

THE STAKES OF THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Maud QUESSARD

Senior Research Fellow-US Foreign Policy, IRSEM

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of the American midterm elections (“Midterms”) on the orientations of US foreign policy in the lead up to the next presidential election of 2020. In a context defined by extreme polarization, these elections are predominantly expected to reflect the domestic political concerns of the US electorate. The impact of the Midterms on American foreign policy will depend on whether the Democrats win a partial victory (House of Representatives) or total victory in Congress (both the lower house and the Senate). In both cases, the first priority of Democrats will be to reinforce current congressional investigations into the president. Unsettled by domestic policy issues, the president, in the grand tradition of American “imperial” presidencies, would transfer all his attention to international policy issues. For example, he could double down on the hubris of his decisions and the politicization of alliances that have characterized the first two years of his mandate. In this respect, a victory for the Democrats would not necessarily be good news for either America’s allies nor its rival powers.

CONTENT

The Midterms, elections polarized by divided visions of society.....	2
What is the agenda for democrat foreign policy in the case of partial or total victory in Congress?	4
What impact will the results of the Midterms have on the foreign policy of the trump administration?	5
Conclusion: towards an increasing politicization of alliances?	7

THE MIDTERMS, ELECTIONS POLARIZED BY DIVIDED VISIONS OF SOCIETY¹

An anti-Trump referendum or a choice of society?

On 6 November 2018, American voters will have the opportunity to express their views on the politics of Donald Trump for the first time since his election. While the midterm elections very often favour partisan shifts between the two parties and generate expectations or nourish hopes abroad among US allies and adversaries alike,² these elections primarily reflect the domestic and local political concerns of the US population.³ Supreme Court nominations, health care insurance and gun control are the main preoccupations of the electorate, closely followed by immigration, especially in the context of the Honduran migrant crisis, and tax policy, according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center.⁴

Unlike the 2016 elections, American voters are much less concerned with terrorism or the foreign policy of their country than during the Obama presidency. The latest opinion polls conducted among the electorate show that what is mainly at stake is the choice of society Americans will express for the next two years and beyond, even if the Trump presidency has often linked domestic policy issues to international affairs by adopting the slogan *America First*⁵. Indeed, trade policy, immigration and national security are presented as successes by Trump's Republican supporters, already in campaign mode for 2020, when looking back on the first two years of the Trump administration. In addition, with a growth rate of 4.5% and unemployment at a historic low (3.9%), President Trump holds key advantages to help his side win Congress and block the predicted (Democrat) "blue wave". The polarization of the electorate between diehard Trump supporters, who constitute a solid electoral base, and progressives and #MeToo movement supporters, who are electorally more volatile, is extreme.

The traditional fracture lines within American society, fragmented by conflicting social values and divided by the "culture wars," can equally be seen within each of the two majority parties. The tribalism which reigns within the Republican Party has favoured the Tea Party movement and the rise of Donald Trump. In the Democratic camp, where the inter-generational conflict is particularly marked, traditional Democrats and ultra-progressives are divided on questions as fundamental as the health care system, reform of the financial system and the role of the United States on the international stage.

Yet overall, in terms of foreign policy, the general trend on both sides of the political spectrum is towards disengagement. This trend has been reinforced by a strong anti-war movement on the left, championed by Bernie Sanders' supporters who have remained active since the 2016 campaign. This trend can also be found at the other end of the political spectrum among non-interventionist conservatives. The phenomenon of *war fatigue* inherited from the Iraq War, the campaign in Afghanistan and what the American military commonly call "the longest war" (against Al Qaeda and its offshoots), has only reinforced the traditional reticence of electors towards foreign adventurism.

