ISSUE BRIEF

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THE 2026 U.S. MIDTERM ELECTIONS: A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The 2026 United States midterm elections have produced a significant shift in the country's political landscape, with Democrats winning control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The results represent a substantial electoral setback for President Donald Trump, ending two years of unified Republican control of Congress and creating a considerably more challenging political environment for the administration.[1] The outcome reflects growing voter dissatisfaction with the administration's handling of domestic and international affairs.

What is a Midterm Election?

Midterm elections are a halfway assessment of the US President's performance. Every four years, halfway through a President's term, Americans vote to elect members of Congress, which consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. These elections determine which political party controls Congress and, consequently, how much support or opposition the President will face when trying to implement policies.

[1] Gram Slattery, David Morgan, and Jason Lange, "Democrats Flex Congressional Majorities as Trump Accepts Electoral Losses," *Reuters*, November 5, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/democrats-seize-congress-sweeping-midterm-repudiation-trump-2026-11-04

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If the President's party wins, he can generally govern more easily; if the opposing party wins, the president faces greater scrutiny and opposition. While midterms do not decide who becomes President, they can weaken or strengthen the incumbent's political position and influence the next presidential race. In simple terms, the 2026 elections have made Trump's remaining two years in office more challenging and given Democrats an opportunity to build momentum ahead of the 2028 presidential elections.

Historic Breakthroughs in American Political Representation

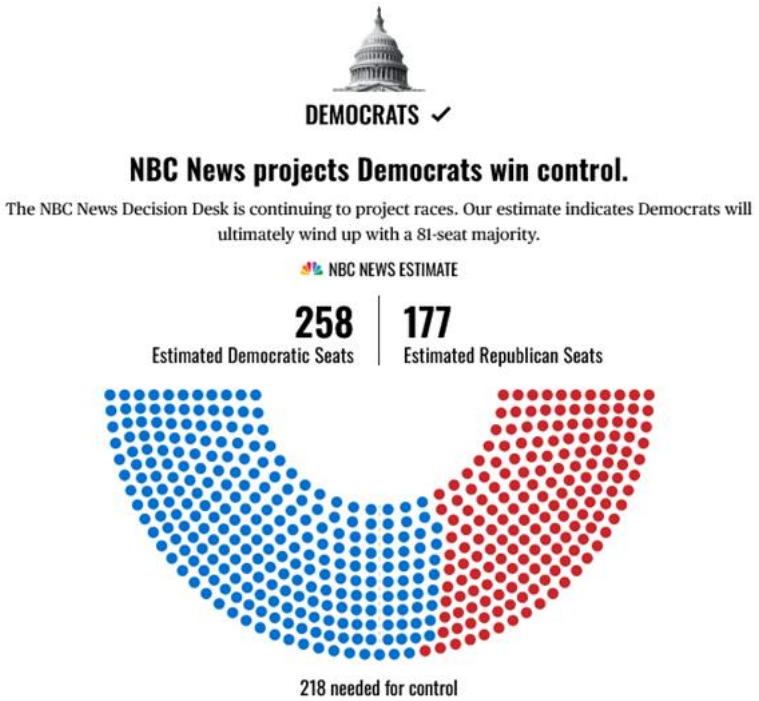
The 2026 midterms marked a historic political realignment in the U.S., delivering one of the most significant setbacks for a sitting president's party in decades. The Democratic Party not only regained control of both chambers of Congress but also made substantial gains in states long regarded as Republican strongholds.

The scale of the Democrats' Senate gains was evident in traditionally Republican states. Democrats secured victories in Kansas by 5 points, Texas by 12, South Carolina by 4, Iowa by 4, and North Carolina by 19—states where the party had not won a Senate election since 1932, 1988, 1998, and 2008, respectively. Democratic candidates also led in Alaska and Mississippi, where the party last secured Senate victories in 2008 and 1982, respectively. Notably, Trump had carried all these states in 2024, by margins ranging from 3 points in North Carolina to 23 points in Mississippi. Separately, a five-term Republican incumbent lost Maine by 6 points, meaning New England's congressional delegation had no Republican representation for the first time in most of its 172-year history.[2]

The results reflected more than a shift in party control: they signaled changing voter priorities, growing demands for political and economic accountability, and a broader transformation in the profile of elected representatives. The election also produced several historic firsts, with greater representation of ethnic, religious, and social minorities in the Senate and state leadership.

[2] "The 2026 Election by the Numbers," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 10, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/2026-election-by-the-numbers

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Source: NBC News[3]

The elections also marked important milestones in minority representation. Among these was Democrat Abdul El-Sayed's election to the U.S. Senate from Michigan, making him the first Muslim American to serve in the chamber. His victory is particularly significant given Michigan's competitive political landscape and the controversy over his religious identity during the campaign.[4] His campaign also faced attacks linking him to Islamic extremism and the Muslim Brotherhood—allegations he denied and which were unsupported by evidence.

