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A MIDTERM ELECTION LIKE NO OTHER- II

THE MIDTERMS MAY REVEAL WHO AMERICANS WANT TO PUNISH — NOT WHO THEY TRUST TO LEAD THE COUNTRY

In the first article in this series, *A Midterm Election Like No Other: November's Congressional Elections Will Help Shape the Next Chapter of the American Experiment*, I tried to step away from the immediate question of who will win the House or the Senate and ask something more basic: what Congress was created to do, why the American system deliberately disperses power, and why a congressional election cannot be read simply as a parliamentary vote of confidence in the president. November will determine how much congressional support Donald Trump has during the final two years of his presidency, and how serious the institutional challenges to his agenda may become. That remains the larger political context. But as the election gets closer, a defining feature of American politics is becoming harder to ignore.

The United States has a two-party system, but neither party speaks with one political voice. Under the Republican and Democratic umbrellas are different constituencies, instincts, and priorities, sometimes pulling in quite different directions. In that sense, what formally remains a two-party system can at times look more like a multiparty system compressed into two broad coalitions. November will force those different movements to come together behind one party or the other, and voters will ultimately deliver a verdict on how Trump finishes his second term. But the result may not be a tell-all story. It may tell us quite clearly what voters are unhappy with and whom they want to punish, while leaving open the more difficult question of what they actually want instead.

¹ <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1499>

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Party Divisions Show Neither Side Is Unified

Those internal divisions are visible in both parties today, though not in the same way. On the Republican side, the question is how well the party's different constituencies still hold together under Trump. Republicans face the more immediate danger because they have the White House and control both chambers of Congress, so whatever voters think is going wrong will inevitably carry a political cost. Trump is central to that equation. He has reshaped the party so profoundly that, for years, challenging him often meant risking a confrontation with the MAGA base as well. He could mobilize voters against Republican officeholders in a primary or turn his fire on them publicly and on social media, damaging their standing inside the party and, as happened with former Republican congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene², once one of Trump's most visible MAGA allies who challenged him over the Epstein files and the Iran war, shortening their political careers. That is why Trump, MAGA and the Republican Party came to be discussed almost as if they were interchangeable. But they are not. MAGA has its own impulses and priorities, and some of its voters are now questioning Trump on the Iran war, tariffs and the economy. November may show how much that distinction matters.

Trump's MAGA Support Has Weakened, but Remains Strong

Polling suggests Trump's support among Republicans has weakened. A Reuters/Ipsos poll found Trump's approval among Republicans at 91 percent just after his second inauguration in January 2025, 86 percent a year later and 73 percent by September 2026. The decline is even more striking on the economy, where Republican approval of his handling fell from 80 percent in January to 56 percent in September.³ None of this means Trump has lost his party; 73 percent approval among Republicans is still substantial. But Republicans do not need a collapse to have a problem. In a close congressional election, a relatively small number of voters becoming less enthusiastic, staying home, or simply refusing to follow the party line can be enough to change the outcome.

The margins are narrow enough for that to matter. Republicans currently hold only a small advantage in the House⁴, where control can change with the movement of just a few seats, while their Senate⁵ majority stands at 53 to 47. Democrats would need a net gain of four Senate seats to take control, and the serious competition is concentrated in a relatively small number of states⁶ — Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Ohio and Texas are currently rated as toss-ups. In other words, this is an election in which a national shift of only a few points — or reduced turnout among one part of either party's coalition — can translate into a change in who controls Congress.

No Republican voter has to become a Democrat

And this is where the Republican voter who remains Republican but has become disappointed with Trump becomes particularly important. No Republican voter has to become a Democrat for the party to lose the election. Staying home is enough. A voter can participate in local races

² Anthony Zurcher, "How Greene went from Maga loyalist to quitting Congress," BBC, November 22, 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwywjz202r7o>

³ Sarah Fortinsky, "Trump's polls sink further in warning sign for GOP," The Hill, September 26, 2026 <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/6112712-trump-approval-ratings-midterm-elections/>

⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, "Party Breakdown," House Radio-Television Gallery, <https://radio.house.gov/house-data/party-breakdown>

⁵ U.S. Senate, "Senate Facts," *Daily Press Gallery*, accessed October 1, 2026, <https://www.dailypress.senate.gov/on-the-floor/senate-facts/>.

