

INFO PACK

US Midterm Elections 2026

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TRT research centre

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What is at stake?

Key races, voter priorities and the battle for Congress

3 Nov	435	35	39
Election Day	House Seats	Senate Contests	Governor Elections

Introduction

What the 2026 midterms will decide and why they matter.

The 2026 U.S. midterm elections will determine the balance of power in Washington during the final two years of President Donald Trump's second term. All 435 House seats are on the ballot, alongside 35 Senate contests and 39 gubernatorial elections. Republicans enter the final stretch controlling both chambers, but narrow margins mean that a relatively small number of competitive races could change the governing environment.

As of September 2026, Republicans control both chambers of Congress, while a number of House and Senate races are classified as competitive by major election forecasters. National surveys also provide a snapshot of voter preferences and the issues receiving the greatest attention during the campaign, particularly the economy, affordability and the cost of living.

This Info Pack provides an overview of the 2026 midterm elections, including the electoral system, the current composition of Congress, key House and Senate contests, gubernatorial elections, voter priorities, turnout patterns and recent polling. It also outlines the constitutional and legislative powers associated with control of the House and Senate and identifies developments to follow ahead of Election Day.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- House control could turn on a small group of districts: Cook Political Report currently rates 21 House races as Toss Up.
- The Senate is also highly competitive: seven contests are rated Toss Up, and Democrats need a net gain of four seats to control the chamber.
- Economic dissatisfaction, inflation and cost-of-living pressure are central to the campaign, while tariffs and the Iran conflict are increasingly linked to household economic concerns.
- Mid-decade redistricting has changed the House map and may affect the path to 218 seats.
- The result will shape legislation and oversight in Washington and can affect U.S. policy on trade, Iran, Ukraine, NATO, foreign assistance and executive power.

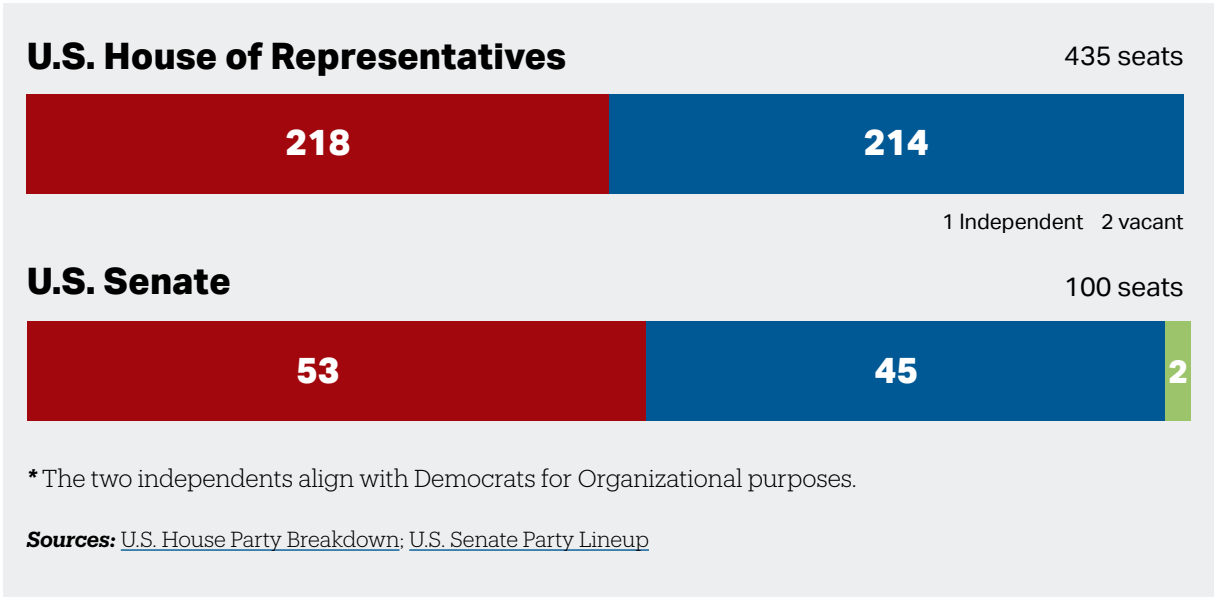
Sources: FEC; U.S. House; U.S. Senate; Cook Political Report; Pew Research Center; Reuters/Ipsos; CRS

How the Midterms Work

Why a congressional election without a presidential contest can reshape a presidency.

