



US Midterm Elections 2018: Why are they Important?

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Abstract

The United States will go to the polls on 06 November 2018 to elect members to the US Congress. The elections have gained significance as the Democratic Party campaigns to win the majority in the House and the Senate and the Republican Party tries to increase its majority. The midterm elections are the first major election after the election of President Trump and are being viewed as a litmus test of his popularity with the people. The paper will study the major issues that are being debated during the campaign for the elections and understand the reasons these elections are important for the United States.

The United States will go to the polls on 06 November 2018 to elect members for each of the 435 House of Representative seats and 34 of the 100 Senate seats, which together constitute the US Congress.¹ Republicans are hoping to maintain their majority in both houses. While in the House, the Democrats are expected to do well, the Senate may prove to be more difficult. The Democrats have to defend 26 of the 34 seats while hoping to take away two more seats from the Republicans to win the majority. Several of the seats they are defending, such as in West Virginia, are in states where President Trump won a large victory in the 2016 presidential race. There are also a number of state-wide and local offices being elected on the same day. Of the thirty six governors seats that are open for election, Democrats are working towards displacing Republican incumbents from twenty three governorship positions. Governorship is an important position. Governors not only implement state laws, they also have considerable control over state budgets and reform agendas. In a federal structure followed by the United States, states are powerful political constituencies.

¹ Representatives serve two-year terms. Senators hold four-year terms.

The expectation for and from President Donald Trump are high. The elections come two years after the Presidential elections and when domestically America appears to be divided along race, gender and ethnicity lines than at any time in its recent history. It would be the first major elections of the Republican Party after the Presidential elections and an indication of the popularity of the President's agenda for the nation. It is therefore, being viewed as a referendum on his policies and accomplishments. If the Republican Party is able to maintain its majority in the US Congress, with the next elections to be held in 2020, the remaining two years of President Trump's term is likely to be relatively smooth and less contentious. It would allow the President the validation and majority to continue with his policies on immigration, trade, domestic health care policy changes etc.

On the other hand, the Democrats are hoping to win the elections in what is being called the 'blue wave' -rejecting the divisive politics of the Trump administration supported by the Republican majority US Congress. A Democrat majority would give them the power to stop legislation and increased oversight power over actions of President Trump and his team. Given the present political gridlock in Washington, the midterm elections have therefore gained significant importance.

Issues in the Election

The major issues that are being debated in this election are the economy, immigration and health.

- *The Economy*

The United States' economy has been growing at a rate of 4.2 per cent (the highest since 2014) and unemployment is at a low (3.9 per cent) with the current fiscal year having the lowest joblessness for Black Americans and Hispanics. President Trump has taken credit for both stating that it is his tough stand on trade and tariffs that has led to this increased growth. Many economists feel that the Trump administration is not solely responsible for the current economic growth. The success is part of a cycle of economic recovery as well as the result of the fiscal policies of previous administrations. Democrats are focusing the debate on the long term consequences of the tax reforms and the economic policies of the administration especially on tariffs and renegotiation of trade agreements with third countries.

While unemployment is low, there has been no real wage growth with many lower income families struggling to pay for essential services such as food and house rent. If the administration is able to dismantle the healthcare act of President Obama there are fears that it will add to the cost of insurance, making it unaffordable to a large number of people.

Democrats are also highlighting the fact that President Trump has engaged the United States in a number of 'trade wars' with its allies and partners. The Democrats are stating that the tariffs and the tit-for tat reactions of other nation will be detrimental to the US economy. Voters also fear a rise in price of consumer goods as a result of the tariff policy of the administration. It takes months for most consumers to feel the impact of tariffs and economists feel that the cost of

the tariffs may become visible before the elections. This may or may not have an impact on voting.