Keisha Lance Bottoms became the first Black woman elected governor of a U.S. state in Georgia, while Deb Haaland became the first Native American woman elected governor in New Mexico; Peggy Flanagan became the first Native American woman elected to the U.S. Senate, while Chris Pappas became the first openly gay man elected to the Senate.[5] Gina Hinojosa became Texas's first Latina governor, while California elected Xavier Becerra as its first Latino governor in generations. Byron Donalds also made history in Florida as the first Black Republican elected governor in

[3] "2026 House Results: Democrats Win Control," *NBC News*, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2026-elections/house-results

[4] Kaia Hubbard, "Abdul El-Sayed Wins Michigan 2026 Senate Election, Defeating Mike Rogers," *CBS News*, November 4, 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michigan-2026-senate-el-sayed-rogers

[5] "Midterms Launch Wave of Historic Firsts for Some States — And for the Nation," *APS News*, November 5, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/midterm-election-native-american-black-governor-senator-women-93d4d163acfd217521b5dce1ab7fc4a9

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American history, showing that minority representation is expanding across political parties and ideological orientations.[6]

Together, these developments suggest that established political loyalties and conventional electoral assumptions are being challenged across the U.S. and that a gradual shift in both major parties' electoral calculations is underway. However, demographic diversity does not automatically translate into political uniformity: minority communities are not ideologically homogeneous, and their voting preferences are shaped by economic circumstances, immigration, healthcare, education, social values, and foreign policy.

Impact on Democratic Agenda

The Democratic takeover of both chambers is likely to have significant implications for Trump and the Republican Party domestically, constraining the administration's legislative space, weakening its political leverage, and intensifying partisan divisions. Key implications include:

1. Significant constraints on the Trump administration's legislative agenda. Democratic control will give the party greater authority over congressional committees, investigations, hearings, and legislative priorities.

2. The administration is likely to face increased scrutiny of its domestic policies, executive decisions, and handling of federal resources.

3. The outcome could also weaken Trump's political authority within the Republican Party. Republican lawmakers facing competitive elections in 2028 may become increasingly reluctant to align themselves with controversial administration policies, particularly on trade, immigration, and foreign affairs.

4. The electoral setback could intensify internal Republican debates over the party's political direction and leadership beyond Trump's presidency.

5. Democratic control of Congress is likely to produce greater scrutiny of foreign policy, military engagements, defense spending, foreign assistance, and the administration's approach to international conflicts.

[6] "Midterms Launch Wave of Historic Firsts For Some States — And for the Nation," *APS News*, November 5, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/midterm-election-native-american-black-governor-senator-women-93d4d163acfd217521b5dce1ab7fc4a9

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6. Congressional control does not automatically translate into the ability to reverse presidential decisions; however, a more immediate consequence is likely to be increased institutional friction and political pressure on the administration.

Impact on Trump's Foreign Policy Agenda

The Democrats' victory in both the House of Representatives and the Senate is the first major electoral rejection of Trump's second-term political agenda, signaling growing voter dissatisfaction with the administration's handling of domestic governance and foreign policy. The result is particularly consequential because it represents more than a change in congressional arithmetic: it introduces a period of divided government in which the White House will face a more assertive legislature during the final two years of Trump's presidency, challenging his foreign policy agenda in the following areas:

1. ***China:*** A Democratic victory could introduce greater congressional scrutiny of Trump's China policy, particularly on tariffs, technology restrictions, and Taiwan. While Democrats may seek to limit tariffs as a negotiating tool, bipartisan support for strategic competition with Beijing is likely to persist. This could widen the gap between Trump's transactional diplomacy with Xi Jinping and Congress's emphasis on technology safeguards, Taiwan's security, and containing Chinese influence.

2. ***Russia and the Ukraine war:*** Democratic control of Congress could revive legislative pressure for continued assistance to Ukraine, reassure European allies concerned about the reliability of U.S. security commitments, and increase scrutiny of Trump's approach towards Moscow. The key implication is therefore a possible divergence between congressional support for Ukraine and the President's preference for a negotiated settlement.

3. ***India:*** For India, the shift in congressional control presents a mixed picture. A Democratic-controlled Congress is unlikely to abandon the strategic partnership, but it may scrutinize relations with New Delhi—particularly on trade and tariffs, immigration, the May 2025 Pakistan–India conflict, human rights, and ties with regional partners. This could give India some diplomatic space to deepen its engagement with Congress, even as its relationship with Trump remains complicated.

4. ***Global Trade War:*** The election results could bolster congressional calls for a more predictable, less disruptive trade policy, while prompting challenges to Trump's tariff strategy and demands for greater transparency about its effects on American businesses,

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consumers, and international supply chains. This could increase pressure for targeted tariff relief and a more measured approach to trading partners. However, Congress is unlikely to reverse the administration's tariff policy outright, given the President's existing executive authorities and veto power.

