



Outlook on the 2026 US midterm elections

Introduction

The 2026 U.S. midterm elections will serve as the first national electoral test of President Donald Trump's second term. With Republicans holding a narrow 220-215 majority in the U.S. House, Democrats need to flip just three seats to reclaim the majority—and they have favorable historical headwinds on their side. Mr. Trump's approval rating sits at 40% at the time of writing. Since 1946, every president below 45% in a midterm year has lost at least 26 House seats. The math is not complicated.

Republicans hold a 53-47 advantage in the Senate, which will be harder — but not impossible — for Democrats to overtake.

Yet while the math is simple, the consequences are profound. A Democratic House majority would halt Mr. Trump's legislative agenda, launch oversight investigations, and create institutional friction that could constrain executive action on trade, foreign policy, and domestic priorities — especially immigration. Impeachment would be on the table.

Thus, an early look at the potential outcome of America's elections this year warrants our attention. What issues will shape the outcome? Which demographic groups will be pivotal? If Democrats do take back the House and Senate, how large could their majorities be?

This report examines the staying power of Mr. Trump's winning 2024 coalition, the electoral impacts of the issue of affordability, the winners and losers in America's mid-decade redistricting battles, and what historical models tell us about likely outcomes in the House and Senate.

The Republican Party's Vanishing Coalition

At the time we are publishing this report, Mr. Trump's job approval rating (40%) is about 10 percentage points lower than the share of the vote he won in the 2024 presidential election (49.8%). We should therefore expect the president to have lost significant ground among all voting groups, including those that supported him in 2024. And 40% of the vote is not enough to hold the House (see Figure 4).

But not all groups have moved against the president in equal measure. Mr. Trump's base — mostly white voters without college degrees, rural conservatives, and evangelical Christians — has remained roughly cohesive. Yet as his first year in office ends, Mr. Trump's coalition is fracturing among the marginal groups that powered his victory in the last election: independents, young voters, and Latinos.

The 2025 elections also showed lower turnout among Republican voters, a sign of potential weakness in attempts to engage Mr. Trump’s core supporters, who tend to show up only in presidential elections.

Start with independents. They have soured dramatically on Mr. Trump. According to February 2026 polling, roughly six in ten political independents now disapprove of Mr. Trump’s handling of the presidency. His approval among independents on the economy is even worse — only 25% approve. This deep unpopularity presents an opening for Democrats to win over moderates and swing voters who backed Mr. Trump in 2024 but have grown disillusioned with his governance.

Off-year elections are usually sleepy affairs, of interest mainly to local politicians and C-SPAN devotees. Not so in 2025: the gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey became referendums on Trumpism — and voters rendered a harsh verdict. As Figure 1 shows, every major demographic group swung toward Democrats, and turnout was at a 20-year high for off-year elections.

Latino voters — the group credited with powering Mr. Trump’s 2024 victory — have swung sharply back toward Democrats. Exit polls from the gubernatorial elec-

tions in Virginia and New Jersey in November 2025 showed a 20-point shift away from Republicans compared to 2024. In Virginia, Democrat Abigail Spanberger won Latino voters by 34 points after Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris won them by just 15 points a year earlier. Much of the narrative around Mr. Trump’s 2024 coalition focused on his gains among working-class Hispanics. Those gains have evaporated, according to exit polls.

And turnout patterns compound the problem. The 2025 elections saw depressed Republican turnout across the board: precinct-level data in Virginia, for example, showed turnout in the most Republican-leaning precincts at just 70% the level in the most Democratic-leaning areas of the state. Mr. Trump’s base of irregular voters, many of whom cast their first ballots in 2020 or 2024, simply did not show up without the former president on the ballot. This asymmetry is the core vulnerability for Republicans heading into 2026: their coalition depends on voters who historically skip midterms.

And there is additional evidence yet Democrats are “fired up” to participate in this year’s midterms. This enthusiasm will help them in November, and could also have consequences for the party’s primary elections.

