



An analysis of key factors in the 2026 midterm elections

By most conventional measures and historical patterns, the Democratic Party should perform well in the 2026 midterm elections. Democrats most likely will retake control of the House of Representatives and narrow the Republicans' margin in the Senate, although they are unlikely to regain the majority. However, the unique volatility of Donald Trump's presidency, deep public dislike for both parties, and a wide range of contingencies make 2026 a more difficult year than usual for political predictions.

Midterm elections historically have turned out poorly for the party that holds the White House, with losses of greater magnitude in the president's second term. The only real post-World War II exceptions to this pattern, in 1998 and 2002, occurred during the unusually popular presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Given that Donald Trump's aggregated approval rating has been in the low 40-percent range since July 2025, Democrats should easily take the handful of seats they need to regain the House majority.¹ But the Democrats have major structural liabilities and significant internal divisions, which they will have to confront in 2028 if not in 2026. Republicans have their own existential questions to address about their future after Trump.

Democrats began 2025 in a state of confusion and demoralization. Trump, despite having exited the presidency with severe reputational damage in 2021 after the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, secured a near-majority of the popular vote in the 2024 presidential election — the first time a Republican candidate had accomplished that feat in 20 years. The GOP ticket gained ground with nearly every demographic group, including a record share of Latino voters, and won all seven of the “battleground” swing states. Trump entered the White House for the second time with a net favorability of nearly 12% according to poll aggregates, a higher approval rating than at any point in his first term.²

The candidacy of 2024 Democratic presidential nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, was hampered by the chaotic circumstances of Joe Biden's withdrawal from the race (as well as racism and sexism, according to many Democratic analysts). But it's likely that any Democratic candidate connected to the administration would have suffered from association with its record on immigration (despite early warnings from Biden aides about the political dangers of a migration surge) and inflation (Biden left office with the cost of living nearly 25 percent higher than when

¹ With the resignation of Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA) and the death of Rep. Doug LaMalfa (R-CA), both on Jan. 6, 2026, the GOP advantage in the House narrowed to 218-213, with 216 votes needed to pass legislation.

² Nate Silver and Eli McKown-Dawson, “How popular is Donald Trump?,” Silver Bulletin, Jan. 5, 2026. <https://www.natesilver.net/p/trump-approval-ratings-nate-silver-bulletin>

he took office).³ The Democratic brand also was tarnished by failures of state capacity (blue cities failed to build housing, blue states and the federal government failed to build infrastructure) as well as the disconnect between many progressive values and mainstream American beliefs.

Republicans began 2025 flushed with confidence that they had created a new and durable majority coalition, rooted in a populist conservatism oriented toward a multiracial and multiethnic working class, that could build and maintain power for years to come. Commentators spoke of a “Trump vibe shift” driving American culture and institutions toward the right for the first time in decades.⁴

But the first year of Trump’s second term was marked by a kind of radicalism that had only been hinted at in his first term, during which he had been restrained by key appointees who were veterans of previous Republican administrations rather than Trump loyalists. The extremism of Trump’s actions across 2025 dismayed many of his supporters while reinvigorating Democrats. In many ways, the Trump administration repeated the principal error of the Biden administration: misreading what was a relatively narrow victory as a mandate for transformative change. While Trump’s actions may have gratified his hardest-core supporters, they were off-putting to voters in the broad American middle. As a result, Trump’s net approval rating fell by some 24 points across his first year in office, from +12 to -12.⁵

Many Americans who opposed the huge volume of migration during the Biden presidency, for example, applauded Trump’s halting of illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border as well as his promise to deport violent criminals, but not the pursuit of mass deportation leading to ICE workplace raids and indiscriminate house-to-house searches that swept up people who in most cases did not have criminal records. Prominent podcaster Joe Rogan, who endorsed Trump in 2024, called ICE’s actions “insane,” pointing out that those arrested were “not cartel members, not gang members, not drug dealers,” but rather construction workers and gardeners.⁶ Rogan added that “When you’re just arresting people in front of their kids — normal, regular people who’ve been here for 20 years — everybody who has

a heart can’t get along with that.”⁷ Trump’s net approval on immigration, historically his most salient issue, fell from a net positive of 11% in March to a net negative of 8% by year’s end.⁸ (Public approval for Trump’s immigration policies declined further amid widespread dismay over the shooting deaths of two American protestors by federal agents in Minnesota in January 2026.)