⁶ Cook Political Report, "2026 Senate Race Ratings," <https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/senate-race-ratings>.

but leave the federal congressional race blank, or vote for a third-party or independent candidate. Such independent candidates rarely have a realistic chance of winning a congressional race, but in a close contest they can still matter by drawing votes away from one of the two major-party candidates.

For those watching this election from the outside, this distinction is worth underscoring: most disappointed Republicans are probably not about to change parties. But that does not mean crossover voting should be dismissed altogether. Texas offers a useful example. Karl Rove⁷, George W. Bush's longtime political strategist and senior adviser, has said he would vote for Democrat Jon Rosenthal over Republican Bo French in the race for Texas Railroad Commissioner. He has also been critical of Ken Paxton, although he has not said that he would vote against him in the Senate race. Some Republicans, however, are crossing that line. Former Republican state representative Glenn Rogers⁸, who voted to impeach Paxton in 2023, has appeared in advertisements supporting Democrat James Talarico. Such cases are likely to remain exceptions. But in a close election, Republicans do not need large numbers of their voters to become Democrats. Some crossing over, some staying home, and others voting in local races while leaving the congressional race blank or choosing a third-party or independent candidate can together produce the same political consequence.

Low Turnout Could Hurt Republicans on Election Day

Republican leaders themselves have acknowledged the turnout problem. A recurring pattern in the special elections⁹ of 2025 and 2026 has been that Republican participation is considerably stronger when Trump himself is on the ballot. Some of that is familiar territory in American politics: turnout tends to fall in off-year and special elections, and the voters who do show up are often the most committed and partisan on both sides. That matters in primaries as well, where the most energized wings of each party can exercise influence far beyond their share of the broader electorate. After a March 2026 special-election loss in Trump's own Palm Beach County territory, Florida Republican House Speaker-designate Sam Garrison¹⁰ blamed low Republican turnout and the election's awkward timing. In Texas, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick¹¹ called another result a wake-up call for Republicans and warned that their voters could not take anything for granted. Ted Cruz¹² called the result very concerning. Trump himself has reminded Republicans that the president's party traditionally has a difficult midterm.

⁷ Carlos Noguera Ramos, "Karl Rove said he'll break 30 years of only supporting Republicans to vote against 'bigot' Bo French," The Texas Tribune, September 14, 2026 <https://www.texastribune.org/2026/09/14/bo-french-kal-rove-endorsement-jon-roenthal/>

⁸ Patrick Svitek, "Republican Former State Lawmaker Vows He'll 'Never' Support Paxton in New Ad as Texas Senate Race Heats Up," CNN, September 23, 2026, republished by ABC 17 News, <https://abc17news.com/politics/national-politics/cnn-us-politics/2026/09/23/republican-former-state-lawmaker-vows-hell-never-support-paxton-in-new-ad-as-texas-senate-race-heats-up/>

⁹ Elaine Kamarck, Jordan Muchnick, and Nikola Miletic, "What do special elections mean for the midterm elections?", Brookings Institute, April 16, 2026 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-do-special-elections-mean-for-the-midterm-elections/>

¹⁰ CBS Miami Team, "Florida Democrats flipped two legislative seats in 2026 special election, their best performance in years," CBS News, March 25, 2026 <https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/florida-democrats-flipped-two-legislative-seats-in-2026-special-election/>

¹¹ Alejandro Serrano, "How Taylor Rehmet upset a MAGA candidate to flip a North Texas Senate district," The Texas Tribune, February 2, 2026 <https://www.texastribune.org/2026/02/02/texas-senate-district-9-special-election-taylor-rehmet-upset-latino-suburban-backlash/>

¹² Demian Bio, "Ted Cruz Issues Warning to Republicans Over Stunning Defeat In Special Texas Election: 'Very Concerning Outcome'", The Latin Times, February 4, 2026 <https://www.latintimes.com/ted-cruz-issues-warning-republicans-over-stunning-defeat-special-texas-election-very-concerning-594235>

The question, then, is whether this is simply the familiar midterm problem of presidential voters not showing up when the president himself is not on the ballot, or whether something more has begun to change inside the coalition Trump built.