Every demographic group shifted left in 2025

Fig. 1

Vote margin in the 2025 governor election and 2024 presidential election in Virginia*, for select demographic groups, per exit polls. Bolded rows are groups that were key to the Republicans’ victory in 2014

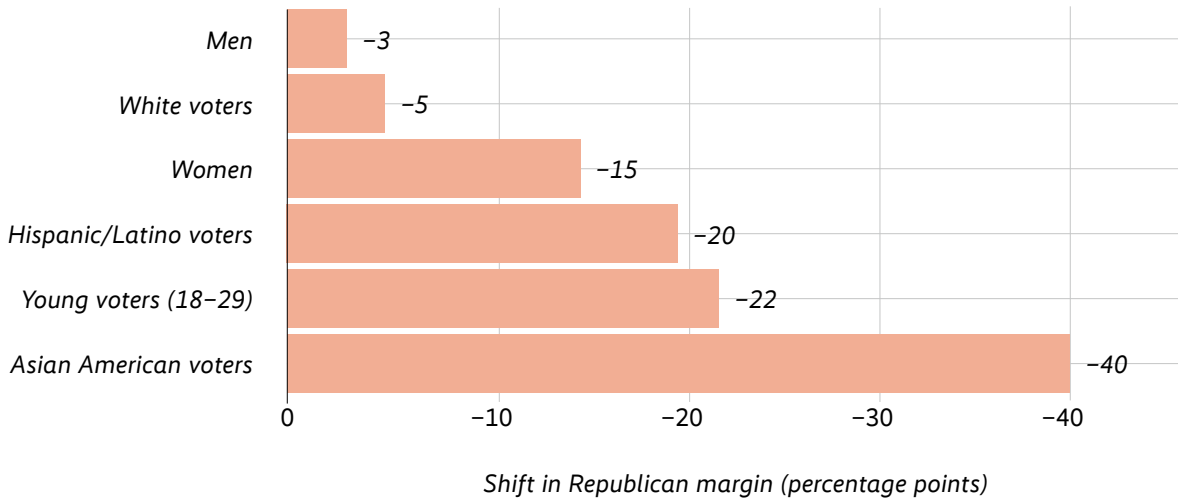
Category	Demographic Group	2024 Margin	2025 Margin	Shift
Gender	Male	6	3	-3
Gender	Female	-15	-30	-15
Race	White	12	6	-6
Race	Hispanic/Latino	-15	-34	-20
Race	Black	-76	-86	-11
Race	Asian	-18	-60	-42
Race	Other	11	-30	-41
Age	18-19	-20	-41	-22
Age	30-44	-12	-24	-13
Age	45-64	3	-10	-13
Age	65+	6	-2	-8
Income	<50k	-9	-26	-18
Income	50-100k	1	-16	-17
Income	100k+	-2	-12	-10

* No exit poll was conducted in Virginia in 2024, so I calculate subgroup margin using a combination of 2020 VA and 2024 national exit polls, adjusted changes since the 2020 election and differences between the national and Virginia electorate (ie, accounting for the fact that Virginia leans toward Democrats relative to the nation as a whole).

Source: Strength in Numbers/gelliottmorris.com - Created with Datawrapper

Trump's Winning Coalition Has Vanished

Shift in Republican vote margin from 2024 presidential to 2025 gubernatorial elections, by demographic group



Note: Republican support collapsed among the groups that supposedly powered Trump's 2024 victory. This chart shows net partisan margin (Republican support minus Democratic support) among key demographic groups. Negative values indicate the group now leans Democratic.
 Source: Exit polls, Virginia and New Jersey

My polling of U.S. voters has found that the entire electorate favors Democrats over Republicans for this November's contests by 8 percentage points (51% to 43%), among those voters who say they are definitely going to or very likely to vote, Democrats lead by an even larger 13 points. The difference between the two numbers reflects disproportionate engagement on the left.

The Democratic coalition, by contrast to Mr. Trump's, has been consolidated by widespread anger at the president's policies. The core Democratic constituency — college-educated voters, Black voters, and young professionals — turned out for the party in 2025, while the party gained ground among working-class whites, disaffected youths, and Latinos. Both polls and election results suggest they are reclaiming most of the voters the party lost in 2024.

The Affordability Election

Every election is about the economy, but 2026 will be about a specific economic grievance: affordability. Voters may see strong GDP growth and low unemployment, but they feel the cumulative weight of prices that never came back down. Eggs cost more than they did in 2019. So do cars, rent, and childcare. In polling, prices rank as the top political issue among likely voters by a double-digit margin.