Midterm elections are held halfway through a president's four-year term. The House is fully renewed every two years: all 435 voting representatives face election in 2026. Senators serve six-year terms, with roughly one-third of the Senate elected every two years. The 2026 cycle includes 35 Senate contests, combining the regularly scheduled Senate class with special elections.

The elections do not remove or re-elect the president, but they can sharply change his governing environment. A new House majority can control the legislative agenda, federal spending decisions (appropriations), committee investigations and oversight. A change in the Senate can also affect legislation, confirmations of senior executive and judicial nominees, and the chamber's constitutional role in treaties.



* The two independents align with Democrats for Organizational purposes.

Sources: U.S. House Party Breakdown; U.S. Senate Party Lineup



(Daniel Cardenas - Anadolu Agency)

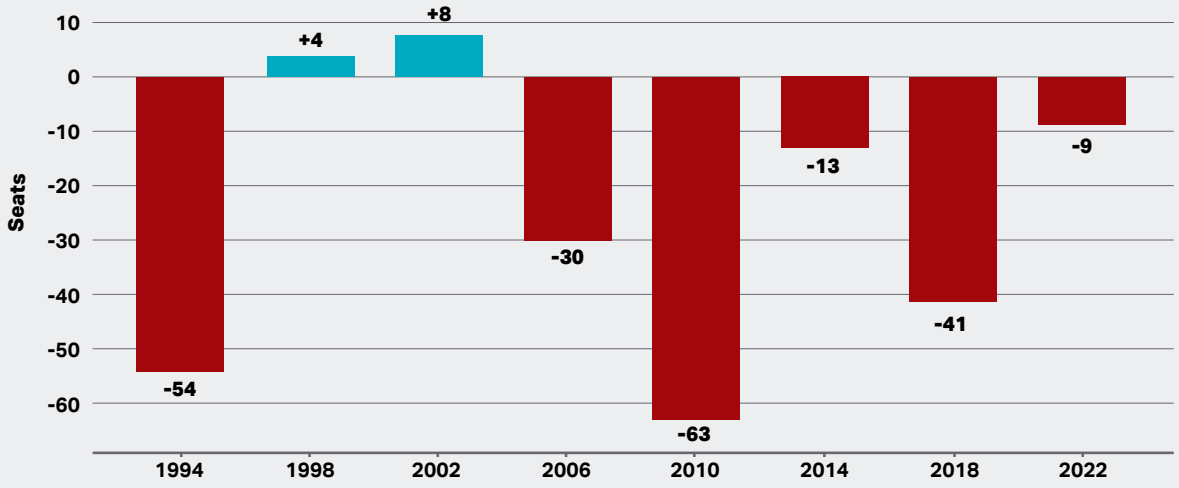
As of the latest official House update, Republicans hold 218 seats, Democrats 214, one member is an independent and two seats are vacant. In the Senate, Republicans hold 53 seats, Democrats 45 and two independents align with Democrats for organisational purposes. Because the vice president is Republican, a 50–50 Senate would not be enough for Democrats to control the chamber; they need to reach 51 seats, meaning four more gains than losses from the current Democratic-aligned total of 47.

Midterm Elections in Historical Perspective

History provides a strong baseline, but not a prediction.

Since 1938, the president's party has lost House seats in 20 of 22 midterm elections, according to Brookings. Recent cycles have varied considerably: Democrats lost 63 House seats in 2010, Republicans lost 41 in 2018, while Democrats lost nine in 2022. The principal modern exceptions were 1998 and 2002, when the president's party gained House seats.

President's party: net House seat change in selected midterms



Sources: American Presidency Project; Brookings Institution; U.S. House History

These figures provide historical context for the 2026 election. Midterm outcomes, however, have varied with economic conditions, presidential approval, candidate and district characteristics, turnout, and the broader political environment.