Many Trump 2024 voters have told pollsters and focus groups that in his second term he is doing things he wasn’t elected to do. Voters who wanted him to bring down Biden-era inflation weren’t asking him to upend the global trading system with massive, wide-ranging tariffs imposed on allies and rivals alike. Those who wanted him to keep the country out of foreign wars weren’t giving him a mandate for strikes on Iranian nuclear sites or regime change in Venezuela. Voters who wanted him to restore the vibrant economy of the pre-pandemic years didn’t anticipate his weaponization of the Justice Department against his enemies, his routine recourse to governing through emergency powers, or his legally and constitutionally questionable actions in the pursuit of the consolidation of presidential power.

Across 2025, the underperformance of the economy under Trump allowed Democrats to gain traction around the issue of affordability — the same issue he had used against the Democrats in 2024. The rate of inflation, while down considerably from its peak of 9.1% in June 2022, has remained around 3% since June 2023, despite Trump’s claims that “Our prices are coming down tremendously.” The costs of housing, childcare, electricity, and groceries continued to outpace wage growth in 2025, as they had for the previous four years.⁹ A majority of Americans believe the economy is in a recession (although technically it isn’t), and nearly two-thirds say the country is headed in the wrong direction.¹⁰

Trump’s tariffs raised the average applied U.S. tariff rate from 2.5% to close to 18%, the highest level in nearly a century. According to the Tax Foundation, they have amounted to an average tax increase of roughly \$1,200 per household in 2025.¹¹ Although structural factors have driven inflation

3 Christopher Flavelle, “How Biden Ignored Warnings and Lost Americans’ Faith in Immigration,” *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/07/us/politics/biden-immigration-trump.html>; Charlie Cook, “What the Democrats’ autopsy should have focused on,” *Charlie Cook Politics* (Substack), Dec. 23, 2025. <https://www.charliecookpolitics.com/p/what-the-democrats-autopsy-should>

4 Tyler Cowen, “The changes in vibes — why did they happen?,” *Marginal Revolution*, July 17, 2024. <https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2024/07/the-changes-in-vibes-why-did-they-happen.html>

5 Nate Silver and Eli McKown-Dawson, “How popular is Donald Trump?,” *Silver Bulletin*, Jan. 5, 2026. <https://www.natesilver.net/p/trump-approval-ratings-nate-silver-bulletin>

6 Elizabeth Crisp, “Joe Rogan on ICE raids, arrests under Trump: ‘It’s insane,’” *The Hill*, July 3, 2025. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5383761-trump-ice-work-site-raids-reaction/>

7 “Joe Rogan on Trump’s mass deportations: ‘I really thought they were just going to go after the criminals,’” *Media Matters*, Oct. 10, 2025. <https://www.mediamatters.org/immigration/joe-rogan-trumps-mass-deportations-i-really-thought-they-were-just-going-go-after>

8 Nate Silver and Eli McKown-Dawson, “How popular is Donald Trump?,” *Silver Bulletin*, Jan. 5, 2026. <https://www.natesilver.net/p/trump-approval-ratings-nate-silver-bulletin>

9 Jason Lalljee, “Trump grades his economy ‘A+++++’ — most Americans don’t agree,” *Axios*, Dec. 9, 2025. <https://www.axios.com/2025/12/09/trump-tariffs-economy-gas-prices>

10 Domenico Montenegro, “Trump’s economic approval hits a new low at 36%, poll finds,” *NPR*, Dec. 7, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/17/nx-s1-5645003/trump-poll-economy-approval>

11 Erica York and Alex Durante, “Trump Tariffs: Tracking the Economic Impact of the Trump Trade War,” *Tax Foundation*, December 1, 2025. <https://taxfoundation.org/research/all/federal/trump-tariffs-trade-war/>

across that period, many Americans believe Trump's tariffs are directly responsible for increased inflationary pressures. A November Yahoo/YouGov poll found respondents felt by a 2:1 margin that Trump's actions had done more to raise prices than lower them.¹² While Trump has claimed his economic policies (including immigration restrictions as well as tariffs) were necessary to boost employment and revive American manufacturing, job growth has lagged and manufacturing employment is down.¹³ Although the recession many economists anticipated would follow Trump's "Liberation Day" has not materialized, many commentators consider the country to have a "K-shaped economy" in which the top tenth of earners now drive about half of consumer spending (compared to 36% three decades ago), while conditions are becoming increasingly difficult for the middle and working classes.¹⁴

Republicans are paying a political price for Trump's actions, particularly with regard to the economy. A November CNN poll found that 61% of Americans agreed with the statement that the Trump administration had "worsened" economic conditions — a number that was up 10% from March and was higher than at any point during the Biden administration. Even 57% of Republicans told pollsters that Trump has neglected the issue of lowering prices.¹⁵ An NPR/PBS/Marist poll taken near the end of 2025 found that just 36% of Americans approved of his handling of the economy, his worst showing ever in that poll. The poll found that Democrats were now slightly more trusted to handle the economy than Republicans, by 37% to 33% — a major shift away from the 16-point advantage Republicans had on the issue in 2022.¹⁶ Many pollsters consider the public's souring on Trump's ability to handle the economy to be the issue on which he has lost the most support since taking office, and they expect it will be the biggest issue in the midterm elections. Trump has not helped Republicans by dismissing the issue of affordability as a "Democratic hoax."

