An introduction to the midterm election

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- The midterm election is not until November, but is already under way
- Control of Congress is make or break for the Trump presidency
- Democrats are looking for gains, but will it be enough?
- Control of governorships and state legislatures is also important
- The 2020 presidential election is framing the debate

Last stop before 2020

The US midterm election is not until 4 November, yet the process is already well under way. In many states, candidates have registered for the primary elections, where the two parties select their respective nominees. On 6 March Texas held the first-in-the-nation primary, followed by Illinois on 20 March with Rhode Island finishing the primary season on 12 September – less than two months before the actual election.

All 435 seats in the House are in play

The grand prize

The grand prize in the midterm election is control of the two chambers of Congress in Washington, currently controlled by the Republicans. Gaining control of a legislative chamber would enhance Democratic leverage over policy-making, but also come with significant additional powers that are likely to be part of the election narrative.

If Democrats take over the House, they will be able to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Trump, something that the progressive wing of the party is clamoring for.

If they take over the Senate, they will be able to block President Trump’s judicial nominations, thwarting the effort to move the judicial system in a conservative direction.

With control of either chambers comes the power to hold hearings and issue subpoenas. Basically, Democrats would be able to bury the Trump administration in legal red tape. Much is therefore at stake.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats need to pick up 24 seats to gain a majority of 218. It is normal for the incumbent party to lose seats in a midterm election, but increasingly congressional seats have been gerrymandered (redrawn to protect the party in power), which makes districts more partisan and difficult to flip. Democrats point to the large number of retirements among Republican lawmakers as a sign that the majority party is afraid of losing its majority and the privileges that comes with power – and that many lawmakers have decided against running a campaign in a difficult national environment. So far,
36 Republican and 16 Democratic members of the House of Representatives have either retired outright or are seeking other offices.

Democrats are defending many seats in the Senate

![Seats up for election](image)

Source: Wikipedia.org

In the Senate, 35 of 100 seats are on the ballot in November – 33 following the regular order and two special elections following the retirement of incumbent senators (Mississippi and Minnesota). Republicans hold a slim 51-49 majority, but 26 of the 35 seats up for election are held by Democrats (including two independents), and ten of those are in states won by President Trump. Republicans are defending four open seats (Utah, Arizona, Tennessee and Mississippi), while Democrats have a replacement senator in Wisconsin.

**All about enthusiasm**

Midterm elections have a lower voter turnout than presidential elections, which tends to favor Republicans as turnout is highest among older and white voters. Only 36% of eligible voters voted in the 2014 midterm election, ranging from 16% of the 18-29-year-old to 55% of the +60-year-old. In the 2016 presidential election 58% of eligible voters voted, ranging from 43% of the young to 71% of the older.

The low turnout also means that “get out the vote” (GOTV) -operations play a much bigger role in American elections than in Europe. With the abysmal youth participation in 2014, it should be fairly easy to mobilize a bigger share of voters – if they see any reason to vote. Hispanic turnout was just 21% in the 2014 midterm election, so here is also substantial room for improvement. Both young and Hispanic voters overwhelmingly vote for Democrats.

Democrats have been encouraged by a string of victories in special elections in heavily Republican districts on the state level. In November 2017, Democrats won every statewide office in Virginia and gained 15 seats (12 of them women) in the 100-seat House of Delegates, almost bringing the chamber to a tie. However, while a huge victory for Democrats, the result in Virginia was not a result of Republican fatigue. Democrats gained strongly in urban and suburban areas, but Republicans actually gained in rural areas. Hence, the election in Virginia further polarized the electorate.

**Democrats and Republicans gained in Virginia**

![Washington suburbs](image)

Source: Electionarium.com

On a federal level, the surprise victory for Democrat Doug Jones in the special Senate election in ruby-red Alabama in December was a big win, but it happened against a deeply flawed candidate (Roy Moore), and should not be used as a national bellwether.

The primaries in Texas on 6 March showed that female candidates continue to perform strongly, winning a record number of nominations. The Democratic turnout was up by two-thirds compared to 2014, reaching the highest level since 2002. However, Republicans also saw increased turnout (although by less) and had 1.5 times more people vote in the primary than the Democrats. Hence, while Democrats point to a building wave, Republicans point to the strong sea walls.

**The canary in steel country?**

However, the result in the special election in Pennsylvania’s 18th congressional district (PA-18) on 13 March cannot be dismissed by Republicans. Democrat Conor Lamb edged out a victory against Republican Rick Saccone in a district that President Trump won by more than 20 points. The President and his family campaigned vigorously in the district, and the
recent steel tariffs were introduced with exactly a manufacturing-heavy district like PA-18 in mind – and the tariffs were embraced by both candidates.