2026 Midterms: Numbers to Know

435	House seats contested
218	Seats required for a House majority
35	Senate contests in 2026
51	Seats required for Democrats to control the Senate, given the Republican vice-presidential tie-breaking vote
39	Gubernatorial elections across states and territories
3 November 2026	Election Day

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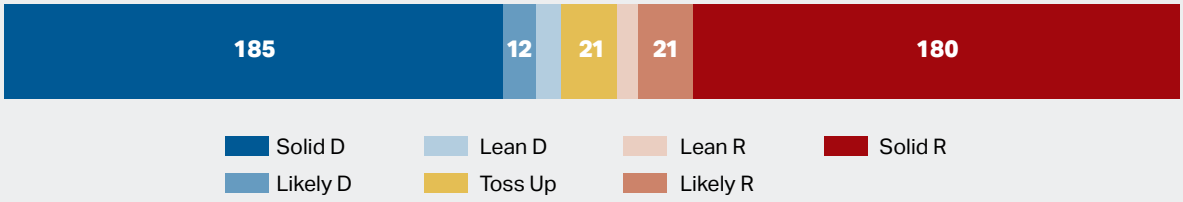
The Battle for the House

A narrow majority and a small set of districts make the House highly sensitive to the national mood.

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Cook Political Report: 2026 House race ratings



Source: Cook Political Report House Race Ratings, 11 September 2026

Cook Political Report rates 21 House contests as Toss Up. Sixteen of those seats are currently Republican-held, and five are Democratic-held, giving Democrats more offensive opportunities in the most competitive category. The map is geographically diverse but concentrated in suburban and exurban districts where ticket-splitting and turnout can still matter.

District	Incumbent / status	Cook PVI
AZ-01	Open	R+1
AZ-06	Juan Ciscomani (R)	EVEN
CA-22	David Valadao (R)	D+1
CO-08	Gabe Evans (R)	EVEN
IA-01	Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R)	R+4
MI-07	Tom Barrett (R)	EVEN
NY-17	Mike Lawler (R)	D+1
PA-07	Ryan Mackenzie (R)	R+1
VA-02	Jen Kiggans (R)	EVEN
WI-03	Derrick Van Orden (R)	R+3

These districts illustrate the House battlefield rather than exhaust it. Pennsylvania, Michigan, Iowa and Arizona each contain multiple competitive seats. At the same time, New York and California remain important because recent cycles have shown that suburban districts in otherwise Democratic-leaning states can decide national control.

Reading the ratings

Toss Up means that Cook Political Report considers the race highly competitive and neither party has a clear advantage. Cook PVI measures the underlying partisan lean of a district relative to the nation using the two most recent presidential elections; for example, R+4 means a district performed about four points more Republican than the country as a whole.

Source: Cook Political Report Race Ratings; Cook PVI

Redistricting and the 2026 House map

Mid-decade redistricting has become an unusually important part of the 2026 House contest. Cook Political Report's 10 September tracker estimates that the likeliest net effect of the new maps is around four additional Republican seats from redistricting alone. That estimate isolates the effect of district lines rather than forecasting the election result. With the House majority so narrow, even a small map-driven shift can change the number and location of seats each party must win.

Source: Cook Political Report Redistricting Tracker



(Mehmet Eser - Anadolu Agency)