Iran War Tests Trump's "America First" Coalition

Foreign policy is part of that answer. A significant section of MAGA understood "America First" to mean keeping the United States out of another generation of prolonged wars. The phrase itself traces back to the original America First movement¹³ of the late 1930s and early 1940s, organized around opposition to America's growing involvement in World War II. The Iran conflict, its economic consequences, and Washington's close alignment with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government therefore cut into a particularly important part of the coalition Trump built. Israel has always divided Republicans and Democrats in different ways, but the Gaza war has made that debate far more difficult. As much of the international community has come to view what happened in Gaza through the language of genocide, America's continued identification with Israel has also become a question about its own global standing and respect for international law. Among Republicans, evangelical Christians remain among Israel's strongest supporters, but even within MAGA the picture is less uniform. Some oppose¹⁴ the Iran war itself, some feel its effects through energy prices and inflation, and others question whether American policy is being pulled too far toward another country's priorities. For many voters, the conclusion is simpler: they voted for peace and prosperity, and they do not feel they are getting that.

To repeat, the issue is not that MAGA is abandoning Trump. The polling suggests he still has strong support. The more relevant point is that this is not an either-or situation in which Republicans have to lose all, or even most, of those voters for the consequences to become serious. The real challenge is that even a modest drop in enthusiasm within a previously disciplined coalition can matter in close races.

Independents Are Moving Toward Democrats

But Republican abstention is only part of the picture. Just as important may be what independents decide to do, because they have been moving away from Republicans by margins large enough to matter. A June McLaughlin¹⁵ poll put Democrats ahead 45 to 26 percent among independents on the generic congressional ballot, while Siena¹⁶ found a 51 to 33 Democratic advantage in May and Emerson¹⁷ had Democrats ahead 50 to 37 in February. Gallup's second-quarter figures¹⁸ pointed in the same direction, with 49 percent of Americans

¹³ James Lindsay, "America First Committee: History Lessons," Council on Foreign Relations, September 5, 2012 <https://www.cfr.org/articles/america-first-committee-history-lessons>

¹⁴ Herb Scribner, "Tucker Carlson says Trump should have been ousted over Iran threat," Axios, September 24, 2026 <https://www.axios.com/2026/09/24/trump-iran-war-tucker-carlson-25th-amendment>

¹⁵ Seth McLaughlin, "Drifting independent voters emerge as dire warning sign for Trump's GOP in the midterms," The Washington Times, June 11, 2026 <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2026/jun/11/drifting-independent-voters-emerge-dire-warning-sign-trumps-gop/>

¹⁶ The New York Times/Siena College, "Cross-Tabs: May 2026 Times/Siena National Poll of Registered Voters," May 18, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/05/21/polls/times-siena-national-poll-crosstabs.html>

¹⁷ Emerson College Polling, "February 2026 National Poll: Trump Approval Steady as Disapproval Rises; Vance Leads GOP Field While Democrats Hold Midterm Edge," February 2026, <https://emersoncollegepolling.com/february-2026-national-poll-trump-approval-steady-as-disapproval-rises-vance-leads-gop-field-while-democrats-hold-midterm-edge/>

¹⁸ Ruth Igielnik and Caroline Soler, "More Americans are Identifying as Democrats Ahead of Midterms," The New York Times, September 5, 2026 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/05/us/politics/democrats-republicans-voters-gallup-midterms.html>

identifying with or leaning toward the Democratic Party, compared with 39 percent identifying with or leaning Republican — the Democrats' largest advantage since 2008.