Lamb dissociated himself from national Democrats, particularly Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who is deeply unpopular in much of the country. Lamb gained votes across the district compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016, but won in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, confirming the suburban trend from other elections. I would not be surprised if the victory was due to an increased youth participation and more votes from white women.

Unsurprisingly, Democrats are eager to make the midterm election all about President Trump to the point where it seems to be the only unifying message. While this has been a potent strategy so far, it could be viewed as too negative come November. Immigration, #metoo and gun control are powerful single issues that could mobilize Democratic voters in different regions, but it is not a national strategy designed to win over independents. Primary elections across the country will pit moderate, “establishment” Democrats against more radical progressives. Progressive success would lower the likelihood of Democratic gains against Republicans in November.

In the November midterm election, PA-18 will no longer exist as a district. Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court has redrawn the election map after ruling that the current map had been gerrymandered too much by the Republican legislature. Although the two parties roughly split the vote in Pennsylvania, Republicans held (until the special election) a 13-5 majority in Pennsylvania’s delegation to the federal House of Representatives. The new map could net Democrats 3-4 seats in November with an unchanged share of the vote. Democrat Lamb is likely to run in the new PA-17.

Election themes
The 2018 midterm election is in many ways a trial run for the 2020 presidential election. All politics is local, until it is not and a national theme builds. Presidential approval ratings remain a good indicator of the outcome, at least on a federal level.

President Trump and congressional Republicans are currently good friends, which has reduced the risk of Republican primaries turning into ideological warfare. However, Congressional Republicans had planned to run on a platform of tax reform and solid economic growth combined with a focus on appointing conservative judges – targeting the suburban areas, where most of the vulnerable seats are.

That plan has been upset by President Trump, who is already running for reelection. Trump knows that he can count on the South and Midwest in his reelection bid, but he has to hold the rust-belt states that brought him to the White House. Hence, Trump has focused on immigration issues and lately also a controversial trade agenda.

Trump’s nascent trade war has played well with voters in the targeted states, where memories of past gloories in steel and manufacturing still run deep. That pits rust-belt Republicans against suburban Republicans, who are more in tune with the global economy. Moreover, Republicans from agricultural states are
rightfully terrified of what retaliatory measures trade partners could introduce.

On the other hand, many Democratic candidates from the rust belt (and labor unions) have been quick to embrace the President’s measures. The result is a quite muddled message (particularly on the Republican side), which is only going to become messier as more trade measures are introduced.

**Do not overlook the states**

Most focus will be on the federal races in the coming months, but the state races are important for several reasons:

- states make a lot of everyday policy and often functions as policy laboratories for both conservative and progressive ideas,
- state legislatures are important incubators for federal lawmakers, and
- after the 2020 census, state legislatures (in most states) get to redraw the election maps. Republicans had an advantage in 2010 and has currently unified control of both legislature and governorship in 26 states compared to eight for the Democrats.

**Partisan control of governorships**

![Graph of partisan control of governorships]

Source: ballotpedia.org

Republicans are currently firmly in charge of the states, controlling 67 of the 99 legislative chambers. While many state chambers are quite lopsided (Democrats hold 25-0 in Hawaii’s House of Representatives and Republicans 27-3 in Wyoming’s Senate), some could flip. Of the 36 gubernatorial races, 26 has a Republican incumbent.

**The waiting game**

While the two parties are now in the middle of the candidate-selection process, they are also testing messages and building ground operations to maximize turnout among the party faithful. Washington politics is paralyzed until the election is over.

For both parties, the coming months are for pretty rough sailing. The progressive wing of the Democratic party is pushing a message that is too abrasive for the suburban moderates. The same goes for President Trump. The 2020 presidential campaign is already framing the intra-party policy discussions in both parties.

It is too soon to make firm predictions about the election outcome, not least because President Trump is a constant source of surprises. Moreover, events can change the national conversation; the high school students in Florida have been surprisingly effective in bringing gun control onto the agenda, although with little federal action.

Conventional wisdom says that Democrats have a better chance of winning the House of Representatives, if the midterm elections turn into a wave, mainly because they are defending so many Senate seats in Trump-friendly states. However, enthusiasm among young and female voters is likely to show up as spikes in isolated geographical clusters (university towns and suburbs), which can affect statewide results (as in Senate races), without necessarily moving the needle in other districts.

I still think Democrats will gain control of at least one chamber in November, but it is by no means a done deal.