Voter discontent with Republicans can be seen in nearly all of the off-year elections held in 2025, which historically have served as a bellwether for the following year's elections. Democratic candidates outperformed expectations

with resounding wins in governor's races in Virginia and New Jersey. The city of Miami, Florida elected its first openly Democratic mayor since 1997. A Democrat defeated a Republican in the special election for a state house district in Georgia that Trump had carried by 12 points in 2024, despite the Republican candidate's superior margin in fundraising. In a special election in Tennessee's 7th Congressional District, a progressive Democratic candidate lost by only 9 points just a year after an election in which the Republican candidate won the district by 22 points. Overall, Democrats in these off-year elections ran about ten points ahead of their 2024 results.

A clear message from these elections is that the Republican Party is failing to retain its "newcomers" — those demographics which had not historically voted Republican but were welcomed to the MAGA coalition in 2024. In particular, the GOP lost support from independent voters, young people (especially men), non-college-educated voters, and minorities (especially Latinos), all of whom had been critical to its successes in 2024.

Independent voters comprise nearly one-third of all U.S. voters, and declining numbers of those independents approve of Trump's performance in office.¹⁷ According to Gallup, Trump's approval rating among independent voters fell from 46% at the start of 2025 to only 25% by year's end.¹⁸ Speaking with American Men (SAM), a research project created by Democrats after the 2024 election to study why young men had shifted so dramatically to the GOP, found that those in the 16-29 age range (a group that is majority independent or unaffiliated) gave Trump a favorability rating of 56% in the spring of 2025 but only 46% by year's end.¹⁹

Moderate Democratic gubernatorial candidates Abigail Spanberger in Virginia and Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey both won supermajorities of independent voters in 2025 (69% and 62% respectively), and both won bare majorities of non-college voters as well. In Spanberger's case, her 51% share of non-college voters represented a 19-point swing away from those voters' support for Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin in 2021.²⁰

12 Kathryn Palmer, "Americans say Trump has done more to raise prices than lower them by 2-to-1: New Poll," *USA Today*, Nov. 30, 2025. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/11/30/trump-prices-cost-living-economy-inflation/87536936007/>

13 Chao Deng and Drew An-Pham, "Why Everyone Got Trump's Tariffs Wrong," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 14, 2025. <https://www.wsj.com/economy/why-everyone-got-trumps-tariffs-wrong-d16a4598>

14 Heather Long, "The economy is cracking. This trend is the most alarming," *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/08/06/economy-jobs-middle-class-recession-tariffs/>

15 Aaron Blake, "Trump is trying to make 'affordability' his issue. Good luck with that," *CNN*, Nov. 7, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/07/politics/affordability-trump-gop-analysis>

16 Domenico Montenegro, "Trump's economic approval hits a new low at 36%, poll finds," *NPR*, Dec. 7, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/17/nx-s1-5645003/trump-poll-economy-approval>

17 "Cross-Tabs: September 2025 Times/Siena National Poll of Registered Voters," *New York Times*, Sep. 29, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/02/polls/times-siena-poll-registered-voter-crosstabs.html>

18 Megan Brennan, "Trump's Approval Rating Drops to 36%, New Second-Term Low," Gallup, Nov. 28, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/699221/trump-approval-rating-drops-new-second-term-low.aspx>; Lisa Ryckman, "There's Good News and Bad News for Everybody in the Midterms," NCSL, Aug. 5, 2025. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/theres-good-news-and-bad-news-for-everybody-in-the-midterms>

19 Peter Hamby, "Manospheres of Influence," *Puck*, Jan. 7, 2026. <https://puck.news/why-young-men-are-souring-on-trump/>

20 Third Way, "What the 2025 Results Tell Us," Nov. 25, 2025. <https://www.thirdway.org/one-pager/what-the-2025-results-tell-us>

Similar shifts towards the Democrats could be seen in Latino-heavy districts in both states. Trump won 48% of Latino voters in 2024 (including a majority of Latino men), compared to 36% in 2020. But in 2025, two-thirds of Latinos supported the Democratic candidates in New Jersey and Virginia. In Passaic County, New Jersey, which is 43% Latino, Sherrill won by 15 percentage points despite Trump having carried the county by 3 points in 2024. In a Virginia district with a similar percentage of Latino residents, the electorate swung by 22 points to the Democrats.²¹