To win the elections and cause serious difficulties for President Trump (i.e. exercising the power to control Congress, blocking the legislative process and possible nominations of the executive to the Supreme Court), Democrats will have to win a majority of seats in both chambers of Congress. To recap, a total of 435 seats are up for election in the lower house, compared to only 35 seats out of 100 in the Senate (a third of the seats are renewed every two years). An unusual and potentially destabilizing factor for the Trump administration is the fact that more than forty Republican representatives have decided not to stand for re-election (compared to about twenty Democrats), including the House Republican leader Paul Ryan. To win the House of Representatives, the Democrats need 23 additional seats, which they will probably have to look for mainly in the 26 constituencies lost by Hillary Clinton in 2016 (in Michigan for example). In the Senate, the Democrats only need 2 extra seats (in addition to keeping hold of the

1. This research paper summarizes the results of interviews conducted by the author during a field assignment in Washington from 19 to 27 September 2018 and the conclusions of the international conference on Trump's America and America's strategic stakes for 2020 ("L'Amérique de Trump et les enjeux stratégiques américains pour 2020") organized by IRSEM at Ecole Militaire on 17 and 18 October 2018.

2. David Ignatius, "Trump's friends overseas are very, very nervous about the Midterms," *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2018.

3. Several elections are being held on 6 November: in addition to electing state representatives and senators, electors in some states can also elect a new governor (36 states are concerned), a new judge, a new mayor or a new sheriff: overall, more than 6,600 local offices are up for election.

4. *Pew Research Center*, "Trump At Midpoint," 23 October 2018.

5. A. Trevor Thrall, "Will Trump's foreign policy matter for the Midterms?," *The Hill*, 9 August 2018.

26 Democrat-held seats up for re-election). They will have to win in Arizona and Tennessee (both Republican strongholds) as well as in Nevada (which is more ambivalent?).

Another major factor is that although the Democrats are largely favoured among urban and coastal populations, Republican strongholds are more evenly spread across the United States territory and have benefited from an electoral map that has so far been very favourable to them. If the Democrats win local elections, they could challenge this Republican advantage by defining a redistricting of several constituencies before the next vote in 2021, taking account of the results of the next census, which should reflect the demographic progression of the Hispanic minorities, especially in states such as Texas, Arizona or California. If this occurs, it is likely true the new electoral maps will be less favourable to the Republicans and should remain valid for the next ten years.

Given the stakes, the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh⁶ as Supreme Court judge in October 2018 has rapidly become a touchstone of the Midterms, crystallizing both inter and intra-party divides. Due to the media pressure and its polarizing tendencies, the Senators who voted in favour of confirming Kavanaugh's nomination risked their seats for these elections. The Republican camp feared that the Democrats would transform the Midterms into a referendum on sexual harassment or deviant sexual practices highlighted by the #MeToo movement, and so it remobilized, claiming this confirmation as a victory. In reaction to this, the most radical Democrats (such as the highly publicized Michael Avenatti)⁷ have suggested making the question of Supreme Court nominations a campaign theme for 2020 by proposing the creation of two extra seats on the Court (which would therefore increase from 9 to 11 judges) in order to rebalance the representation of the two parties within this crucial federal institution.

Mobilization and electoral sociology: fundamental trends for each of the parties

These midterm elections are therefore predicted to be close and may mobilize electors more strongly than usual. For both camps, the aim is to play to their strengths and take advantage of the characteristics of these 2018 elections.

1) Health care and social protection are priorities among voters in every state; the fate of Medicare has become a national concern that may result in local mobilization around a Democratic candidate advocating "Medicare for all" (this has been observed in several states, including Alaska, where, against all expectations, the Democratic candidate Mark Begich has become a serious challenger to his Republican rival).

2) Women's vote and their political representation are inescapable features of these 2018 elections. White women with university degrees are particularly mobilized and are targeted by both camps. Also, the number of female candidates for Congress is at a historic high: 198 Democrats and 59 Republicans.

3) For Democrats, the challenge lays in bridging the generation gap, mobilizing young people and encouraging them to register on electoral rolls.

4) Trump's electoral base among white electors with little to no higher education has remained stable (estimated at about 30%), and the president's popularity has even seen a slight increase at the end of this campaign, higher than 40%. This popularity is paradoxically dissociated from Republicans' chances of winning in Congress.

5) Finally, fund-raising and the mobilization of financial support are also at a historic high for Democrats, since they have raised more than a billion dollars (compared to 709 million dollars for Republicans).