There is, however, something important hidden inside the word "independent." Gallup¹⁹ found that a record 45 percent of American adults identified as independents in 2025, compared with only 27 percent each calling themselves Democrats or Republicans. But that does not mean nearly half the country is politically up for grabs. Pew, using registered voters and a different methodology, found 35 percent identifying as independent or something else, but 15 percent leaned Republican and 16 percent Democratic. That left only about 4 percent with no partisan lean at all, and Pew²⁰ has found that the leaners generally vote and think much like the partisans they lean toward. So the group genuinely choosing between the two parties is much smaller than the word "independent" might suggest. Still, in an election this close, where those voters go — and whether the much larger group of partisan-leaning independents actually turns out — can matter a great deal.

That matters because it changes the nature of the Republican problem. If the difficulty were only that Republican voters were discouraged, the answer would be to mobilize them. But if independents are actively leaving the party, Republicans have a persuasion problem as well as a turnout problem.

Moving Toward Democrats Does Not Mean Becoming Democrats

Still, Democrats should be careful not to read these numbers as evidence of a new affection for their party. Much of the data says almost the opposite. Democratic favorability has remained extremely weak even as Democratic electoral prospects have improved. One Gallup²¹ measure put the party's favorable rating at 34 percent, the lowest since that series began. Another survey²² found only 24 percent of independents viewing Democrats favorably and 58 percent unfavorably. Republicans were viewed even more negatively by the same voters, which may be the more important part of the story.

The movement seems to be more about voters turning away from Republicans than embracing Democrats. Gallup itself described the recent Democratic gains in partisan identification as coming from more independents leaning Democratic rather than from a surge in people wanting to identify formally with the party.²³ Siena data pointed in the same direction: the share of independents leaning Republican fell sharply, while the Democratic share remained comparatively stable.²⁴ The gap widened because Republicans were losing support, not because Democrats suddenly attracted a much larger share of independents.

The point is that voters do not have to switch parties for their dissatisfaction to matter. Republican voters can remain Republican while becoming less willing to turn out for Republican candidates; the same can happen on the Democratic side.

¹⁹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "New High of 45% in U.S. Identify as Political Independents," *Gallup*, January 12, 2026, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/700499/new-high-identify-political-independents.aspx>

²⁰ Pew Research Center, "The Partisanship and Ideology of American Voters," April 9, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/the-partisanship-and-ideology-of-american-voters>

²¹ Brendan Rascius, "Which political party do Americans align with more? New poll finds a shift," *Miami Herald*, August 1, 2025 <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article311549201.html>

²² McLaughlin, "Drifting Independent Voters."

²³ Rascius, "Which Political Party Do Americans Align With More?"

²⁴ Ibid.

Democrats nevertheless have a substantial enthusiasm advantage. More than a year ago, a Reuters/Ipsos poll found that 44 percent of registered Democratic voters said they were very enthusiastic about voting, compared with 26 percent of Republicans.²⁵ And that enthusiasm appears to have held steady. Democrats have also outperformed previous Democratic numbers in special elections and, in several cases, gone beyond narrowing Republican margins to actually flipping Republican-held legislative seats. Since Trump returned to office, Democrats have flipped 13 Republican-held state legislative seats, while Republicans have not flipped a Democratic-held seat in the other direction.²⁶ One of the clearest examples came in Texas Senate District 9, where Democrat Taylor Rehmet won a district Trump had carried by more than 17 points in 2024.²⁷

So Democrats have plenty of reasons to feel good about the way things are going. Yet the more interesting story may be what is unfolding within their own party.

Democrats Are Still Searching for Direction

After Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris lost all seven swing states in 2024²⁸ — the closely contested states that often decide the presidency — Democrats entered something closer to a crisis of direction than a normal post-election argument. One Pew²⁹ survey found 67 percent of Democrats frustrated with their own party. Some believe the party failed because it did not resist Trump aggressively enough. Others think it became too removed from the concerns of ordinary voters on immigration, crime, culture, and the cost of living. The argument is usually described as progressives versus moderates. That could be only part of the story, though.

Some of the most revealing Democratic primaries this year were not contests in which a progressive defeated a conservative Democrat. They were contests in which younger, more confrontational candidates defeated long-serving liberals who were already on the left on most policy questions. That is a more interesting development because it suggests that ideology alone is not what is being tested.