Dismay at the heavy-handed immigration enforcement efforts of ICE and other agencies certainly has been a factor in turning Latinos away from the Republican Party. Fear of racial profiling, detentions, and mass deportations has been felt in Latino communities across the country, as for example with the cancellation or postponement of events celebrating Hispanic heritage.²² According to election day exit polls in New Jersey, Virginia, California, and New York City, majorities of Latinos said that the administration has gone too far in its crackdown. Conservative strategist and Trump campaign veteran Giancarlo Sopo noted that the Latino shift toward the Democrats in Miami's mayoral election was driven in part by detentions and deportations of immigrants working through the legal system to adjust their status: "This is bad for many reasons, and it's terrible for the GOP brand."²³

But while Latino voters are concerned about immigration, the economy (and particularly the cost of living) remains their main issue. As NBC observed after the 2024 election, "From the beginning of the election to its final days, Latino voters in interviews and polls consistently named the economy, inflation, or higher costs as their number one issue and gave Trump the advantage on them."²⁴ Pluralities of Latino voters in every state where post-2025 election polling was conducted said that the economy or the cost of living was the issue mattering most to their vote. Majorities also said that they were either holding steady financially or falling behind. At least 6 in 10 Latino voters told pollsters that they felt dissatisfied or angry about the direction of the country.²⁵

In Texas — a state where Trump won 55% of Latino voters in 2024 — two-thirds of Latinos polled said that they believe Republicans in Congress and President Trump are failing to focus enough on the economy. The same poll found that if the midterm elections were held today, 53% would support the Democratic House candidate and only 28% the Republican.²⁶ According to the Pew Research Center, 68% of Latinos say that the situation for Hispanics today is worse than it was a year ago — the first time that most Latinos say their situation has worsened in nearly two decades — and nearly 80% say the Trump administration's policies have harmed Latinos more than helped them.²⁷

The erosion of Latino support has implications for Republicans that go beyond the usual calculations of electoral support. Trump's push for Republican state lawmakers to shore up the GOP's narrow House majority (through a controversial mid-decade redistricting effort) focused on Texas, where new Republican-drawn congressional maps were designed to flip five Democratic seats in the 2026 midterms. However, the redesign was based on the theory that Latinos had become reliably Republican voters. As *Politico* pointed out, the GOP's maps — which include the creation of four majority-Hispanic districts — "indicate the party is bullish on Latino voters continuing their rightward political shift even without Trump on the ballot."²⁸ This may prove to have been a bad bet in Texas as well as other states where Republicans based their redistricting efforts on similar calculations.

However, Democrats may not benefit from a thermostatic reaction against Republicans to the extent that past historical patterns would suggest.²⁹ Paradoxically, even while Trump and the Republicans have become increasingly unpopular across 2025, Democrats have become even more unpopular. An August 2025 CNBC poll found the Democratic Party's net unfavorability among registered voters was -32, the lowest rating for either party going back to at least 1996. The same poll showed Democrats polling significantly worse than Trump, with a 24% positive rating and a 56% negative rating compared to Trump's 46% approval

21 Sam Sanchez and Massey Villereal, "Why Trump Is Quickly Losing Hispanic Support," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 1, 2026. <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/why-trump-is-quickly-losing-hispanic-support-aa88d8d0>

22 Reis Thebault, Emmanuel Felton, Rachel Hatzipanagos, and Mariana Alfaro, "Documented or not, Latinos are changing habits during ICE crackdown," *Washington Post*, Nov. 1, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2025/11/01/ice-latinos-race-profiling/>

23 <https://x.com/GiancarloSopo/status/1998724124697395480>, Dec. 10, 2025.

24 Nicole Acevedo and Mark Murray, "Poll: Democrats' advantage with Latino voters continues to shrink," NBC News, Sep. 29, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/poll-harris-trump-democrats-advantage-latinos-voters-continues-shrink-rcna172686>

25 Bridget Bowman, Julie Tsirkin, Melanie Zanona, and Stephanie Perry, "Latino shifts in Tuesday's elections alarm some Republicans," NBC News, Nov. 6, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/latino-voter-shifts-tuesdays-elections-alarm-republicans-rcna242186>

26 Unidos US, "Texas poll: Pocketbook issues dominate Hispanic voters' priorities, yet nearly 7 in 10 feel the President and Republicans are not focusing enough attention on the economy," Nov. 6, 2025. <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/texas-poll-pocketbook-issues-dominate-hispanic-voters-priorities-yet-nearly-7-in-10-feel-the-president-and-republicans-are-not-focusing-enough-attention-on-the-economy/>