6. Judge Brett Kavanaugh is a conservative Republican chosen by President Trump, He was accused of sexual abuse by professor Christine B. Ford in testimony to Congress that received considerable media coverage. Of the nine judges on the Supreme Court, he is the fifth conservative, and so his nomination has given the majority on this federal institution to the conservatives.

7. Bill Scher, "Michael Avenatti is Winning the 2020 Democratic Primary," *Politico*, 14 September 2018.

WHAT IS THE AGENDA FOR DEMOCRAT FOREIGN POLICY IN THE CASE OF PARTIAL OR TOTAL VICTORY IN CONGRESS?

Timid re-engagement attempts, essentially on the diplomatic and humanitarian fronts

The Democrats do have the outline of an agenda, a political programme that integrates foreign policy challenges (already looking towards the 2020 elections) if they win the Midterms, even if only in the House of Representatives. However, in the event of a Democrat win, their priority will be to pursue Congressional inquiries into the ability of the president to run the country (more than on collusion with Russia). A succinct list of other foreign policy preoccupations may exist as follows:⁸

1) As is the case for Republicans, the priority, unsurprisingly, is the Chinese threat. For the Democrats, the new silk roads (the “Belt and Road Initiative”) are a major preoccupation that will require solutions other than military intervention. The Democrats’ strategy in Asia would prioritize multi-dimensional re-engagement (economic, diplomatic and military cooperation). Also, the question of Chinese influence in the United States continues to worry decision-makers, particularly troubled by the various reports of Chinese interference in the American academic and political spheres.

2) North Korea is an unresolved question equally of concern to Democrats, who do not see the rapprochement between North and South Korea as necessarily in line with American national security interests. This rapprochement would obviously favour South Korea’s economic interests, but not the strategic interests of the United States.

3) Foreign trade and the question of customs tariffs have become thorny issues for Democrats given their electoral base (mainly blue-collar workers). Democrats have therefore preferred to evade the issue and not be too loud in their criticisms of higher tariffs imposed by President Trump in order to avoid alienating a part of their electorate. Nevertheless, after the elections, this question will be examined on a case-by-case basis by each member of Congress. It should be noted that many representatives in the House will be elected for the first time in November and will already have their eyes on their re-election in two years. They will therefore have to make pragmatic choices to keep their seats. By contrast, the Democrats already in Congress are aware that, with regards to Canada and Europe, it will be necessary to argue for more flexible customs and tariff policies.

4) The foreign policy that Democrats wish to promote goes beyond the war on terror and seeks to establish an engaged – and no longer transactional – diplomacy committed to human rights and democratic values. The humanitarian situation in Yemen is expected to be one of the issues raised by Democrats. There is a rare and relatively strong bipartisan consensus on this question. Senators on the foreign affairs committee, both Democrats and Republicans, would like to end America’s logistical support to Saudi Arabia, and more broadly to the Arab coalition against the Houthis. A resolution presented by the Senate to this effect was rejected in March 2018, but the latest developments in the Khashoggi affair have provided new arguments to Representatives and Senators wishing to end American logistical support to Saudi Arabia.

5) The Iranian question remains a preoccupation for Democrats, partly for reasons of long-term strategy in the Middle East but also due to a mistrust of the Saudi lobby in Washington, with Democrats no longer wishing to support Saudi actions in the name of counter-terrorism.

6) Finally, on the question of climate change, although there is a consensus among Democrats it is not the top priority for all of them. Climate change is expected to be highlighted only by certain candidates, for reasons of visibility or electoral niche.⁹

8. Priorities established in accordance with the preoccupations expressed or highlighted by the Democratic Senators on the various foreign affairs sub-committees (Ben Cardin, Chris Murphy, Tim Kaine, Edward Markey and Cory Booker).

9. For example, the governor of the state of Washington, Jay Inslee, is campaigning for 2020 with a proposal to introduce a carbon tax.

Which Democrat personalities will represent US foreign policy looking towards 2020?