Mr. Trump, of course, promised to fix this problem. In 2024, he told voters he would bring down prices "immediately" upon taking office. That promise is now a liability. According to December 2025 polling, 64% of Americans say Mr. Trump hasn't done enough to lower grocery prices. More damaging: voters increasingly blame him for making things worse. His tariff policy — sold as protecting American workers — has instead raised prices on consumer goods and led to a recession for manufacturing jobs; such employers closed over 70,000 positions across the country in 2025.

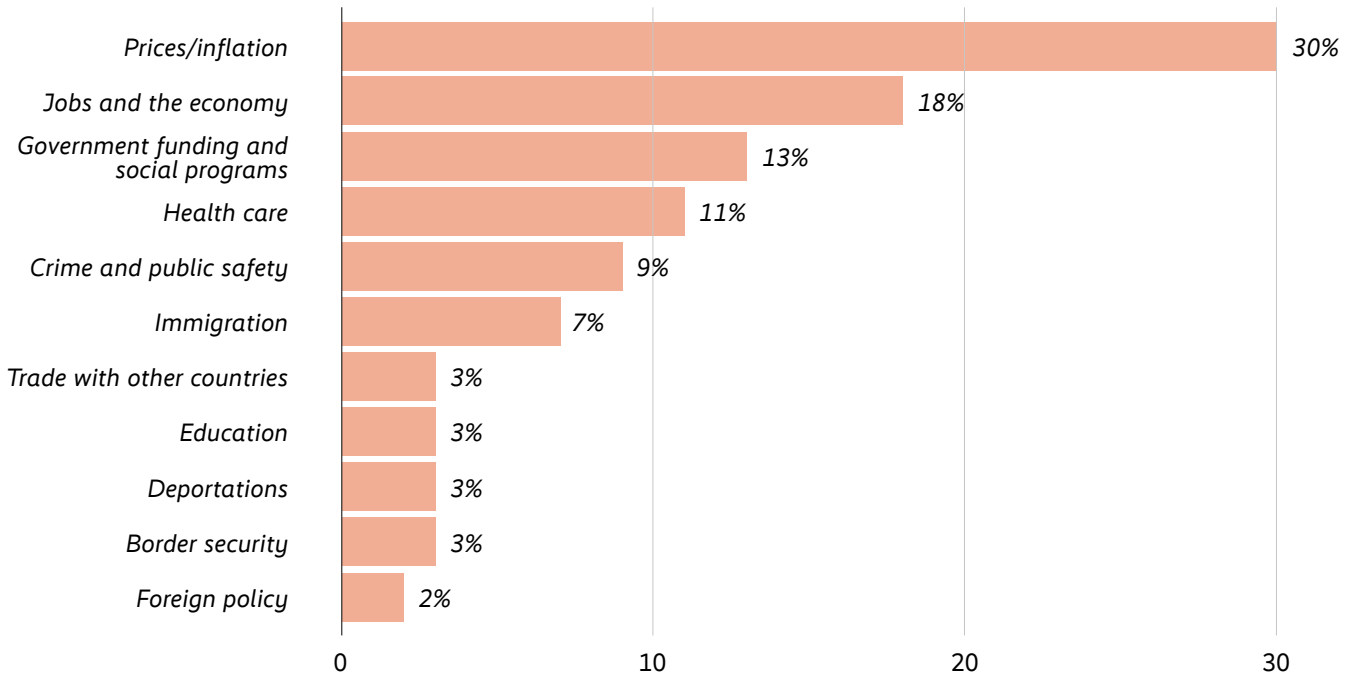
Democrats, as such, have emerged with an early advantage on the issue: Democrats have made affordability their central message for 2025. This is wise; most Americans pay little attention to politics, instead focusing on broader conditions and kicking out the party in power when things get tough. But polls also show voters are worried about Mr. Trump's tariffs, his deportation agenda, and the state of democracy more broadly.

Democratic primary voters want a fight. In November 2025, Echelon Insights, a Republican polling firm, found that 85% of Democrats wanted their party to be "more combative against Mr. Trump than they are now," vs 15% who wanted to turn down the political temperature. The mood among Democratic voters is less about policy specifics than about posture — incumbent congresspeople seen as too soft on Mr. Trump may be in danger of a primary by a fighter.

