DHS officials. They could force the agents involved in the Good and Pretti shootings to testify under oath, and compel the release of unedited body camera footage, text messages, and internal memos regarding rules of engagement.
- **Capping and Restricting ICE Funding:** The House is where all government funding bills must originate. A Democratic majority could refuse to fund the requested expansion of detention beds or place strict, legally binding restrictions on how money is used—such as banning the use of funds for warrantless arrests or operations near schools and hospitals.

Response to war in Iran as majority versus minority in the House.

The question of what Democrats can do regarding the **war in Iran** depends heavily on the balance of power in Washington. Under the U.S. Constitution, the President serves as Commander-in-Chief of the military, but Congress holds the power to declare war and control the budget.

Because a conflict with Iran is actively ongoing and has not been formally declared by Congress, Democrats find themselves in a complex political and legislative environment.

1. What Democrats Can Do Now (As the Minority Party)

With Republicans holding the presidency and majorities in both the House and the Senate, the minority party has limited tools to directly stop or alter military operations. However, they are currently utilizing several strategies:

- **The "Power of the Purse" Leverage:** The administration is expected to request a massive supplemental funding bill (upwards of \$200 billion) to continue funding the war. Democrats can use the threat of a filibuster in the Senate or united opposition in the House to demand concessions, strict oversight, or a timeline for withdrawal in exchange for any war funding.
- **Committee Oversight and Public Hearings:** Democratic members on committees like House Armed Services are aggressively demanding public hearings. They are calling on the Department of Defense to testify openly regarding the lack of clear strategic objectives, the rising costs, and the potential deployment of ground troops. They have no power to make this happen.

2. If Democrats Win a House Majority (Divided Government)

If Democrats capture the House of Representatives in the midterms but the Senate remains in Republican hands, their power to act unilaterally is still restricted, but they gain massive procedural weapons:

- **Blocking War Funding:** The House is where all revenue and spending bills must originate. A Democratic majority could simply refuse to pass any supplemental war funding or place hard restrictions on defense appropriations—

such as strictly forbidding the use of funds for a ground invasion of the Iranian interior.

- **Subpoena Power and Aggressive Investigations:** As the majority, Democrats would take over committee chairmanships (such as Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, and Intelligence). They could issue legally binding subpoenas to compel Pentagon officials and generals to testify about the rules of engagement, intelligence failures, or secret escalations.

OTHER KEY AREAS

1. Financial Conflicts & "Pay-to-Play" Allegations

Democrats intend to probe the nexus between the administration's policies and the personal financial interests of the Trump family and its donors.

- **Trump Family Enrichment:** Investigations into the awarding of federal contracts to companies with ties to the administration.
- **"Digital Kickbacks":** Probing the use of cryptocurrency and other "digital kickbacks" from foreign and criminal interests.
- **Corporate "Pay-to-Play":** Examining private companies that made significant financial contributions—such as those for the construction of a White House ballroom or the Trump Presidential Library—shortly before receiving favorable regulatory relief or federal contracts.

2. Executive Branch & Regulatory Interference

Democrats have already begun laying the groundwork to investigate the freezing of agency enforcement to benefit political allies.

- **Halted Investigations:** Scrutinizing the pause of Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) inquiries into firms backed by major Trump donors.
- **Watchdog Removals:** Investigating the removal of agency watchdogs (Inspectors General) who were tasked with preventing fraud and waste.

2026 Midterms

- **All 435 House seats are up for election**
 - Approximately 35 to 45 seats are viewed as highly competitive
 - Democrats need a net gain of just 3 seats to retake the majority
 - Following Prop 50, 4 California seats are in play

- **Seats to flip**

- **CA-22** (Central Valley – **David Valadao**). Covering parts of Kings, Tulare, and Kern Counties, CA-22 remains a major toss-up district. David Valadao, a Republican, has been able to hold on to this Central Valley district time and time again, developing a reputation as a pragmatic member focused on water access and cost of living issues. Valadao has survived in a district that often votes for Democratic presidential candidates. Prop 50 incorporated more Democratic-leaning urban areas within Fresno and moved away from several Republican-leaning strongholds in portions of Hanford, Tulare, and Porterville. The Cook Political Report rates it a toss-up, with D+1 voting population.
- **CA-48** (former **Darrel Issa** seat). A large field of Democrats are vying for this seat against Jim Desmond, the most high-profile Republican in the race. Prop 50 redrew the district to lean significantly more Democratic by shifting boundaries from East County San Diego toward urban and coastal areas like Vista and Palm Springs. The Cook Political Report rates it as lean Democratic with D+2.

- **Seats to Hold**

- **CA-13** (Central Valley – **Adam Gray**). Gray, a Democrat, won with a razor-thin margin in 2024. He has several Republican challengers, including Kevin Lincoln who is a popular mayor of Stockton. Analysts estimate that the Republican registration advantage decreased by approximately 5.5 percentage points. Republicans are fighting hard to reclaim this seat. The Cook Political Report rates it as lean Democratic, with D+2.
- **CA-45** (Orange County – **Derek Tran**). Tran unseated Michelle Steel by a margin of just 653 votes in 2024. Prop 50 extended portions of Southern Los Angeles County into this district with much higher concentration of registered Democrats. The district retains its core identity in Little Saigon (Westminster and Garden Grove) with a high percentage of Vietnamese Americans. The Cook Political Report rates it as lean Democratic, with D+3.