To promote this agenda, Democrats have a relatively organized shadow cabinet that could place Anthony Blinken at the head of the Department of State and Michele Flournoy at the Department of Defence. Both these personalities are close to the Clinton clan and are experienced and highly respected. They are already well-known on the international stage. Michele Flournoy, who seems to generate consensus beyond partisan divisions, turned down requests from the Trump administration to assist James Mattis at the Defence Department in February 2017.

As for the emergence of a possible leader of the party and candidate for the presidency in 2020, two opposing factions exist: on one side, the partisans of a “restoration” of traditional Democratic party policies (these personalities include Michael Bloomberg and John Hickenlooper); on the other side, the progressives and ultra-progressives (such as Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker) who are willing to absorb the satellite movements emerging from the left wing of the Democratic party since 2016 in order to win over, among others, the millennials (young people from 18 to 34 years old) and a part of the “silent majority” (the 40% of the population who do not necessarily vote).

For his part, Joe Biden, former vice-president of Barack Obama, could embody the return of the traditional Democrats. Joe Biden is particularly feared by the current president’s entourage because of his experience in politics and his ability to mobilize large fractions of the electorate otherwise considered to be “safe” Trump supporters, in particular whites without higher education (for example in Michigan, which switched to Trump during the 2016 election). Slightly further to the left, Kamala Harris (Senator for California), who is very strongly opposed to Trump, could be Biden’s vice-presidential nominee. As for Elizabeth Warren, she could stand for the ultra-progressive tendency on the left wing of the party; she has already rallied many Democratic supporters in several states and has adopted the idea of a “reform of financial capitalism” (by proposing a law on corporate dividend redistribution, the Accountable Capitalism Act), which has echoes of the demands made by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, or, more recently, those of Bernie Sanders in his campaign for the 2016 primaries.

WHAT IMPACT WILL THE RESULTS OF THE MIDTERMS HAVE ON THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION?

In the improbable event of a Republican victory in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, President Trump would be galvanized by this election and would be given a free hand to pursue his presidential agenda on particularly divisive issues, such as the abolition of Obamacare or immigration. Also, a Republican triumph would legitimize the candidacy of the incumbent for 2020 and would weaken his rivals among critical or dissident Republicans, such as Jeff Flake (Arizona) or Larry Hogan (Maryland), who would be left with no choice but to stand as independents.

In this case, President Trump would therefore be primarily focused on domestic political issues and partisan arguments over the next two years.

Limited impact on Trump's foreign policy if the Democrats score either a partial or total victory

If the Democrats win the House but not the Senate¹⁰ – the scenario considered most probable, with a margin of about 6 to 7% (Hoover Institution) – and even in the most surprising case of a double Republican loss of both House and Senate – the impact on the Trump administration’s foreign policy would probably be limited. The top priority of the newly elected Democrats would be to strengthen existing inquiries into Trump and to demand new investigations: the president and his closest entourage would then be subject to particularly scrupulous examination to determine if there are any conflicts of interest. However, even if the Senate were to change hands, the launch of impeachment proceedings remains improbable, or even “taboo” for many members of Congress on both sides of the aisle. For impeachment

10. With less than two weeks to go before the elections, according to *FiveThirtyEight*, the most widely recognized poll aggregator among observers of American politics, the Democrats have an 86% chance of winning the House and only a 21% chance of taking the Senate.

to succeed, a two-thirds majority would be required in the Senate, which would mean a significant proportion of Republican Senators voting for impeachment, thereby further shattering the unity of the Grand Old Party.

In the extreme case of impeachment, which would result in the replacement of Donald Trump by the vice-president, Mike Pence, the direction of foreign policy would not change on Iran or Syria. On the other hand, America's alliances and NATO could be strengthened. The priority would remain the power struggle with China, which is still perceived as a threat by the entire American political class.¹¹

Weakening of Congress's power of control over foreign policy

Also, we should emphasize that over the last few years, the various committees responsible for foreign affairs have lost some of their effectiveness and influence over the decision-making process of US foreign policy. We continue to see a "hyper-presidentialization" of the American democratic system (a feature common to both Obama and Trump) and therefore of the country's foreign policy. With the prospect of a Democratic victory in the House and even the Senate, the power of Congress to implement checks and balances would remain weak, given the powers of the president to bypass Congress.¹² Among the Republican Senators who have marked their opposition to President Trump, two of them, and by no means the least important, are retiring – Bob Corker (Tennessee), chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and Jeff Flake (Arizona). After their departure, who will determine the Trump administration's foreign policy direction?