27 Carlyne Im and Luis Noé-Bustamante, "Majorities of Latinos Disapprove of Trump and His Policies on Immigration, Economy," Pew Research Center, Nov. 24, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/11/24/majorities-of-latinos-disapprove-of-trump-and-his-policies-on-immigration-economy/>

28 Andrew Howard, Jessica Piper, Elena Schneider, and Nick Reisman, "Republicans bet big on Latino voters in redistricted Texas," *Politico*, July 31, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/31/republicans-texas-redistricting-latinos-voters-00485890>

29 Christopher Wlezien, "The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 39:4 (Nov. 1995), pp. 981-1000. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111666>

versus 51% disapproval rating.³⁰ An end-of-December YouGov poll likewise found the Democrats' favorability to be the lowest recorded in the poll's history.³¹

A majority of Americans consider the Democrats to be nearly as extreme as the Republicans. At the same time, the main reason why Democrats tell pollsters they are unhappy with their party is that they don't think it has pushed back hard enough against the Trump administration.³² The Democrats' strategy of countering Trump by presenting themselves as the champions of political norms, expertise, and trust in government has in some ways made them the party of the status quo at a time when much of the electorate wants disruptive change. Early indicators suggest some Democratic candidates on both the left and right may run as independents in 2026 in the hope of disassociating themselves from the party's "establishment" brand.³³

This historically unusual situation of two deeply unpopular parties plays into each party's internal debates about how to approach the 2026 midterms. The divide in the Democratic Party is largely between moderates, who want the party to take the kinds of positions that would restore its reputation with working- and middle-class voters, and progressives, who want the party to double down on turning out greater numbers of its activist base.

The progressive position was most forcefully advanced recently by the left-wing organization Way to Win, whose analysis concluded that while some Biden 2020 voters did flip to Trump in 2024, a substantial number stayed home because they were disappointed that the Democratic Party did not take more forceful progressive positions on issues like racial and economic justice, immigration, and Gaza.³⁴ The moderate position was most prominently argued by the Welcome organization's "Deciding to Win" report, which concluded that most voters think the Democratic Party is too far to the left and is focused on issues that aren't top priorities for most Americans. The report also

criticized the party for paying insufficient attention to swing voters, choosing instead to rely on a counterproductive base-mobilization strategy.³⁵

The progressive position has some merit. It can point to progressives' success in galvanizing well-attended No Kings protests across the country, as well as the pressure campaign and celebrity boycotts that forced Disney to rehire late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel. Democrats also have recently waged successful school board campaigns across the country, "emphasiz[ing] test scores and bus safety over debates about which bathrooms transgender students use and banning books from school libraries," which suggests that culture-war issues may no longer be the toxic liabilities (at least at the local level) that they have been for Democrats for the past several electoral cycles.³⁶

Above all, progressives can point to the victory of Zohran Mamdani, a leader of the Democratic Socialists of America, in the New York City mayoral election. Mamdani, who polled at 1% in a February survey of the field, overcame the Democratic establishment on the strength of his appeal to young voters, his DSA-led mass-movement campaigning, and his mastery of social media. In theory, moderates should be as able as progressives to produce viral vertical videos, but in practice moderate candidates shy away from both the authenticity and emotionalism that social media algorithms reward.³⁷ Mamdani, however, won not just with videos and charisma, but because he centered his campaign on the issue of affordability, an approach that elicited grudging admiration even from Vice President JD Vance.³⁸

But what works for progressive candidates in overwhelmingly Democratic areas like New York City may hurt the party elsewhere.³⁹ As the *New York Times* editorialized, "Candidates closer to the political center, from both parties, continue to fare better in most elections than those farther to the right or left. This pattern may be the strongest one in electoral politics today, but it is one that many partisans try to obscure and many voters do not fully grasp."⁴⁰ But

30 Anna Commander, "Democrat Net Favorability Plunges to Near Three-Decade Low, Poll Shows," *Newsweek*, Aug. 7, 2025. <https://www.newsweek.com/democrat-net-favorability-plunges-near-three-decade-low-poll-shows-2110513>

31 Taylor Orth, "Negativity toward political parties and politicians is pervasive and especially sharp among Democrats," YouGov, Dec. 30, 2025. <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/53799-negativity-toward-political-parties-politicians-pervasive-especially-sharp-among-democrats-december-26-29-2025-economist-yougov-poll>