- *Immigration*

Both parties have campaigned on the issue of immigration and border security. President Trump accused congressional Democrats of allowing open borders and crime to fester. The Democrats have in turn criticised the federal agencies and the administration's policy of separating minor children from their parents, especially mothers, after they come to the United States illegally. The two parties have differences on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act that allows children of illegal immigrants' renewable visas for deferred action of deportation. President Trump has expressed his opposition to the Act. He has time and again stated that he would like to build his 'border wall' to stop illegal migrants and has repeatedly blamed the Democrats in the US Congress for stalling the process. While some within the Republican Party have supported President Trump's views, there is also divisions as moderate Republicans feel that the administration needs to move back from cutting legal immigration and work towards policies to stop illegal entry of people into the United States. They also reject the call for hard policies on undocumented immigrants and separation of children from parents.

Democrats on their part have been urging the voters to vote for legislators who would provide solutions to the immigration issue rather than the use of force, especially on children. They have also recommended the shutting of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency. Republicans have counter attacked by stating that the Democrats want to abandon enforcement of immigration laws with this demand. It needs to be pointed that not all Democrats hold the position to abolish ICE. Most Democrats say the agency should be reformed, not abolished, along with a reform in immigration laws. ICE is only one of several agencies tasked with immigration enforcement along with Customs and Border Protection agency.

The American view on immigration is divided. While most understand that the importance of immigration for the larger benefit of the economy; they also want strict implementation of laws to restrict the flow of illegal migrants. The US Congress that comes to session post the midterm elections would have to build a policy that addresses both these concerns.

- *Health*

Healthcare and drug prices are the primary issue for Democrat candidates in these elections. The Trump administration has repealed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or Obamacare's individual mandate and expanded access to short-term limited-duration health plans, which cannot be renewed and offer limited coverage to beneficiaries. Under the ACA, these plans were designed as a bridge to help people maintain coverage after a job loss or other change in insurance until the next enrolment period for longer-term plans under Obamacare. Such short term plans are cheaper than the longer term plans. The Trump administration's changes allow people to renew such short term insurance for longer periods. However, this has meant that insurance companies

do not have to abide by the laws of the ACA, meaning they can deny claims and charge patients higher premiums for pre-existing conditions. This has meant insurance companies can reject people with pre-existing conditions and/or charge them higher premiums. As poor people do not renew their premiums due to high cost it will lead to further increase in premium prices for those in the system. An alternative policy is yet to emerge from the Trump administration. The uncertainty on continuation and threat to cut subsidies to existing plans has meant that a number of insurance companies are refusing to cover certain geographical areas especially those that are sparsely populated or counties which are economically poor. This has meant a lack of good healthcare options for some and limited options to others which do not provide cover for all their healthcare needs. In the long run this may lead to added expenditure on treatment for diseases and conditions that are rare and require prolonged medical care. Republican candidates face questions on their alternative to 'Obamacare'. The White House has not made any such plans public. The Democratic Party in turn is focused on the budget cuts of the administration stating that it will be detrimental to social programmes. The recently implemented tax reforms have also been used highlight likely deficits in the economy in the future that will only then be bridged by making more cuts in social programmes such as for healthcare.

Conclusion

The principle characteristic of these elections is that they take place amidst partisan divide that has never been more visible. President Trump is campaigning for Republican Party candidates across the country supporting his "America First" agenda while attacking opponents for being "weak on crime and immigration". In the recent United Nations Security Council meeting he claimed that China was attempting to interfere in the midterm elections against his administration. He presented no evidence to prove his claims and many feel that it was said with a view to deflect blame in case of poor results for the Republican Party.

These elections are seeing a record number of ethnic minorities, women, members of the LGBTQ community and Muslims candidates come forward as a reaction to President Trump's comments on women, his anti-immigration stand, appointment of more conservative judges to the Supreme Court, a challenge to pro-choice laws for women, lack of criticism of the white supremacy movement and support of the pro-gun lobby. (The candidates are bipartisan but a majority of the candidates are from the Democratic Party.) The nomination of candidates from these diverse groups is part of the ongoing discussion within American society about the need for more political power and representation for such groups of people that play a significant role in elections.

The elections are important for both parties. For the Republicans it is a test of how they are doing under President Trump. For the Democrats it is an opportunity to protect their core values and regain lost ground in the American political arena.

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