Presidentialization and personalization of decision-making processes

The decision-making process in US foreign policy, particularly the role of the National Security Council (NSC), seems unclear and uncertain, since many committee-stage proposals are reduced to their most simple expression once the decision is made by the executive. The president makes the final decision, without necessarily taking into account the recommendations formulated by inter-agency sub-committees. Today, inter-agency power struggles for influence on policy decisions have been reduced to personal conflicts. The best example is the rivalry between Mike Pompeo and John Bolton. It would seem that John Bolton, who is more often at the White House, has the ear of the president. Remains the question of James Mattis, who is unanimously appreciated at the Pentagon for his ability to run the defence "machine" but not necessarily for his strategic orientations.

In any case, whether partial defeat (loss of the House) or total defeat (loss of both House and Senate), Trump's response to frustration on the domestic front would without doubt be to accentuate certain aspects of his foreign policy, for example hitting harder against alliances or the Europeans or reinforcing protectionism. This hard line is illustrated by the declarations of President Trump on the subject of his Defence Chief on 14 October, in the TV programme *60 minutes*.¹³ In other words, a Democratic victory in the Midterms will only reinforce the excesses and hard-line positions of the president in foreign policy, not soften or curb them. There is no plan B to hope for regarding Iran or Syria, since the desire for disengagement predominates in both parties. These issues are clearly not the priority for electors and thus neither for their representatives in Congress.

11. See the speech of Vice-President Mike Pence at the Hudson Institute on 4 October 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1610-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018>.

12. See James Goldgeier & Elizabeth N. Saunders, "The Unconstrained Presidency. Checks and Balances Eroded Long Before Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018, p. 144-156.

13. During the interview broadcast on 14 October, the American president, Donald Trump, declared that in fact, in his opinion, his Defence Secretary Jim Mattis is "sort of a Democrat" who could soon be leaving the government.

Towards a hardening of the president's nationalist line

The president, who is already campaigning for 2020, said it himself during one of his rallies in Texas to support Senator Ted Cruz.¹⁴ He defined himself as a “nationalist” (in opposition, according to him, to the “globalists”). By saying this, President Trump is challenging the terms normally used by Republicans and their traditional positions on foreign policy (interventionist, non-interventionist etc.). In the Grand Old Party (GOP), there are now three categories of Republicans: Trumpists, cautious and resisters.¹⁵ With the departure of Bob Corker and the death of John McCain, the Republican party is suffering from a crisis of leadership in Congress on questions of foreign policy. President Trump could take advantage of the ideological divisions in the party to impose his own line. He is close to the nationalist Senator Tom Cotton (Arkansas), is reasonably on good terms with the libertarian Senator Rand Paul (Kentucky), and, more surprisingly, with his former primary rival, Senator Marco Rubio (Florida) or the successor of John McCain, Senator Lindsay Graham (South Carolina).

On the other hand, within his administration, National Security Adviser John Bolton, Defence Secretary James Mattis, and Vice-President Mike Pence have adopted very conservative positions and therefore do not question the merits of America's alliances.¹⁶

What impact will the election result have on the Defence budget?

There remains the much-awaited question of the Defence budget. In the case of a Republican victory, it could remain at about 3% of GDP, despite the president's announcements concerning a new arms race in space.¹⁷ In the case of a partial victory, Democrats could use the lever of the Defence budget to promote the redistribution of spending to several domains that affect fundamental choices of society. In foreign policy, they will most probably favour development aid, which was threatened by Trump-Tillerson in the early days of his mandate and more recently by President Trump at the UN summit of 24 September 2018.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN INCREASING POLITICIZATION OF ALLIANCES?