In Sacramento, Doris Matsui³⁰, 81 years old and deeply rooted in the city's political life, lost a Democratic primary to a 40-year-old city councilwoman backed by progressive organizations. In Colorado, Diana DeGette³¹, 69, with two decades in Congress and senior standing on the

²⁵ Jason Lange, "Democrats more energized for 2026 elections than Republicans, Reuters/Ipsos poll finds," Reuters, November 13, 2025 https://www.reuters.com/world/us/democrats-more-energized-2026-elections-than-republicans-reutersipsos-poll-finds-2025-11-13/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁶ Joel Williams, "Heading into the midterms, Democrats have flipped 13 Republican state legislative seats in special elections since President Donald Trump took Office," Ballotpedia News, September 25, 2026 <https://news.ballotpedia.org/2026/09/25/heading-into-the-midterms-democrats-have-flipped-13-republican-state-legislative-seats-in-special-elections-since-president-donald-trump-took-office/>

²⁷ John Hanna, "Texas Democrat Taylor Rehmet flips Republican state Senate seat Trump won by 17 points," PBS News, February 2, 2026 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/texas-democrat-taylor-rehmet-flips-republican-state-senate-seat-trump-won-by-17-points>

²⁸ 538 and ABC News, "Election 2024 updates: With Arizona, Trump sweeps all 7 swing states," ABC News, November 10, 2024 <https://abcnews.com/538/live-updates/election-results-2024?entryId=115533094&id=115468646&utm>

²⁹ Steven Shepard, Andy Cerda, Joseph Copeland, Ted Van Green, and Shanay Gracia, "A Year Ahead of the Midterms, Americans' Dim Views of Both Parties," Pew Research Center, October 30, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/10/30/a-year-ahead-of-the-midterms-americans-dim-views-of-both-parties/>

³⁰ Laurel Rosenhall, "Democrats' Generational Battle is Fierce in California's Capital," The New York Times, May 29, 2026 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/29/us/doris-matsui-mai-vang-congress.html>

³¹ Jesse Bedayn, "Democratic socialist Melat Kiros defeats longtime House incumbent in Colorado primary," PBS News, July 1, 2026 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/democratic-socialist-melat-kiros-defeats-longtime-house-incumbent-in-colorado-primary>

Energy and Commerce Committee, lost to a 29-year-old challenger. The Denver race included a genuine difference over Israel and Gaza, but the broader pattern goes beyond that issue.

Democratic Voters Want Their Representatives to Push Back Harder

What seems to be changing is what Democratic voters expect from their politicians. They want to see them more actively engaged, adapting to the challenge in front of them.

The traditional model of congressional politics is well-known: legislate, work the committees, build seniority, secure funding for the district, protect local interests, negotiate when necessary, and use institutional experience to get things done. It is important work, but rarely the kind that captures broader public attention. Yet it is a large part of what Congress actually does.

A newer expectation among an energized part of the Democratic electorate seems more confrontational, to match Trump's style of politicking. Some Democratic voters now appear increasingly impatient with politicians who still respond in the traditional, more restrained, more controlled way. They want to see them push back harder and make that fight more visible.

That pressure has begun affecting Democrats who do not naturally practice that kind of politics. Rep. Suhas Subramanyam³² of Virginia's 10th District has generally presented himself as a mild-mannered, effective legislator rather than someone who built his political identity around attacking Trump. Yet as the election approached, he began promoting legislation directed at alleged conflicts of interest and abuses involving Trump, members of his family and senior officials. The legislation may well have merit. The point is that even Democrats who would normally prefer to focus on governing are being pulled toward a more confrontational style of politics, because that is increasingly what the most energized part of the electorate wants to see.

The Pressure Is Not Just to Move Left, but to Fight Harder

It would be too simple to describe all of this as the Democratic Party moving to the left. There is certainly an ideological shift in parts of the party, but something else is happening as well. The tone is becoming more confrontational, more impatient and, in some places, angrier. Candidates are under growing pressure not only to offer different policies, but to show that they are prepared to fight, even if that means breaking with some of the political norms and traditions that once shaped the party.

