

President Trump and the 2026 Midterm Elections

The approaching midterm elections will be heavily influenced by the president and his administration. In fact, the midterm elections are most often a referendum on the president, even though his name isn't on the ballot. So how are President Trump and the Republican Party faring thus far?¹

Most House Seats Up for Grabs

One factor that indicates it will be challenging for Republicans to retain House control is the high number of open seats where no incumbent is running for office.

Among the 435 total House seats, 57 are open with 37 of those Republican, as of this writing. This is the second most total vacancies since 1930 and the largest number of Republican open seats during this period.

Many of the vacancies are in districts that will likely be uncompetitive, where voter registration leans heavily toward one party or the other. More than anything else, the large number of Republican open seats is a marker – so many Republicans would not be moving on if rank-and-file members felt confident the party would retain House control. Remember, the majority party holds more power and perks, and these preferences diminish noticeably when party control flips and they are in the minority.

Redistricting Shenanigans

The Trump Administration set out to improve the party's prospects in the midterm elections by encouraging Republican-leaning states to voluntarily redraw their congressional districts in order to increase the likelihood that Republicans could win more seats. Yes, this process is called "gerrymandering."

Among the many criticisms of this process, redistricting can end up dividing voters within cities or counties who have shared interests, lumping them together with communities that differ greatly. Both Republicans and Democrats have engaged in gerrymandering for decades.

There are some court challenges outstanding, and a recent landmark Supreme Court ruling about racial gerrymandering in Louisiana has raised the possibility that additional states could redraw congressional districts ahead of primary elections. Redistricting normally occurs once every 10 years, following the national U.S. Census.

The U.S. Senate

Republicans currently control the upper chamber with 53 of 100 seats, and it would take a net gain of four seats for the Democrats to take control. A 50-50 tie would give the president's party the majority as the vice president votes to break ties.

Among the 35 Senate seats up for election, more of them are in red states (those that tend to vote Republican) than in the blue states (those that usually vote Democratic). Polls have shown for many months that the Democrats would have to clear a high hurdle to take control of the Senate. However, a number of pollsters have recently shifted some seats to the "contested" bucket that just a few months ago were likely to be Republican wins.

Closer to the election, the president's approval rating and voters' opinions about their economic prospects, inflation and the war in Iran could impact some key Senate races. Pocketbook issues tend to be the most important concern of American voters in every election and this one is no different.

¹ Midterms, the market and what matters, <https://www.rbcwealthmanagement.com>

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Independent Voters are in Command

Independent voters will tip the scales in both House and Senate races. Party loyalty has been decreasing for many years, and more voters now self-identify as independent rather than as a Republican or Democrat.

President Trump won the 2024 election with the help of independent voters, and many of these supporters perceived their economic prospects would brighten with his return to the White House. Since then, Independent voters' assessment of the president's handling of the economy has soured. Discontent about ongoing inflation appears to be a key reason.

The Republican President

From 1906 through 2022, the president's party gained seats in only three years: in 1934 Republicans gained nine seats; in 1998, Democrats gained five seats; and in 2022, Republicans gained seats. Both Republican and Democratic presidents saw their party lose seats in midterm years. The worst two years were 1922 (Republican loss of 77 seats) and 1938 (Democratic loss of 72 seats). In the most recent midterm elections, Democrats lost nine seats in 2022 and Republicans lost 42 seats in 2018.

This historical pattern is especially relevant for the 2026 midterms given President Trump's approval ratings have been well below 50 percent in many polls for some time, and Republicans currently control the U.S. House of Representatives by only a narrow margin.

Regardless of where the presidential approval rating sits in the last few weeks before the November election – when this rating matters most – there is little doubt that the midterm election will be a referendum on Trump 2.0.

This has the potential to affect not only House and Senate races at the federal level but also some “down ballot” state races, shaping political party control over state legislatures and governorships.

Retribution²

Trump has weaponized closed Republican primaries to punish disloyal lawmakers, demonstrating that crossing him – even occasionally – can end a career. The handful of Republican defections on tariffs, war powers and discharge petitions suggests that while Trump's grip on his party remains strong, it is not absolute. His primary victories may be self-defeating, as defeated incumbents have little incentive to support him and Trump-backed nominees could struggle with Independents in November.

Primaries are the secret to Trump's enduring power despite his legal troubles and low approval ratings. Control over his base allows him to discipline his party to such an extent that very few Republicans cross the aisle to vote with Democrats. Trump has demonstrated that if an elected official crosses him – especially on major issues – he will recruit a MAGA challenger, fund the candidate, campaign for the candidate, and defeat the incumbent in a primary. But his successes may carry hidden costs.

The president has several months left with several Republicans in the Senate and in the House who feels no obligation to him. In another hidden cost, candidates who win high-profile races with Trump's backing will face a steeper challenge in November general elections, where MAGA turnout alone may not be enough.

How effective President Trump's tactics will be in the next Congress remains to be seen, particularly as he becomes a lame duck and Democrats could regain control. Although his support remains strong among Republicans, it has weakened significantly among Independents – a crucial swing vote in many elections. Tactics that work in GOP primaries could backfire in general elections, where the voter pool is far broader.

² The 2026 Midterms, <https://www.brookings.edu/collection/the-2026-midterm-elections/>

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Ironically, the very tactics that helped him install very conservative nominees in primaries may ultimately cost Republicans in November.

The 'Hate Election'³

There's broad GOP frustration that Trump has made challenging midterm elections worse by not focusing heavily on pocketbook issues – especially the tax cuts Republicans won – while launching the Iran war, which raised gas prices and fueled inflation. Trump's prime-time speech about China's alleged influence campaign targeting U.S. voters six years ago did little to assuage those concerns.

"I have yet to understand how we win the midterms by talking about what happened in 2020," Senator John Cornyn told Axios.

Trump hopes his speech will pressure Congress to pass the SAVE America Act and excite his base voters to turn out, but it appears to be falling on deaf ears. A Republican pollster working on multiple races nationwide said, "Our research shows people want the president to make their life better, and they don't believe he has."

But Democrats also have poor favorability ratings. And Republicans plan to use the Democrats' Tea-Party like revolt by progressives to paint the entire party as radicals who can't be trusted to govern. Will the GOP really try to make the case that yeah, we're not good but they're worse?

Here's the reality check:

- Both political parties have similar (low) approval ratings in the eyes of voters, according to a Pew Research Center poll.
- A majority of voters consistently view Trump as dishonest (even in red states, including Texas).
- A recent CNBC poll found that voters now are more likely to be turned off by a MAGA candidate than a Democratic Socialist.

Could the outlook improve for the president's party? It's a few days until August – three months before the November midterms – yet President Trump doesn't appear to be focused on what voters want; instead, he appears to focus on what he thinks they should want.

Remember, "It's the economy stupid!"

³ GOP Midterm Strategy: Make it a 'hate election', <https://www.axios.com/2026/07/19>