32 Steven Shepard, Andy Cerda, Joseph Copeland, Ted Van Green, and Shanay Gracia, "A Year Ahead of the Midterms, Americans' Dim Views of Both Parties," Pew Research, Oct. 30, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/10/30/a-year-ahead-of-the-midterms-americans-dim-views-of-both-parties/>

33 Tom Lutey, "Bodnar plans Senate run as an Independent," *Montana Free Press*, Jan. 14, 2026. <https://montanafreepress.org/2026/01/14/bodnar-plans-senate-run-as-an-independent-and-testers-apparent-support-angers-democrats-in-montana/>; Todd Feurer, "Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez announces independent run for Rep. Chuy Garcia's Congressional seat," *CBS News Chicago*, Jan. 28, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/ald-byron-sigcho-lopez-announces-independent-run-for-congress/>

34 Monica Potts, "A New Report Reveals the Real Reason Democrats Lost in 2024," *The New Republic*, Dec. 11, 2025. <https://newrepublic.com/article/204271/why-democrats-lost-2024-election-trump-way-to-win-report>

35 Simon Bazelon, Lauren Harper Pope, and Liam Kerr, *Deciding to Win: Toward a Common Sense Renewal of the Democratic Party*, Oct. 27, 2025. <https://decidingtowin.org>

36 Liz Crampton and Madison Fernandez, "In culture war backlash, Democrats sweep school boards," *Politico*, Nov. 21, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/11/21/culture-war-democrats-school-boards-00663699>

37 Lauren Egan, "Dems Struggle to Make Their Moderates Go Viral," *The Bulwark*, Dec. 11, 2025. <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/democrats-struggle-to-make-their-moderates-go-viral>

38 Zac Anderson, "Vance calls Mamdani 'smart' on one key issue," *USA Today*, Dec. 4, 2025. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/12/04/jd-vance-zohran-mamdani-affordability-new-york-trump/87614701007/>

39 Nick Reisman and Jeff Coltin, "'Giddy' Republicans cheer Mamdani's impact on Democrats," *Politico*, Sep. 1, 2026. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/01/democrats-fret-the-zohran-mamdani-effect-will-cost-them-next-year-00531906>

40 "The Partisans Are Wrong: Moving to the Center Is the Way to Win," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/20/opinion/moderation-strategy-democrat-republican-center.html>

growing progressive activism in the party, and increasing anger against the party establishment, means that Democrats may face an intraparty revolt similar to the Tea Party rebellion that reshaped the GOP two decades ago.

The divide between moderates and progressives has played out in other Democratic debates across the past year, notably with regard to the Abundance movement that originated as a critique of Democratic governance shortcomings in big cities (especially with regard to housing unaffordability) and the failure of Democratically-controlled states to build the energy and infrastructure projects funded by Biden-era legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act. As journalist Jonathan Chait has pointed out, the Abundance movement is controversial because it amounts to “a direct attack on the constellation of activist organizations, often called ‘the groups,’ that control progressive politics and have significant influence over the Democratic Party.” Further, since the Obama era, “many of the component groups in the progressive coalition have drifted further left on their core demands,” while at the same time “they have grown more purposeful about their belief that each group must stand behind all the positions outlined by the others.” This dynamic locks the Democratic Party into deeply unpopular positions that it cannot distance itself from without challenging its activist base.⁴¹

The Democratic Party establishment has been unwilling to come down on one side or another of this internal conflict. Such reluctance surely was one reason why the Democratic National Committee suppressed its “autopsy report” on the party’s failure in the 2024 election. In practice, this means that the party’s only unifying characteristic is its opposition to Trump. In the midterms, this may be a winning strategy, but if the party is to recover from its reputational damage it must come up with a more coherent and popular identity before the 2028 elections.

The Republican Party in a sense is better off today than it was at a similar point in 2017, because it is now wholly aligned around Trump, unlike the party of nearly a decade ago that still contained significant numbers of Republicans opposed to Trump and his populist approach. Trump has purged his opponents and completely redefined the party’s identity and “MAGA” brand. Republican officeholders and officials who want to stay in political life have little choice other than to follow his lead. Nonetheless, Trump is now a lame-duck president, as hard as that can be to remember at times, and beneath the surface unity one can see vari-

ous actors beginning to put forward their visions of a post-Trump GOP. For now, however, there are attempts at differentiation but little open dissension.