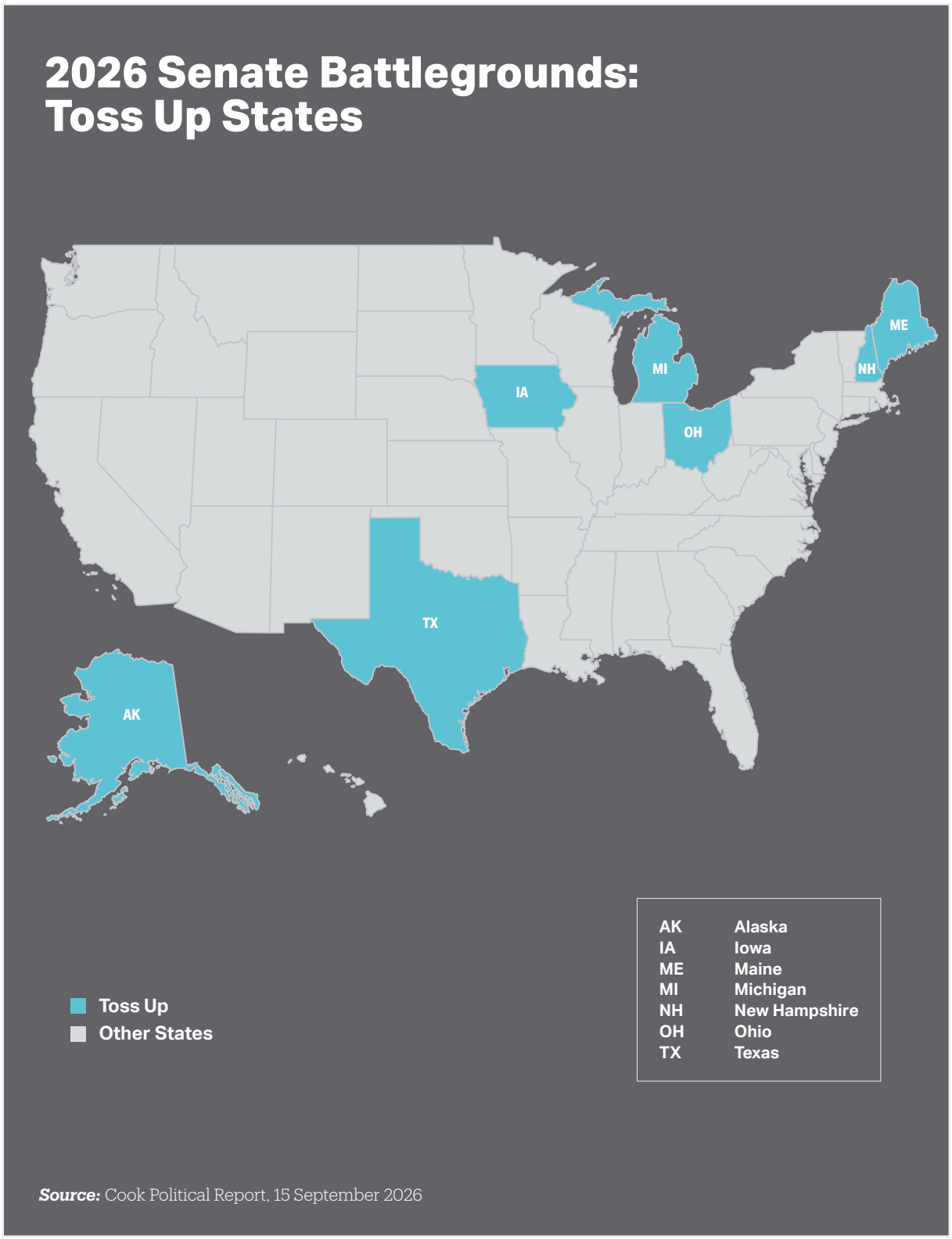
The Battle for the Senate

Democrats need a net gain of four seats (four more gains than losses), and the map has widened beyond the traditional battlegrounds.

Cook Political Report currently rates seven Senate races as Toss Up: Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Ohio and Texas. Five are Republican-held or Republican-controlled seats, while Michigan and New Hampshire are Democratic-held open seats. The seven-state Toss Up category shows how broadly Senate control is being contested across very different political environments.

State	Republican	Democrat	Why it matters
Alaska	Dan Sullivan (R)	Mary Peltola (D)	Incumbent GOP seat; ranked-choice voting
Iowa	Ashley Hinson (R)	Josh Turek (D)	Open GOP seat after Joni Ernst retirement
Maine	Susan Collins (R)	Troy Jackson (D)	Long-serving Republican in a Democratic-leaning state
Michigan	Mike Rogers (R)	Abdul El-Sayed (D)	Open Democratic-held seat
New Hampshire	John E. Sununu (R)	Chris Pappas (D)	Open Democratic-held seat; shifted to Toss Up on 15 Sep.
Ohio	Jon Husted (R)	Sherrod Brown (D)	Special election for JD Vance's former seat
Texas	Ken Paxton (R)	James Talarico (D)	Open GOP seat after John Cornyn primary defeat

Source: Cook Political Report Senate Race Ratings, 15 September 2026

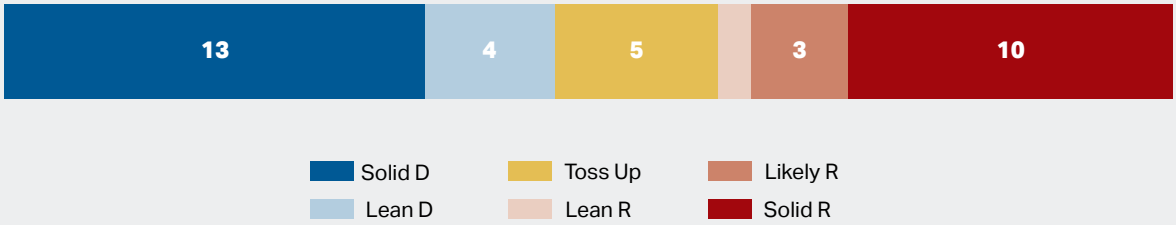


Georgia and North Carolina are rated Lean Democratic, while New Hampshire moved from Lean Democratic to Toss Up on 15 September. Democrats therefore need to protect their own competitive seats while winning several Republican-held contests to reach 51 seats.

