Chintan Research Foundation

ISSUE BRIEF NO. 30/2027



TRUMP 2.0 AT THE BALLOT BOX

Power, Performance, and the Battle for Congress

The 2026 US midterm elections will test whether the coalition that returned Donald Trump to the White House can sustain Republican congressional control after two years in power. This brief argues that unified control brings electoral accountability: Republicans must demonstrate that power has improved voters' lives, while Democrats must translate dissatisfaction into a credible alternative. It examines how affordability, the Iran war, immigration, election integrity, crime, abortion, and religion shape this contest, drawing on public-opinion surveys, policy developments, and party strategies. It highlights the gap between aggregate economic performance and household experience, how foreign intervention's costs enter domestic calculations, and how established and emerging leaders mobilise voters and influence their parties' trajectories. Republican vulnerabilities do not guarantee Democratic gains. Candidate credibility, local concerns, organisational strength, and competing issue priorities will determine how national sentiment translates into seats. Ultimately, the midterms will test political loyalty against governing performance, shaping institutional constraints on Trump's remaining term and leadership contests beyond it, while revealing which party connects its claims about America's future with voters' judgements of their present circumstances.

NOVEMBER 2026

Keywords: US midterm elections; Donald Trump; Congressional control; electoral accountability; affordability; Iran war; immigration; election integrity; crime; abortion rights; religion; political leadership

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Introduction

Donald Trump returned to the White House in 2025 with Republican majorities of 220–215 in the House of Representatives and 53–47 in the Senate (Sullivan 2024). This governing trifecta armed his administration with the political tools to advance its objectives on taxation, immigration, federal spending, and national security. Unified control, however, also brings accountability. The 2026 midterms will deliver voters' first nationwide verdict on how the administration and its congressional majority have wielded that power.

All 435 House seats and 35 of the Senate's 100 seats are being contested. Retaining both chambers would preserve Republican legislative advantages, while losing either would force Trump to navigate Democratic control of part of Congress. A Democratic takeover of both would tilt the institutional balance more decisively, strengthening the opposition's power to shape legislation and scrutinise the administration.

Although Trump will not be on the ballot, Republican candidates must defend their records while answering for his presidency. Democrats will seek to convert dissatisfaction with his presidency into congressional gains. Overall approval sketches the broad political terrain, but electoral outcomes will depend on voters' judgements of specific policies and individual candidates.

Affordability, employment, and tariffs will remain central, alongside immigration, election integrity, crime, abortion, and religion. The Iran war links foreign policy to household costs, raising questions about military intervention and prolonged conflict. Party leaders and emerging voices must translate these concerns into candidate support and congressional seats.

This issue brief examines how Trump's governing record, domestic and foreign-policy debates, and political leadership interact in the battle for Congress. Its central question is whether Republicans can convert their hold on power into a renewed electoral mandate, or whether voters will reset the balance for the remainder of his presidency.

Trump 2.0: Governing Record, Midterm Test

The names on the November ballot will be those of House and Senate candidates, but Donald Trump will remain central to the political choices before voters. A July 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that most voters were taking the President into account when considering their midterm vote. While 42 per cent viewed their vote as one against Trump, 22 per cent saw it as one in his favour (Daniller et al. 2026). The comparison with the 2022 midterms suggests that Trump weighs more heavily on voters' choices than Biden did at a similar stage. At that time, 31 per cent viewed their vote as one against Biden and 19 per cent as one in his favour, while 49 per cent said he was not much of a factor in their decision (Pew Research Center 2022). The challenge for Republicans, therefore, will be to defend individual congressional seats in an election where voters' assessments of the President could sway contests far beyond the White House.

Four recent national surveys by Pew Research Center, the Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (AP-NORC), Reuters/Ipsos, and Marquette Law School capture the political mood in which Republicans must defend their congressional majority.

Table 1: Donald Trump's Approval Ratings Ahead of the 2026 Midterm Elections

Source	Field dates	Approve	Disapprove
Pew Research Center	6–12 July 2026	34%	64%
AP-NORC	23–27 July 2026	33%	66%
Reuters/Ipsos	14–17 August 2026	33%	64%
Marquette Law School	22–29 July 2026	40%	60%

Source: Author's compilation based on data from Daniller et al. (2026), AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (2026), Lange (2026), and Marquette Law School Poll (2026).

Trump's approval ranges from 33 to 40 per cent across these surveys. Sample composition, interview methods, weighting, fieldwork dates, and margins of error help explain the variation. The consistent finding is that disapproval outstrips approval. His 33 per cent Reuters/Ipsos rating matches that pollster's lowest figure across his two presidencies, previously recorded in December 2017, and is down from 47 per cent in January 2025. Public dissatisfaction nevertheless varies across his governing record, as the July 2026 CNN poll below shows.