The divisions in the Republican Party, like those in the Democratic Party, are between relatively moderate, status-quo conservative, and extreme factions. Since few actors on any side can openly criticize Trump and survive politically, they vent their grievances on proxy issues or figures like House Speaker Mike Johnson or Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem. For example, four moderate House Republicans broke with Johnson in December to force a vote to extend Obamacare subsidies; the expiration of those subsidies is projected to double healthcare premiums for 24 million Americans who participate in the program.⁴²

The developing schism is also playing out in conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation, which has seen an exodus of trustees and staff over the leadership’s tolerance of white nationalism and its support for Trump-inspired protectionism instead of Reaganite free-market principles.⁴³ Likewise, Indiana state legislators who defied presidential pressure to redraw the state’s congressional map did so because Trump’s effort “simply ran afoul of the small-c conservatism on which many Indiana legislators still pride themselves,” a conservatism based on institutionalism, pragmatism, and civility.⁴⁴

There are also tensions between a consistent “America First” populist ideology and Trump’s largely improvisational approach to government. Former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, once the most devoted of Trump acolytes, gradually turned against him, accusing him of betraying his own “America First” populist ideals. According to a much-discussed *New York Times* profile of Greene, she increasingly criticized Trump and the GOP over policies favoring tech elites and billionaire donors over working-class Americans. Her most significant act of defiance was to demand the release of all investigative materials pertaining to convicted sex offender (and former Trump associate) Jeffrey Epstein, which to her represented “everything wrong with Washington. Rich, powerful elites doing horrible things and getting away with it. And the women are the victims.”⁴⁵

Former Trump advisor Steve Bannon has also attacked the administration from the populist right, accusing it of deporting insufficient numbers of immigrants and failing to destroy the “deep state.” In particular, he has said that his rival Elon Musk, the head of the administration’s so-called

41 Jonathan Chait, “The Coming Democratic Civil War,” *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2025. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/abundance-democrats-political-power/682929/>

42 “4 Republicans defy Speaker Johnson to force House vote on extending ACA subsidies,” Associated Press, Dec. 17, 2025. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/12/17/4-republicans-defy-speaker-johnson-to-force-house-vote-on-extending-aca-subsidies>

43 “Without free markets, American conservatism comes apart,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/12/23/heritage-aan-pence-free-trade-roberts/>

44 Russell Berman, “The State That Handed Trump His Biggest Defeat Yet,” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 11, 2025. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/2025/12/indiana-republicans-trump-gop-redistricting/685220/>

45 Robert Draper, “‘I Was Just So Naïve’: Inside Marjorie Taylor Greene’s Break with Trump,” *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/29/magazine/marjorie-taylor-greene-trump-maga-split.html>

Department of Government Effectiveness (DOGE) initiative, “had zero idea what he was talking about regarding \$2 trillion PER YEAR in budget cuts. Insane, yet no one stood up to him — it put us back a year and it depressed the base when it never happened.”⁴⁶ Bannon’s anger at Musk underscores that the varied and unruly elements of the MAGA coalition — cosmopolitan tech magnates, anti-immigrant nativists, Reaganite China hawks, isolationists, Chamber of Commerce corporatists, anti-establishment contrarians and conspiracists, Evangelical Christians, Groypers, Barstool conservatives, and a dozen different schismatic varieties of postliberals — hold contrary positions and are actively antagonistic to each other. All that holds them together is deference to Trump and a shared abhorrence of the left.

But in Trump’s succinct formulation, “MAGA is me. MAGA loves everything I do, and I love everything I do, too.”⁴⁷ While the leadership of the MAGA coalition will be increasingly contested as 2028 approaches — and it’s possible that only Trump is capable of holding that coalition together — for now it appears unlikely that anyone can outflank Trump from any political angle, populist or otherwise.

By the same token, few Republicans are likely to distance themselves from Trump in the midterm elections, whether swing-district moderates or America First ultras. As Republican strategist Robert Blizzard observed, as a Republican candidate “you are going to be tied to the president regardless. You’re getting all the negatives anyway; you might as well get the positives” — particularly Trump’s ability to turn out low-propensity voters including the “newcomers” in the 2024 MAGA coalition. Blizzard advises Republican candidates to focus on issues where voters historically have trusted them more, including the economy, crime and public safety, immigration, national security, as opposed to areas like healthcare and climate change where voters tend to trust Democrats more.⁴⁸ Of course, Republican candidates will face bleaker prospects if the economy continues to perform poorly. But the emerging party line is that tariffs are only temporarily necessary in order “to reset our trade alliances, to reset the world stage for trade for America,” in the words of the GOP’s House campaign chair, Rep. Richard Hudson, “because we’ve been getting a raw deal for a long time. It’s a challenge because this is a painful transition... [but] this reset is going to be a windfall for America because we’re going to finally have fair trade rules around the world.”⁴⁹

Trump has urged Republican members of Congress to run on the administration’s achievements, including the drop in illegal border crossings, drug pricing deals, and the provisions in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA) including ex-

tension of the 2017 tax cuts; Republicans will also remind voters that by opposing the reconciliation package Democrats thereby voted for tax increases and against new tax breaks for tipped wages and overtime pay. The administration is also reported to be backing initiatives such as the Housing for the 21st Century Act that would reduce regulatory barriers to home building and development, modernize federal programs, and increase overall housing supply.⁵⁰ Trump intends to travel around the country to sell his agenda, and the Republican National Committee is discussing plans for a midterm convention to boost enthusiasm among low-propensity voters who are less likely to show up when Trump isn’t on the ballot. The question of whether Trump’s presence in swing districts would hurt or help Republican candidates there is still a matter of dispute.