Beyond Congress: Governors and the States

Thirty-nine gubernatorial elections add a second layer of political competition.

Cook-rated state gubernatorial contests



Source: National Governors Association; Cook Political Report Governor Race Ratings; Cook Political Report Alaska Governor update, 17 September 2026

The National Governors Association lists 39 gubernatorial elections across states and territories in 2026, with 21 incumbents either term-limited or not seeking re-election. Cook Political Report currently rates five state races as Toss Up: Alaska, Georgia, Nevada, Ohio and Wisconsin. Arizona, Iowa, Michigan and Oregon are rated Lean Democratic, while Kansas is Lean Republican.

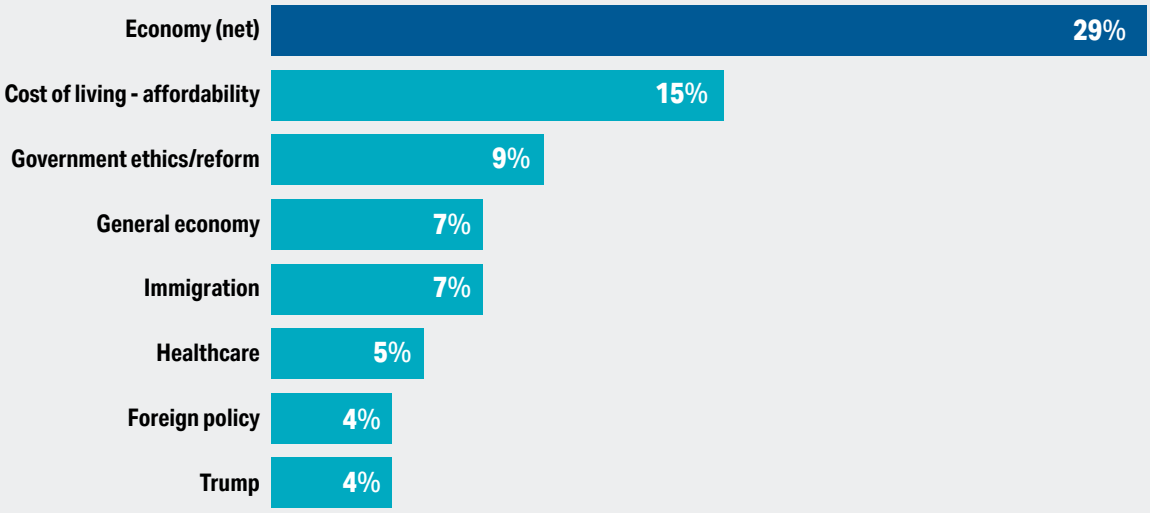
Governors matter to the midterm picture because state executives shape the implementation of federal policy, election administration, education, healthcare, energy and infrastructure. Gubernatorial outcomes can also affect the national political bench ahead of future Senate and presidential cycles.

Toss Up state	Why it matters
Alaska	Open seat; ranked-choice voting and a four-way general-election field
Georgia	Open seat in a closely divided state
Nevada	Incumbent Republican Joe Lombardo seeks re-election
Ohio	Open seat alongside a Toss Up Senate special election
Wisconsin	Open seat in a perennial presidential battleground

What Is Driving the Vote?

Economic concerns lead the agenda, with affordability the most frequently named specific issue.

What voters most wanted congressional candidates to discuss



Source: Pew Research Centre, survey conducted 6–12 July 2026

Economic issues are the clearest priority. Pew found that 29% of registered voters wanted congressional candidates to talk about the economy, with affordability and the cost of living alone named by 15%. Only 24% of Americans rated national economic conditions as excellent or good, while 35% described them as poor.

The campaign also connects foreign and domestic issues. CBS News found that voters link the Iran conflict and tariff policy to higher prices and that many prefer candidates who oppose new tariffs and the conflict. Immigration remains a major partisan issue, while healthcare, abortion, government ethics and concerns about political extremism can matter strongly in individual races.