Inflation Dominates Voter Concerns, But Democrats Lead on Trust

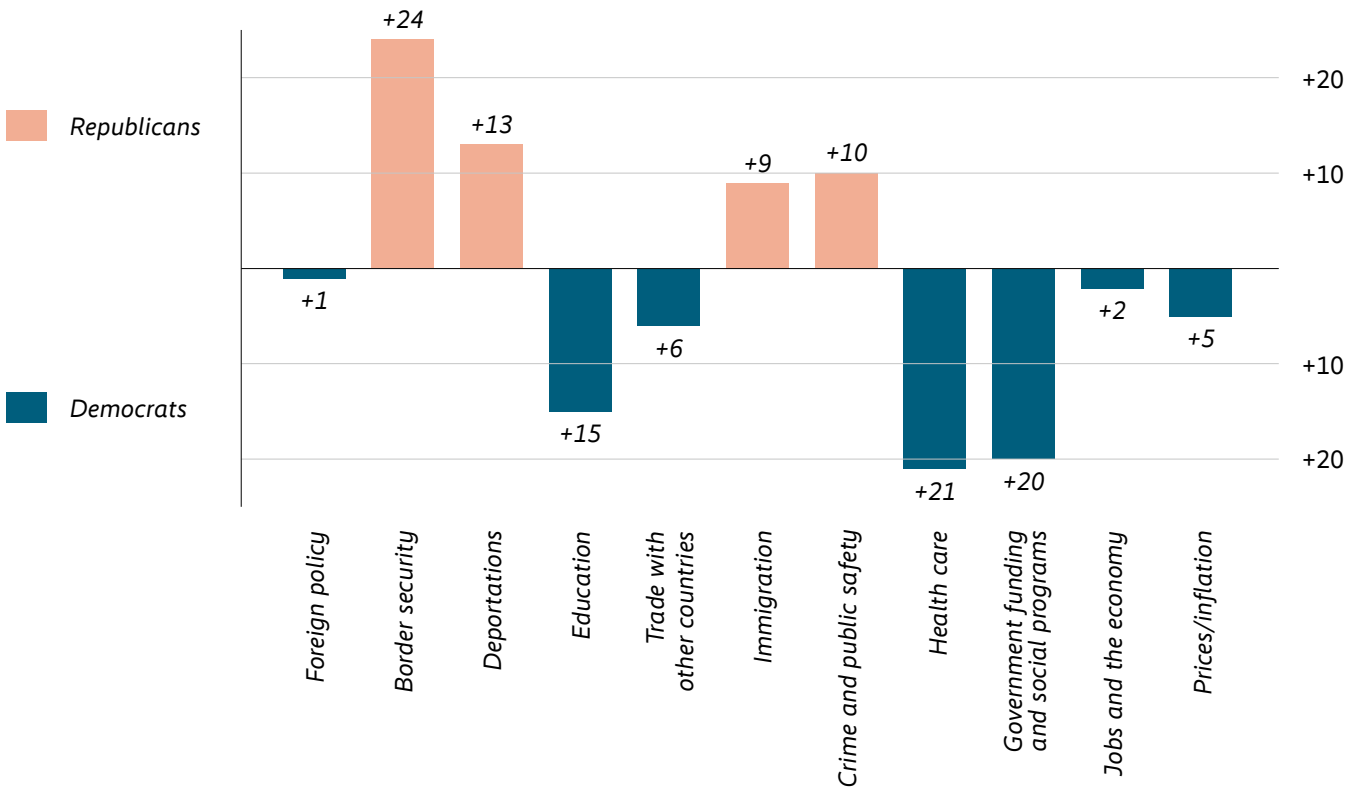
Issue Importance

% saying most important problem*



Which party do voters trust?

Net margin on each issue



Note: Top: Share of voters naming each issue as the 'most important problem.' Bottom: Which party voters trust more to handle each issue (blue/D+ = Democrats, red/R+ = Republicans). Inflation dominates voter concerns, yet Democrats hold a trust advantage on most issues – including a narrow edge on the economy.

Source: Author's polling, October 2025.