The cross-cutting currents and volatility of American political life in the Age of Trump make political predictions more difficult than in more routine times. Voters may be unhappy with the state of the economy under Trump — but do they want to hand back power to Democrats when they hold such a low opinion of that party as well? In the absence of a Democratic Party reckoning with its liabilities, will Republicans continue to reap benefits by running against the left’s excesses on issues like immigration, policing, socialism, DEI, cancel culture, transgender radicalism, and COVID-19 restrictions? In a “post-news era” in which misinformation means that citizens don’t know what or whom to trust, can voters connect the dots between their pain and the policies and parties responsible for it? And how will voters respond if any number of unknown unknowns alter the political calculations between now and November: a popping of the AI bubble that tanks the stock market, a Chinese attack on Taiwan, an American attack on Greenland?

The mid-decade redistricting effort appears to be too much in flux to say whether it will benefit either party. But the Supreme Court may issue a major ruling on the Voting Rights Act’s Section Two that would remove protections for majority-minority districts; if such a ruling were to come in the spring, before primaries and/or filing deadlines, that could allow Republican legislatures in Southern states like Alabama and Louisiana to eliminate currently Democratic districts in time for the midterms. The Court might also do Trump a political favor (although he wouldn’t see it that way) by ruling his unpopular tariffs unconstitutional.

Nonetheless, I return to my prediction that Democrats will retake control of the House in the 2026 midterms, but with smaller gains than in past “blue wave” elections: most likely in the 10-15 seat range. And they will pick up Senate seats but almost certainly fall short of a majority.

46 Max Tani, “What media leaders got wrong in 2025,” *Semafor*, Dec. 28, 2025. <https://www.semafor.com/article/12/28/2025/what-media-leaders-got-wrong-in-2025>

47 Kristen Welker and Jonathan Allen, “Trump says the U.S. isn’t at war with Venezuela,” *NBC News*, Jan. 5, 2026. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-says-us-not-war-venezuela-rcna252427>

48 Leigh Ann Caldwell, “The G.O.P.’s Midterm Polling Paradox,” *Puck*, Dec. 28, 2025. <https://puck.news/2026-midterm-predictions-a-gop-strategists-reality-check/>

49 Leigh Ann Caldwell, “Midterms in the Garden of Good and Evil,” *Puck*, Dec. 16, 2025. <https://puck.news/house-campaign-chiefs-clash-over-trump-turnout-strategy/>

50 “H.R. 6644 – Housing for the 21st Century Act,” introduced Dec. 11, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6644>

Partisan redistricting in the House, even before this year’s Republican map-redrawing and Democratic retaliation, had reduced the number of competitive seats. (Ongoing political polarization has reduced the number of swing voters as well.) Democratic congressional outperformance of Kamala Harris in 2020 also means that there are fewer GOP-held seats that Trump won by less than 5 points or even lost. In the 2018 midterms, there were 31 such seats; in 2026, there will be only 14.⁵¹ The likeliest losers of these seats, unfortunately, will be the GOP’s handful of remaining moderates.

Republicans are defending 35 Senate seats in 2026 compared with 13 for Democrats, but many of the GOP seats are in deep-red states. Even if the Democrats defended all of their seats — which would mean winning in Georgia and Michigan, states Trump carried in 2024 — and won the Republican tossup states of Maine and North Carolina, they would still be short of a majority. The only other pickup opportunities would be in states Trump won by significant margins, such as Ohio, Iowa, Texas, and Alaska. Democrats will be left to hope for divisive GOP primaries that will force the eventual nominee into extreme positions he or she can’t repudiate in the general election, or major events that turn public opinion against Trump across the board. But in the Trump era, stranger things have happened.

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⁵¹ Jessica Piper, Abhinanda Bhattacharyya, and Paula Friedrich, “The underrated factors limiting the power of a blue wave next year,” *Politico*, Dec. 16, 2025. <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2025/democrats-2026-midterm-flips-redistricting-data/>