The economy matters, but voters do not believe the opposition has an easy solution. CBS found broad scepticism that either party would materially improve household finances. This makes part of the midterm vote retrospective: voters can register dissatisfaction with the governing party even when they remain uncertain about the alternative.

Election confidence

Pew found that 55% of Americans were confident that the 2026 midterms would be conducted fairly and accurately, down from 61% before the 2024 election and 64% in 2022. Unlike those earlier cycles, the partisan gap is small: 58% of Democrats and Democratic leaners and 55% of Republicans and Republican leaners expressed confidence.

Source: Pew Research Center, 5 August 2026

The National Political Environment

Democrats lead in recent national polling, while turnout and district geography leave control of the House unsettled.

September 2026 national political environment



Sources: Reuters/Ipsos, 14 September 2026; CBS News Battleground Tracker, 13 September 2026

Reuters/Ipsos found Democrats ahead 44% to 37% on the generic congressional ballot on 14 September, with Trump's job approval at 35%. National polling measures the overall environment, but House control is decided district by district and does not translate mechanically from a national vote margin.

CBS News' Battleground Tracker placed its central estimate at 228 Democratic House seats, above the 218 needed for control, but the model's lower bound was 215. CBS describes the estimate as a current snapshot that may change as it collects more data closer to Election Day.

Trump remains unusually central to the campaign. CBS found that MAGA-aligned Republicans remain highly motivated while Democrats are strongly motivated by opposition to Trump. The Republican turnout question is whether that intensity reaches non-MAGA and less-frequent voters; the Democratic challenge is whether national dissatisfaction translates into enough votes in the relatively small number of districts that can change hands.

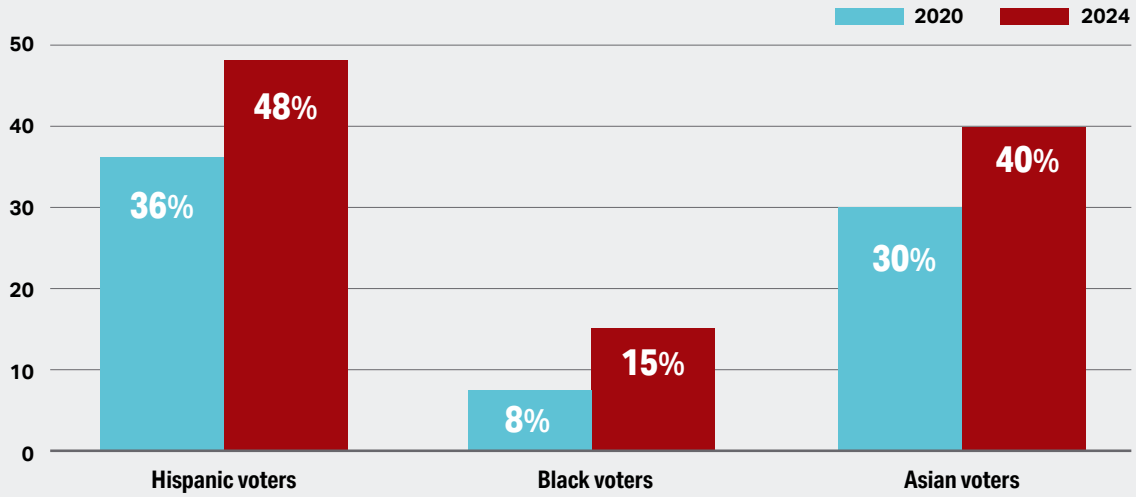


(Mehmet Eser - Anadolu Agency)

Voter Coalitions and Turnout

Who votes may matter as much as how they vote.