Historical Patterns: The Fundamentals Favor Democrats

Midterm elections are referendums on the president. When voters are unhappy with the White House, they punish the president’s party in Congress. This pattern is among the most reliable in American politics, akin to a law of physics.

We can see this dynamic in the relationship between the president’s approval rating and the number of seats his party loses in midterm elections. As Figure 4 shows, there is a strong correlation between a president’s approval rating in January of a midterm year and how many seats their party loses in November.

According to Gallup’s historical analysis, presidents with approval above 50% tend to minimize losses (approximately 14 seats on average), while those below 50% see much steeper losses (approximately 37 seats on average). The rare presidents who gained seats — Clinton in 1998 (66% approval) and Bush in 2002 (63%) — had unusually high ratings. Unpopular presidents like Obama

in 2010 (45%) and Mr. Trump in 2018 (40%) suffered massive losses of 63 and 40 seats respectively.

Yet the bigger factor in predicting midterm outcomes is the dynamic by which the party in power typically loses seats regardless of the president’s approval rating. This suggests there is little Mr Trump can do to avoid disaster come November.

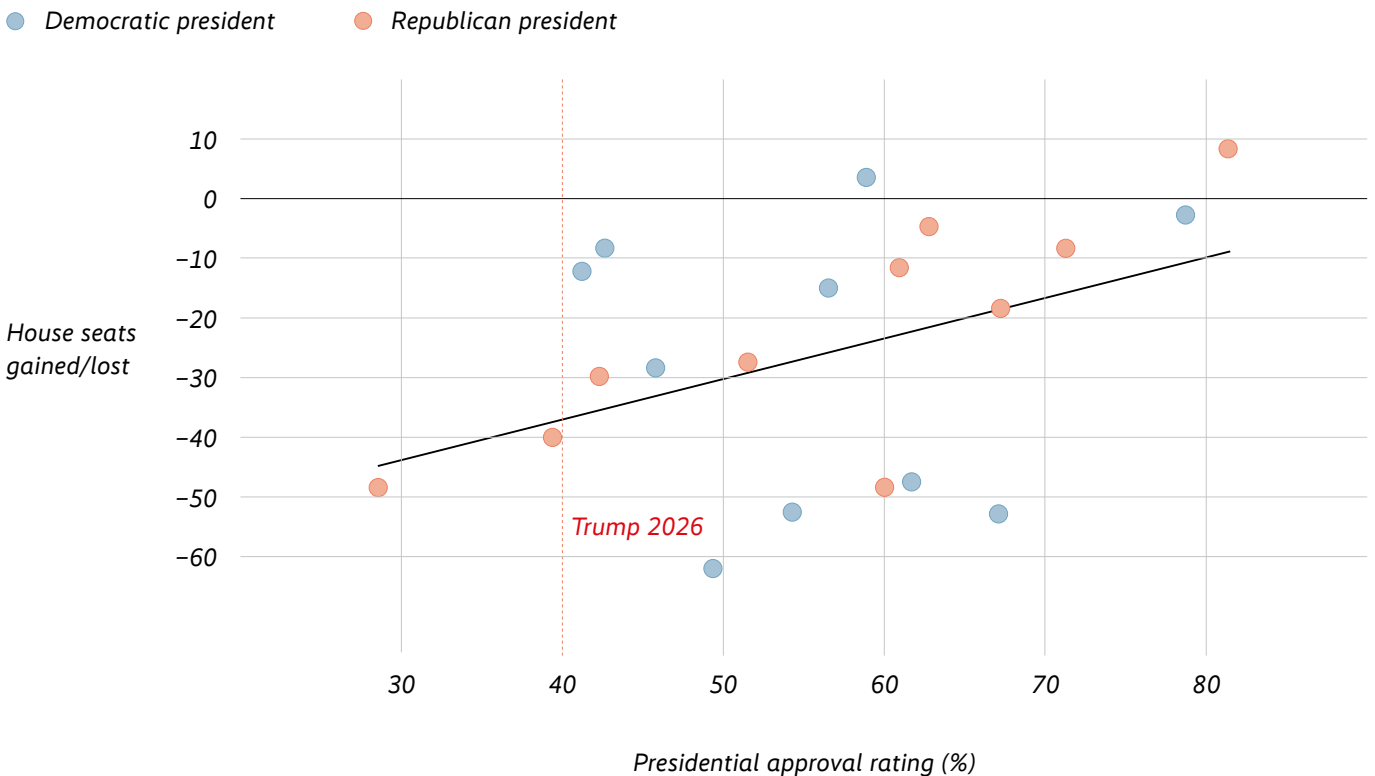
For 2026, my historical model offers a sobering picture for Republicans. With Mr. Trump’s approval currently around 40%, a simple regression model suggests Republicans would lose on the order of 35 seats in the House next year.