Progressive and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders-aligned candidates — Sanders having long represented the party's democratic-socialist and economic-populist wing — have had a remarkable primary season. Candidates backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have won nominations in several states, sitting members of Congress have been defeated, and Medicare for All has become an important dividing line in many races. Yet many of those victories came in safe Democratic territory or in low-turnout primaries. November will be something else entirely.

Michigan may provide the most useful test.

Abdul El-Sayed narrowly defeated the more centrist Haley Stevens for the Democratic Senate nomination. Although he is not a DSA member, his candidacy clearly appealed to much of the

³² U.S. House of Representatives, Office of Rep. Suhas Subramanyam, "Rep. Subramanyam Introduces Bill Package to Stop Trump Administration Corruption," September 2026, <https://subramanyam.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-subramanyam-introduces-bill-package-stop-trump-administration-corruption>

same progressive and democratic-socialist base. El-Sayed³³ built his strongest support among younger voters, highly educated liberals, Arab American communities, and university towns such as Ann Arbor and East Lansing. Stevens did better among Black voters in Detroit, seniors, working-class suburban voters and rural counties. A pre-election poll supplied in the research showed the Republican candidate leading El-Sayed by three points in a general-election matchup while trailing Stevens by two. That does not tell us what will happen in November, but a five-point difference depending on the Democratic nominee is not something the party can simply ignore.

This is the test progressives say they want. Their argument is that the old definitions of electability and moderation have become too outdated. Voters who call themselves moderate do not necessarily want conventional centrist economics. Data for Progress³⁴, a progressive research group, found that most swing voters who described themselves as moderate also supported taxing the wealthy more, Medicare for All, limits on AI setting prices or wages, and tighter controls on utility costs. What is striking is that, in the same research, swing voters responded more positively to an economic-populist Democratic message than to the party's more conventional one.

That raises a question Democrats probably need to take seriously. Perhaps the real divide is not moderate voters versus progressive policies. A voter can be moderate in temperament, uncomfortable with parts of the cultural left and worried about immigration or crime, while at the same time wanting a much stronger government response to healthcare costs, housing, wages or concentrated corporate power. The thing is, categorizing voters according to fixed assumptions about what they are supposed to want may actually make it harder to understand them — and harder to find the right political response.

Democrats may already be paying a price for that. The reason is that the demographic shifts are difficult to ignore: Latino men, who backed Biden by 23 points in 2020, moved sharply toward Trump in 2024, while Black men supported Harris at lower levels than they had supported Biden or Clinton. A Financial Times³⁵ analysis also pointed to a widening gap between white progressives and Black and Hispanic voters on issues such as immigration, racism and meritocracy. Greg Schultz, who managed Biden's 2020 campaign, put the problem more bluntly: Washington often talks about "the base" as if it were made up of white intellectuals in a few coastal cities, while much of the actual Democratic base is older, working-class and less ideological.

None of this means Democrats have no agenda beyond Trump. They do.

Their formal 2026 affordability initiative is built around five areas: healthcare, housing, energy, food and groceries, and tariffs. Healthcare is the most developed. Democrats want to reverse Medicaid cuts, restore the enhanced Affordable Care Act premium subsidies that expired, expand Medicare drug-price negotiations and protect vaccines, medical research and public-health institutions from political interference. Housing, energy and food costs form the rest of the economic frame, although some of those proposals remain less developed.

