



## **Why the US midterm elections matter for America and the world**

### **Foreign policy:**

Foreign policy normally is not a prominent issue in US presidential, let alone, in midterm elections, which tend to focus on national and local topics. But these are not normal times. Foreign policy played an outsized role in the presidential race that Donald Trump won in 2016 and could be a factor again in the elections on November 6 — albeit in an indirect way.

"What the midterms usually are is a reflection of presidential popularity," said Trevor Thrall, a foreign policy scholar at George Mason University and the Cato Institute. "Trump's foreign policy efforts have been pretty unpopular on average with the American public — that's what most of the recent polling shows — and that had a depressing effect on his popularity."

While foreign policy as an individual issue will likely not be a key election issue, the outcome of the Congressional election could, however, impact the Trump administration's conduct of foreign affairs in various ways. Should Democrats wrest the Senate from Republican control, which is currently deemed unlikely but not impossible, it would give them significant sway over foreign policy.

Since Senate approval is required for executive branch nominations and international treaties, Democrats could block the appointment of foreign policy officials and put the breaks on trade agreements, a cornerstone of Trump's political agenda, and other international accords. That's why for President Trump and Congressional Republicans losing the Senate is a nightmare scenario: It would give Democrats a strong tool to push back against the White House's so far fairly unconstrained foreign policy machinations.

But even if Democrats win back the House of Representatives from Republicans, which is deemed likely but not certain, they could influence Trump's foreign policy, although to a much lesser extent than if they captured the Senate.

"In terms of hearings and public discourse, that will change quite markedly if Democrats take control of the House, because there would be committee investigations into administration actions across the board, including administrative changes on immigration enforcement, said Frances Lee, a congressional scholar at the University of Maryland.

A probe into the Trump administration's crackdown on undocumented immigrants could be one consequence of a Democratic-led House. Another would surely be the ramping up of existing investigations and the possible launch of fresh probes into the Trump campaign's connections with Russia.

The midterms determine who will fill the committee leadership post vacated by the late John McCain

None of this would change the direction of Trump's foreign policy. But all of it would make it a lot more difficult and time consuming for Trump to carry out his policy, which could lead him to assess whether advancing any specific foreign policy goal is worth the fight and the political price he might have to pay to push it through Democratic roadblocks in Congress.

Often overlooked, however, is the unusual change of practically all foreign policy leadership positions in Congress after the midterms. The head of the Foreign Relations Committee in the House of Representatives, Republican Ed Royce, is retiring, as is his pendant in the Senate, Republican Bob Corker. House Speaker Paul Ryan, who in that position has a key role in Congressional foreign policy, is also calling it quits. Finally, the next head of the Senate's Armed Services Committee, an influential post long-held by the late John McCain, Congress's leading voice on foreign policy, will also be determined by the midterms.

### **Domestic policy:**

Just as a Democratic takeover of one or both chambers of Congress would allow them to slow down or block Trump on foreign policy, they could do the same on domestic policy — but much more forcefully. That's because the constitution allows Congress a lot more input into domestic policy than into foreign policy, which is generally the remit of the executive branch.

A Democratic House would spell the end to any Republican hopes of fully eliminating Barack Obama's healthcare reform. It could also hamper GOP efforts to slash federal regulations or social benefits or launch another round of tax cuts.

And on a very basic level, Democratic control of the House would force President Trump to deal with the opposition party in a much more measured manner than he has so far. That's because he would need the Democrats for the mundane-seeming but crucial tasks of keeping the government open or raising the debt ceiling.

While that suggests the president would be forced to strike a more cordial cord and reach out to the Democrats, such conventional thinking does not necessarily apply to Trump. He might instead opt for an even more confrontational course, in the hopes of riling up first his base and then national sentiment against the Democrats. Should that happen — judging Trump's behavior so far, a distinct possibility — it could lead to an even more toxic political climate than today.

Races for governor and legislatures in states like Georgia will have a lasting impact

### **The census:**

Beyond the outcome of races for Congress in Washington, the results of elections for state legislatures and governors are also key for the upcoming US census in 2020. The census, which is conducted every 10 years, is the foundation upon which voting districts are realigned. In what some view as an arcane aspect of the US political system, legislators in many states essentially can carve out voting districts that favor their party. So whoever wins control of state governments this year will determine who gets to shape voting districts for the next election in four years and beyond.