To be sure, these models have error. In 2022, President Biden’s approval was only 42%, yet Democrats lost just 9 House seats — far fewer than the 30+ seats models predicted. The Dobbs abortion decision created an unusual issue environment that partly overrode the fundamentals. If Republicans pass popular legislation or an external crisis rallies the country around Mr. Trump, the picture could shift.

Fig. 4

Presidential Approval Predicts Midterm Seat Loss

January approval rating vs. House seats gained/lost by president’s party, 1946–2022



Note: Presidents with low approval ratings consistently suffer large midterm losses. Each point represents a midterm election since 1950. The trend line shows that for every 10-point drop in approval, the president’s party loses roughly 20 additional House seats.

Source: Author

Yet the structural forces working against Republicans are formidable. Midterm electorates skew older, whiter, and more educated than presidential electorates — which means they skew away from Mr. Trump’s base of irregular voters. The president’s party has gained House seats in a midterm exactly twice since World War II: 1998 and 2002. Both presidents had approval ratings above 60%, and 2002 may have been an exception due to a rally-around-the-flag effect caused by the September 11th terrorist attacks.

The House majority margin is razor-thin. From the vantage point of this analyst 11 months out, it looks very unlikely that Republicans manage to hold their House majority.

Redistricting and the 2026 Electoral Map

One factor that may upend the historical pattern is redistricting. An unprecedented round of mid-decade redistricting battles has dramatically reshaped the electoral map for 2026. At President Mr. Trump’s urging, Republican-controlled states have redrawn congressional maps to

shore up the GOP’s narrow House majority — triggering Democratic retaliation and a constitutional arms race over district lines.

The redistricting wars began in summer 2025 when Mr. Trump called on Texas to redraw its congressional map and deliver the GOP “five more seats.” In the ensuing months, Texas, Missouri, and North Carolina enacted new GOP-friendly maps, targeting Democratic incumbents. The net effect of these new maps was to reduce the number of Democratic-leaning congressional districts by 9 seats.