³³ Teo Armus, Erin Cox, Praveena Somasundaram, and Clara Ence Morse, "El-Sayed Gives Progressives Another Victory and a New Challenge," *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/08/05/el-sayed-other-progressives-won-michigan-now-they-face-republicans/>

³⁴ Lew Blank and Abby Springs, "The Swing Voters of the 2026 Midterms Want Democrats to Tax the Rich," *Data for Progress*, July 9, 2026, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2026/7/9/midterms-swing-voter-report-1>

³⁵ John Burn-Murdoch, "The Left Is Losing Its Grip on Ethnic Minority Voters," *Financial Times*, July 12, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/84b81600-d107-4050-80cf-1d1e276ea54d?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

That is a legitimate political program, particularly in an election dominated by the cost of living. Yet much of the Democratic agenda remains focused on undoing what the Trump administration has done: reversing cuts, restoring programs, stopping policies they oppose and protecting institutions they believe the administration has weakened. The question is whether that is enough to define what Democrats want to build, rather than simply what they want to prevent.

By the way, there is nothing unusual about an opposition party doing that. Midterm elections are often about stopping the party in power rather than writing the next governing manifesto. But it does leave a larger question hanging over the Democrats: once opposition to Trump is removed from the center of the picture, what kind of party do they want to be? A restoration of the pre-Trump Democratic Party? A more economically populist party? A party increasingly shaped by democratic-socialist ideas? A party also being pulled apart over Israel and Gaza, where generational, ideological, and ethnic differences inside the Democratic coalition have become increasingly visible? Or a broad coalition in which a progressive from New York, a centrist from Virginia, and a working-class Democrat in the Midwest do not have to speak the same political language as long as they can still belong to the same party?

Republicans Are Beginning to Define Themselves Beyond Trump

Republicans face a different identity problem. Their party has spent the past decade being remade around Trump, and the question now is how much of that political identity survives separately from him. The old Republican establishment has not disappeared, but it has been marginal enough that many traditional Republicans learned to remain quiet rather than invite a MAGA primary challenge. Now the primaries are over. Republican candidates running in competitive districts have more reason to create some distance from Trump, including over the Iran war, because they need independents and softer Republican voters in November.

But there is no obvious safe distance.

Stay too close to Trump, and a candidate inherits every frustration associated with his presidency: the economy, inflation, tariffs, war and the general exhaustion that often accumulates around a deeply polarizing leader. Move too far away, and that same candidate risks alienating the MAGA voters without whom Republicans cannot win.

Trump is therefore simultaneously the Republican Party's strongest political force and, in some races, one of its greatest vulnerabilities.

Democrats face almost the reverse problem. A candidate who perfectly captures the anger and ambitions of the progressive primary electorate may energize young voters and activists but struggle to reproduce that coalition in a purple state. A centrist who reassures independents and suburban voters may discover that a Democratic base demanding visible resistance is insufficiently excited to turn out.

Neither party has solved its problem.

Maybe that should not surprise us, because the electorate itself looks increasingly unsettled. The evidence discussed above points to voters whose attachment to both parties is increasingly conditional. Some Republicans are less willing to turn out for Republican candidates, independents are moving away from the party without necessarily embracing Democrats, and Democrats themselves remain divided over what kind of party they want.

That is not the picture of a country happily choosing between two coherent political projects. It is a country whose political loyalties appear much more conditional than either party would like to admit.

For that reason, it would be premature to describe what is happening as a Democratic realignment. Democrats may win substantially in November, and the political environment clearly favors them. Republicans could lose ground because some of their own voters stay home, because independents move away from them, because a smaller number of Republicans cross over, or because all three happen at once.

But winning an election, earning political trust, and defining the direction voters want the country to take are not the same thing.

November will tell Republicans how much of Trump's coalition still turns out when Trump himself is not on the ballot. It will tell them whether voters who supported him remain willing to support the candidates who tied themselves to him. And if the losses are serious, it will begin a much larger argument about what the Republican Party becomes after Trump.

For Democrats, the election will test whether progressive primary victories can travel beyond Democratic constituencies; whether economic populism can reach voters who would never describe themselves as progressive; whether their affordability agenda can become more than a response to Republican policies; and whether voters currently moving toward Democrats are developing any durable attachment to the party.

The first article in this series asked why Congress matters and what happens when political power becomes concentrated. November will answer part of that question by deciding who controls the institution designed to check the executive. But the election will also expose how unsettled both political coalitions have become. The result may be decisive in institutional terms while remaining much less decisive about where American politics is actually heading.