5. ***Iran and the Middle East:*** The Iran conflict was one of the foreign-policy issues that fueled voter dissatisfaction with the administration, particularly because of its economic consequences and effect on energy prices. A Democratic-controlled Congress is likely to step up scrutiny of the administration's military campaign, question the legal basis and costs of continued operations, and seek greater congressional oversight and constrain further military escalation. However, the President retains significant authority as commander-in-chief, and any binding congressional effort to end the conflict could face a presidential veto.

6. ***Palestine and Israel:*** The results could also intensify debate in Congress over the traditionally bipartisan U.S. commitment to Israel. A growing number of Democratic lawmakers are likely to call for more conditions on arms transfers and closer scrutiny of Israeli military operations in Gaza and the wider region. Support for Israel may increasingly come with demands for accountability for civilian casualties, humanitarian access, and the future of Palestinian statehood. Congress could also increase pressure on military assistance and arms sales to Israel, narrowing the political space for unconditional support and pushing for a more active diplomatic role in Gaza and the wider Middle East.

Impact on Pakistan–U.S. Relations

For Pakistan, the Democratic victory introduces uncertainty into a relationship that has gained considerable diplomatic visibility under Trump. The recent improvement in bilateral ties has been closely associated with presidential-level engagement, Pakistan's role in regional diplomacy, and, more recently, Islamabad's relevance to Washington's engagement with Tehran. The relationship has also acquired an economic dimension through trade discussions and cooperation in areas such as critical minerals and other commercial ventures. Much of this renewed engagement, however, has developed through the Trump administration's personalized and transactional approach rather than through a broad-based institutional consensus in Washington.

The shift in congressional control could make it harder for Pakistan to sustain the current momentum if its engagement remains largely dependent on the White House. A Democratic-led Congress may place greater emphasis on democratic governance, human rights, civil liberties, and institutional accountability in Pakistan, potentially reviving issues that received less attention during

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the recent improvement in ties. Furthermore, Democratic lawmakers have historically shown greater support for India as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific, which could limit how far Pakistan can translate its recent presidential-level engagement into sustained congressional support. Washington may not necessarily revert to a policy of strategic distance from Islamabad; rather, Pakistan is likely to face a more demanding political environment in which its relationship with the U.S. is assessed through a wider set of institutional and policy considerations.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's strategic relevance to the United States is not confined to its relationship with Trump. Its geographic position, strategic partnership with China, close ties with the Gulf countries, and its growing role in regional stability, including as a bridge between Washington and Tehran, provide a continuing basis for engagement beyond the current political cycle. Islamabad's challenge will be to turn the current opening into a more durable, institutionalized relationship by broadening contacts beyond the executive branch and building stronger links with Congress, both parties, relevant committees, and policy institutions. Pakistan would also need to articulate a clear agenda centered on trade, investment, counterterrorism, regional stability, and economic cooperation, rather than allowing bilateral relations to remain tied to personalities or short-term geopolitical calculations.

The road to 2028

The 2026 elections show that American politics is gradually transforming in political representation, electoral mobilization, and the composition of political leadership. The election of the first Muslim American senator, the first Black woman governor, and the first Native American woman governor represents a departure from the historically limited demographic diversity of senior political institutions.[7]

At the same time, these developments should not be interpreted as evidence that racial, religious, or ideological divisions have disappeared. Rather, they show that communities historically underrepresented in American political institutions are increasingly able to translate participation into electoral and institutional representation. The simultaneous success of minority candidates from opposing political parties also suggests that the changing character of American politics cannot be reduced to a single ideological movement.

[7] "Midterms Launch Wave of Historic Firsts for Some States — And for the Nation," *APS News*, November 5, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/midterm-election-native-american-black-governor-senator-women-93d4d163acfd217521b5dce1ab7fc4a9

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The midterm results will definitely shape the political environment leading into the 2028 presidential elections. For Democrats, congressional victories provide an opportunity to rebuild political momentum, challenge the administration's policies and establish a broader electoral platform. However, the party will also need to reconcile differences between its progressive and moderate factions and show it can translate electoral gains into effective governance.

For Republicans, the results raise questions about the sustainability of a political strategy that relies heavily on Trump's personal electoral appeal. The party will need to reassess its approach towards economic policy, immigration, younger voters and minority constituencies while managing the emerging debate over its post-Trump leadership. Nevertheless, whether these developments translate into a lasting political realignment will depend on subsequent electoral cycles and both parties' ability to retain the coalitions that contributed to their respective successes.

Although the President will retain considerable foreign policy authority, a Democratic-controlled Congress could increasingly shape its implementation through legislative oversight, appropriations, and political pressure. This could impact U.S. engagement with China, Russia, Ukraine, India, the Middle East, and global trading partners, especially where congressional priorities diverge from the administration's transactional approach.

For Pakistan, this changing political landscape reinforces the need to look beyond the current opening and approach Washington through a broader institutional lens, building bipartisan political support and establishing deeper linkages with Congress and relevant stakeholders, and keeping the relationship relevant across political administrations. Pakistan must therefore use the present diplomatic momentum to develop a more substantive and predictable bilateral agenda, anchored in economic partnership and trade.

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