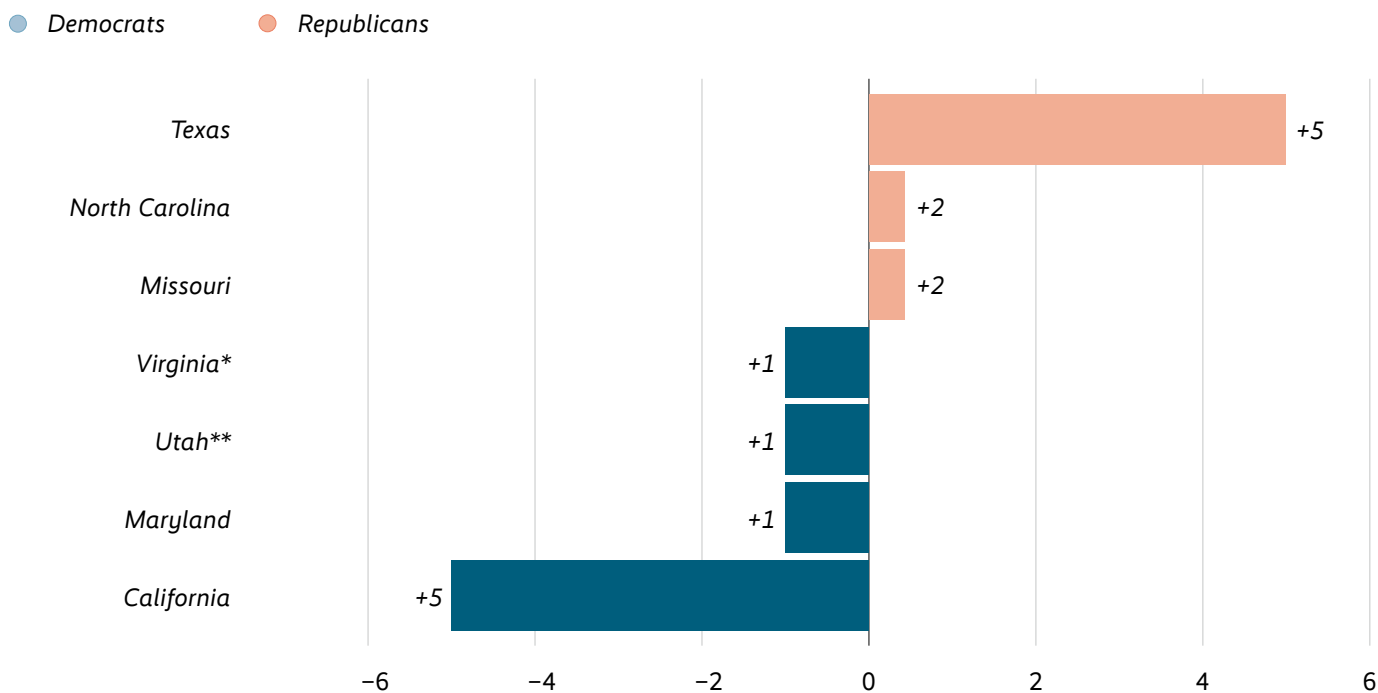
But Democrats fought back: California voters approved Proposition 50 in November 2025, authorizing new maps that could flip five seats to Democrats. As of February 2026, states legislators in Virginia and Maryland have also begun a process to redraw their congressional districts. In a surprise court decision, a new map was put in place in Utah that gave Democrats an extra seat in Salt Lake City.

Across these efforts, Republicans have gained an edge in approximately nine seats through new maps, com-

The 2025–2026 Redistricting Wars

Fig. 5

Estimated net seat changes from mid-decade redistricting



*Process ongoing **Redistricted via court decision

Note: Mid-decade redistricting has shifted the playing field in Republicans’ favor. This chart shows states where post-2020 redistricting changed district boundaries, with colors indicating which party gained seats. Republicans netted approximately three seats through these changes, partially offsetting their expected midterm losses. *Virginia’s redistricting process is ongoing. **Utah’s new map resulted from a court decision.

pared to potentially eight for Democrats. But the net effect remains fluid: Florida is considering new maps, the Supreme Court could gut Voting Rights Act protections enabling further Republican gerrymanders in the South, and the processes in Maryland and Virginia won't conclude until the middle of 2026.

Additionally, shifts to the left among Latinos could render gerrymandering in Texas less effective than Republicans hoped. One seat in particular, the state's Ninth Congressional District, saw a 20 percentage point increase in the share of the district's population that is Hispanic. Republicans expect to win the seat by about 20 points, whereas Democrats won in 2024 by about 50 points. A shift of 50 points left among Latino voters would push the seat back in the Democrats' column. There are six other House districts in Texas where the GOP is projected to win by 20 points or less and where Hispanics make up a majority of voters.

All these changes mean that models based on historical patterns come with more uncertainty than usual. Already our D+35 prediction based on Mr. Trump's approval rating alone has an 80% uncertainty interval of around 25 seats — and a 95% interval of 37 seats. If you assume Republicans gain 5 seats from redistricting, and other factors push the political environment toward Republicans, they could emerge with a majority in around 10% of forecast scenarios.

Senate Outlook in 2026

The upper chamber presents a steeper climb for Democrats. Not only will the contest play out across states that typically lean Republican, but outcomes in each state hinge more on the particularities of party nominees than they do in the House.

The Senate map in 2026 presents a challenging but not impossible path for Democrats seeking to flip control. Democrats need to protect all their current seats while flipping four Republican-held seats to take the majority. That will be a tall order, but one that looks more plausible after Mr. Trump's approval collapse and Democratic victories in the 2025 elections.

Potential Republican-to-Democratic flips will come in the following six states:

Maine: Susan Collins is the only Republican senator in a state Kamala Harris won. Democrats must choose between current Governor Janet Mills and populist Democratic upstart Graham Plattner to challenge her. The thinking is that Mills' proven ability to win statewide can finally unseat Collins, but Mills may carry baggage after serving as governor during a period when inflation in the state rose by double digits. The race is a toss-up.