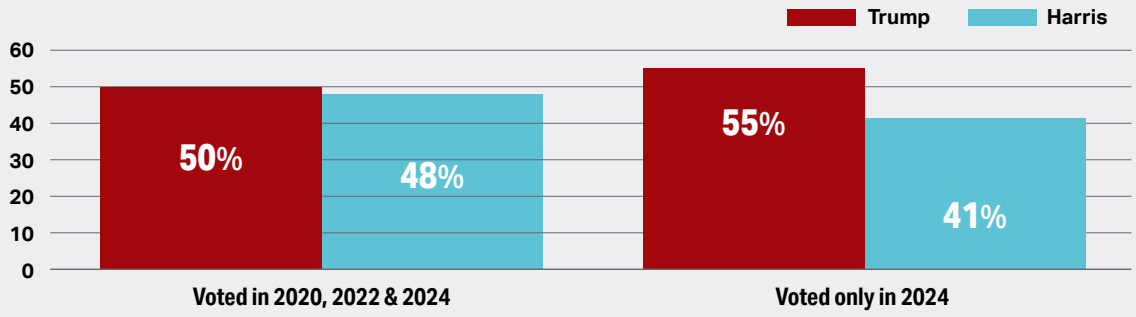
Trump's support among selected voter groups



Source: Pew Research Centre validated-voter study of the 2024 election

Trump's 2024 coalition was more racially and ethnically diverse than in his previous campaigns. Pew's validated-voter analysis found that his support rose from 36% to 48% among Hispanic voters, from 8% to 15% among Black voters and from 30% to 40% among Asian voters between 2020 and 2024. He also retained a large advantage among voters without four-year college degrees.

2024 vote choice by recent turnout history



Source: Pew Research Center turnout analysis, 26 June 2025

Turnout history complicates the picture. Among voters who participated in 2020, 2022 and 2024, Trump and Kamala Harris were nearly even in 2024, 50% to 48%. Among eligible voters who skipped both 2020 and 2022 but voted in 2024, Trump won 55% to 41%. This group represented 12% of the 2024 electorate. The midterms therefore directly test whether less-frequent voters who backed Trump participate when he is not a candidate.

Campaign Themes and Messaging

Both parties are trying to convert dissatisfaction and identity-based motivation into turnout, but their campaign emphases differ.

Campaign messaging in the 2026 midterms reflects both national political debates and state- and district-level concerns. Republican candidates and aligned groups have emphasised immigration, security, the administration's policy agenda and criticism of Democratic positions. Democratic candidates and aligned groups have focused heavily on affordability, healthcare, abortion, tariffs and criticism of the Trump administration's record. The emphasis placed on these issues varies considerably across individual House and Senate races.

Republican Campaign Emphasis	Democratic Campaign Emphasis
Immigration, border enforcement and public safety	Cost of living and affordability
Tax cuts and defence of the administration's legislative record	Healthcare and prescription-drug costs
"America First" policies, including trade and domestic manufacturing	Tariffs and their economic effects
Criticism of Democratic economic and social policies	Abortion and reproductive policy
Support for Trump's broader governing agenda, with some candidates adapting their positions to local conditions	Criticism of the Trump administration's domestic and foreign-policy record

Sources: Reuters, 11 September 2026; CBS News Battleground Tracker; Reuters, 17 September 2026 (tariffs); Reuters, 17 September 2026 (immigration)

The Republican midterm convention in Dallas illustrated the party's reliance on Trump as a mobilizer. Reuters reported that Trump and allied outside political groups, including super PACs, are committing hundreds of millions of dollars to battleground races. Democrats, meanwhile, are benefiting from anti-incumbent and anti-Trump sentiment in current polling. Still, CBS finds that much of their support is motivated by stopping Trump's policies rather than strong confidence that a Democratic Congress would improve household finances.

Why the Result Matters Beyond Washington

Congressional control can affect the resources, oversight and legal authority behind U.S. foreign policy.

Foreign policy is often associated with presidential power, but Congress has major constitutional and statutory tools. The Congressional Research Service notes that Congress can shape the U.S. role in the world through appropriations, authorisations for military force, trade legislation, oversight, foreign assistance and, in the Senate, confirmations and treaty consent.

Policy arena	Congressional leverage	Why 2026 matters
Iran and war powers	Funding, authorisations, War Powers votes and oversight	A new majority could change the intensity of scrutiny over the continuing Iran conflict, its legal basis and its costs.
Ukraine, NATO and foreign assistance	Appropriations and legislation	Congress can expand, condition or restrict funding even when the president sets diplomatic strategy.
Israel / Gaza and the Middle East	Foreign assistance, arms funding and oversight	Committee control can change the intensity and direction of congressional scrutiny.
Trade and tariffs	Congressional authority over foreign commerce and delegated tariff powers	A new Congress could seek to preserve, revise or reclaim powers that have been delegated to the executive branch.
Appointments and treaties	Senate confirmations and treaty consent	Senate control affects confirmations for ambassadors and senior national-security officials; treaties require Senate consent.