According to the most likely scenario, the result of the midterm elections will lead to another deadlock in Congress, which is largely unfavourable for both parties in the run-up to the 2020 elections. Thus, once again, members of Congress are, in the next two years, facing relative powerlessness in regards to the executive. This extreme polarization on the domestic front could spill over into American foreign relations, whereby the trend of politicization of alliances (“for or against Trump”) already seen in the hints of rapprochement between the Canadian government and Congress will continue.¹⁸

Above all, the electoral battle of the Midterms will probably lead to a more uncertain battle on the legal front, which would take the spotlight off issues of foreign policy, both in Washington and in the media. Therefore, decisions regarding current conflicts will probably continue to be taken essentially by the Pentagon, especially since the National Security Council has become more opaque and weaker under Trump's presidency. In other words, the military will have a more powerful voice than civilians (technocrats, special advisers and elected officials). This, in turn, could reinforce the trend towards the militarization of American foreign policy (a trend that should be monitored depending on the ability of James Mattis to remain in his current position despite recent public criticism by President Trump).¹⁹

Once again, the main stakes of these elections lay outside Washington. It is primarily the American electorate that will make a choice of society, amplified by the anti-Trump movements. The results will most probably further harden

14. Cruz, a former rival whom Donald Trump had slandered during the 2016 primaries, is now nicknamed “Texas Ted” by the president.

15. See Colin Dueck, “GOP Foreign Policy Opinion in the Trump Era,” Program on National Security, FPRI, E-Notes, 20 April 2018.

16. See Colin Dueck, “Foreign Policy and the 2018 Midterms,” Program on National Security, FPRI, E-Notes, 26 October 2018.

17. However, this project is in no way comparable to the IDS of President Reagan.

18. See Daniel Drezner (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tuft University), “The polarization of U.S. alliances,” *The Washington Post*, 27 May 2018.

19. CBS News, *60 minutes*, 14 October 2018.

the extremes, pitting ultra-progressives against ultra-conservatives as illustrated in the recent affair of the parcel bombs sent to prominent Democrats. This scenario could accelerate the disengagement that the United States is currently undertaking: an underlying trend popular both within the electorate and among elected officials.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND TO FOLLOW AND UNDERSTAND THE STAKES OF THE MIDTERMS IN THE UNITED STATES:

1) Opinion polls and surveys:

Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org>

FiverThirtyEight, <https://fivethirtyeight.com>

2) Specialists on the political parties:

The works of Ray La Raja, expert on political parties and election issues in the United States, <https://polsci.umass.edu/people/ray-la-raja>

The works of Colin Dueck, specialist on the Republican party and its foreign policy: *Hard Line, The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010; "GOP Foreign Policy Opinion in the Trump Era," Program on National Security, FPRI, E-Notes, 20 April 2018 and "Foreign Policy and the 2018 Midterms," Program on National Security, FPRI, E-Notes, 26 October 2018.

Maud Quessard is a senior research fellow and US researcher at IRSEM. A graduate of Paris "Sciences Po" University, she is a specialist in American foreign policy. Up to 2017, she lectured at Poitiers University, Bordeaux IEP and Paris Sciences Po University. Her research focuses on public diplomacy, American soft power, information wars and influence strategies. She has received support from the IHEDN research support program and was a visiting fellow at the history department of Harvard University in 2015. She is the author of a monograph on influence strategies in the United States: *Les Stratégies d'influence des États-Unis: propagande, information et diplomatie publique depuis la guerre froide*, Presses universitaires de Rennes (to be published in 2019). Her recent publications include: "Les diplomaties de l'entertainment au service du nation branding américain," in Thierry Balzaq, Frédéric Ramel, Frédéric Charillon (eds.), *Manuel de diplomatie*, coll. "Relations internationales," Presses de Sciences Po, August 2018; with David Haglund, "How the West Was One: France, America, and the 'Huntingtonian Reversal'," *Orbis Journal of World Affairs*, Autumn 2018.

Contact: maud.quesard@irsem.fr