North Carolina: Former Democratic Governor Roy Cooper, still popular after his tenure, is running for the open seat vacated by Republican Thom Tillis. Republicans have coalesced around former RNC Chairman Michael Whatley with Mr. Trump's endorsement. Cooper is slightly favored, according to race raters.

Ohio: Former Senator Sherrod Brown is challenging appointed Senator Jon Husted for the final two years of JD Vance's term. Brown, who narrowly lost his 2024 re-election bid, remains the only Democrat to win statewide in Ohio since 2012. Husted, the former lieutenant governor, lacks the populist appeal that once made Ohio competitive — and Brown's working-class brand could capitalize on economic discontent in the Rust Belt. But it's a solidly Republican state, so a win for Brown won't come easy. The race leans Republican.

Alaska: Democrats have recruited former Representative Mary Peltola, who won a House special election in 2022 and held the seat until losing her 2024 re-election bid, to challenge Senator Dan Sullivan. Alaska's ranked-choice voting system and Peltola's crossover appeal among rural and Native voters make this race more competitive than the state's Republican lean would suggest. The race is a toss-up.

Iowa: Senator Joni Ernst's surprise retirement in September 2025 opened a seat Democrats had written off. Ernst cited exhaustion with Washington — though her tepid defense of Pete Hegseth's Defense nomination and a viral town hall gaffe ("Well, we all are going to die") had soured relations with the MAGA base. Republicans have nominated Rep. Ashley Hinson, while Democrats are sorting through a competitive primary featuring state Rep. Josh Turek and state Sen. Zach Wahls. Mr. Trump carried Iowa by 13 points in 2024, making this a long shot — but open seats are always more competitive than incumbent races. The race leans Republican.

Texas: In a state that should be an easy Republican victory, Democrats have two potential factors on their side. First, Republicans are locked in a bruising three-way primary between incumbent Senator John Cornyn, far-right Attorney General Ken Paxton — whose legal troubles have alienated suburban voters — and Rep. Wesley Hunt, who has made Cornyn's age (73) a central attack line. Second, Democrats have a potential high-quality recruit in state Rep. James Talarico, a former preacher and teacher. But he will have to defeat Rep. Jasmine Crockett — who is well-connected and well-financed — in the March primary to make it to November. Texas remains a reach, but demographic shifts and Republican infighting have put it on the board. The race leans Republican.

Democrats will have to protect their ground in the following two states:

Georgia (Democratic-held): Jon Ossoff is the only Senate Democrat running in a Mr. Trump-won state. Republicans are mired in a three-way primary between Reps. Buddy Carter and Mike Collins and former football coach Derek Dooley.

Michigan (Democratic-held): Gary Peters' retirement opened this battleground seat. Republicans have coalesced around Mike Rogers, who narrowly lost a Senate race in 2024. Democrats face a competitive primary between moderate Rep. Haley Stevens, state Sen. Mallory McMorrow, and progressive Abdul El-Sayed.

The Senate map is tougher than the House. But a strong anti-Trump wave could sweep multiple Republican incumbents out of office.

Conclusion

The conditions for a Democratic wave are set. Mr. Trump's approval has collapsed to 40%. His 2024 coalition — built on gains among Latinos, young voters, and independents — has fractured. Voters blame him for the affordability crisis he promised to solve. And the structural dynamics of midterm elections have punished unpopular presidents without exception since World War II. Still, uncertainty remains; external shocks — a foreign crisis, an economic surprise, a Democratic misstep — could shift the landscape. Mr. Trump has defied political gravity before.

But the stakes of this election extend beyond seat counts. A Democratic House would halt Mr. Trump's legislative agenda and launch oversight investigations into his administration. Subpoena power would shift. Impeachment would return to the table. For the first time since January 2025, Congress would function as a check on executive authority rather than an enabler of it.

For international observers, the 2026 midterms offer a test of American democracy's self-correcting mechanisms. The question is not whether voters want change — they voted for that in 2024. The question is whether, having seen what that change looks like, they choose to constrain it.

About the author

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