Sources: Congressional Research Service: U.S. Role in the World; CRS: Congressional and Presidential Authority to Impose Import Tariffs; U.S. Senate: About Treaties

The midterms therefore matter internationally even though the president remains the central actor in diplomacy. Divided government can slow legislation and funding, increase investigations and force bargaining over appropriations. Unified government can make it easier for a president's party to enact parts of its agenda, although Senate rules, presidential veto power and intra-party divisions remain important constraints.

Three Illustrative Post-Election Scenarios

The institutional consequences depend on which party controls each chamber; these scenarios illustrate outcomes rather than predict them.

Scenario	Domestic agenda	Oversight / institutions	Foreign-policy effect
Republicans retain House and Senate	The administration keeps the clearest path to legislation, budget priorities and tax/trade initiatives.	Committee oversight remains largely in Republican hands; nominations face a friendlier Senate.	Greater continuity for the administration's Iran, tariff and foreign-policy agenda, subject to Senate rules and internal GOP divisions.
Democrats win House; Republicans hold Senate	Legislation becomes harder and budget negotiations more confrontational.	House committees gain subpoena and investigation power; the Senate continues controlling confirmations.	More House scrutiny of war powers, foreign assistance and tariffs, with major changes still requiring Senate agreement or other legal pathways.
Democrats win both chambers	The administration faces substantially greater legislative constraint.	Oversight intensifies in both chambers and Senate confirmation dynamics change.	Funding, tariff authority and war-powers disputes could become major sites of institutional conflict, while presidential veto power remains relevant.

Other configurations are also possible, including a Republican House paired with a Democratic Senate. The table is not a ranking of likelihoods; it highlights how control of the two chambers creates different institutional consequences. The House is especially important for appropriations and investigations, while the Senate has unique authority over confirmations and treaties.

What to Watch Between Now and Election Night

The final weeks can still move a narrow map, especially when many decisive contests are concentrated in a small number of states and districts.

Watch	Why it matters
House ratings	Whether the 21 Toss Up districts expand or contract, especially in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Iowa, Arizona, New York and California.
Senate map	Whether the seven Toss Up races remain in that category, and whether Georgia or North Carolina moves closer to or farther from Toss Up.
Turnout	Whether Republican enthusiasm extends beyond the MAGA base and whether Democratic voters sustain their current engagement advantage.
Economy	Inflation, energy prices, interest rates and household sentiment, including any further effect from the Iran conflict or trade disputes.
Tariffs and trade	Whether economic criticism of tariffs becomes decisive in industrial, agricultural and border states.
Redistricting	How new maps shape the route to 218 House seats and whether late legal developments affect any district boundaries or election procedures.
Election administration	Late court rulings and state-level rules on voting procedures can affect how ballots are cast and counted, although election administration remains primarily state and local.
Late-breaking events	Foreign-policy developments, economic data, court rulings and campaign controversies can have outsized effects in a narrow field of battlegrounds.

Sources: Federal Election Commission; Pew Research Center on election confidence

The FEC lists Tuesday, 3 November 2026 as the regularly scheduled federal general election date. Close races may not be called immediately because ballot-counting and certification procedures vary by state. A useful early signal will be whether competitive districts begin moving consistently in one direction rather than any single national vote total.

Conclusion

The governing stakes after November 3.

The 2026 midterms are best understood as a contest over institutional control rather than a single national vote. Narrow margins in Congress mean that relatively small shifts in turnout, a handful of House districts or several Senate races can change control of one or both chambers. The economy and cost of living are central to the campaign, but redistricting, candidate quality, turnout, and state-specific political conditions will determine how national sentiment translates into seats.

Whatever the result, the consequences will extend beyond partisan control of Congress. Changes in the House or Senate can alter the administration's room for legislation and spending, the intensity of investigations and oversight, the confirmation process, and congressional involvement in trade and foreign policy. The election will therefore help define the governing environment for the final two years of Trump's second term and the political terrain heading toward 2028.

Data note

This Info Pack reflects information available through 18 September 2026. Polls and race ratings are time-sensitive snapshots and may change before Election Day. Charts are original visualisations based on the cited source data. Historical House seat-change figures use the American Presidency Project's consistent measure of the president's party, which can differ slightly from raw party totals in some years.



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