Table 2: Trump's Approval Ratings Across Key Policy Areas, July 2026

Policy area	Approve	Interpretation
Inflation	25%	Among his weakest ratings
Petrol prices	21%	Lowest reported area
Immigration	39%	One of his relatively stronger areas
Federal government management	35%	Negative overall
Voting rights and election integrity	41%	His strongest area in this survey
Handling the situation in Iran	28%	Very weak

Source: CNN Poll – July 2026 (Edwards-Levy 2026)

Approval ratings for inflation and petrol prices stands at 25 and 21 per cent respectively, far below those for immigration and election integrity. The economy is therefore a natural starting point for understanding Republican vulnerabilities.

Economy: Trump on the Other Side of the Affordability Debate

Economic discontent under Democratic rule was among the factors that carried Donald Trump and the Republican Party back to power in 2024. Under Joe Biden, unemployment remained below 4 per cent for the longest sustained stretch in more than 50 years (DeLuca Vinocur 2024). Real gross domestic product (GDP) expanded by about 12.6 per cent over his four years, with annual growth of at least 2.5 per cent (Gore et al. 2025). Yet the strength of these macroeconomic indicators did not translate into a comparable sense of economic well-being among American households. Inflation had eased from its pandemic-era highs, but slower price increases did little to undo the rise in living costs accumulated during the earlier surge. This gap between economic performance and household experience gave Republicans an opening to attack 'Bidenomics' as disconnected from middle-class concerns. Their argument drew on a politically consequential reality: positive economic numbers offered limited reassurance to voters who continued to feel worse off.

In 2026, the roles have reversed, leaving Republicans to confront the same gap between economic performance and household perceptions that they had wielded against the Democrats. Under Trump, unemployment has remained low at 4.2 per cent, while real GDP growth has held steady at around 2.2 per cent annually (Gore et al. 2026). Yet, as under Biden, these broader indicators have not translated into a stronger sense of economic well-being among American households. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, annual consumer-price inflation reached 3.7 per cent in September 2026, while gasoline prices rose by 34.2 per cent over the preceding 12 months (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2026). For Republicans, the political challenge now lies in explaining how a growing economy is not improving everyday affordability.

A July 2026 CBS News/YouGov poll found that 58 per cent of Americans believed Trump's policies had left them financially worse off, against 13 per cent who felt better off (CBS News 2026). Before the 2024 election, 44 per cent of registered voters had expected improvement (CBS News 2024). This gulf between expectations and experience offers Democrats an opening similar to the one Republicans exploited against Biden.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries has made 'Fighting for an Affordable America' central to the campaign, asking voters to judge Republican performance by groceries, housing, fuel, and healthcare costs alongside growth, employment, and financial markets (Jeffries 2026). The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll suggests an opening: 38 per cent trusted Democrats more on the economy, compared with 35 per cent who chose Republicans (Lange 2026).

The White House sees jobs, market gains, and tax cuts as a strong electoral record. Some Republicans doubt it will suffice in competitive races. Former Trump administration official Marc Short calls this a 'Catch-22': candidates must defend economic performance without appearing indifferent to household pressures (Wingrove, Niquette, and Lucey 2026). Rising petrol prices, partly tied to the Iran war, further complicate Trump's defence. Fuel and energy bills bring the costs of foreign intervention home, making the Republican economic case partly dependent on a conflict whose duration and consequences remain uncertain.

US–Iran War: The Electoral Cost of a Prolonged Conflict

On 28 February 2026, the United States launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran, targeting offensive missiles, production facilities, and naval and security infrastructure, while seeking to block nuclear-weapons development. Iran retaliated by closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which around 20 per cent of global oil supply and 20 per cent of liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade pass. The closure removed 15–16 million barrels per day of crude and refined products from markets overnight, driving up oil and US petrol prices (International Energy Agency 2026). Trump promised prices would come 'tumbling down' after the United States left Iran, suggesting this could happen within two or three weeks (Sukri 2026).

Nearly six months later, commercial traffic remains severely restricted and US petrol prices hover around US$4.11 a gallon (Associated Press 2026). The continuing burden on household budgets has exposed the gap between expectations of a short conflict and the mounting costs of prolonged intervention, feeding public dissatisfaction.

A July 2026 AP-NORC poll found that 64 per cent of US adults believed the war had not been worth fighting, while 33 per cent considered it worthwhile (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research 2026). Opposition reached 87 per cent among Democrats and 68 per cent among independents, whereas 61 per cent of Republicans considered it worthwhile. Republican approval of Trump's handling of the conflict nevertheless slid 10 percentage points from 71 per cent in June. By late July, overall approval of his handling of Iran stood at 28 per cent (Sanders and Catalini 2026).

By August, 18 US service members had been killed and more than 750 wounded (Copp 2026).

The reclassification of some deaths under a separate operational category drew scrutiny to the administration's casualty reporting. With diplomacy struggling to produce a lasting settlement, Democrats have demanded a credible plan to end what they describe as the most partisan conflict in modern US history.

Republicans continue to support Trump's approach publicly, presenting the war as necessary to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Behind this public support, however, many are pressing the White House for a clearer path towards ending the conflict, fearing that public dissatisfaction could translate into electoral losses in November. Republican candidates thus face the challenge of defending the President's strategic objectives while responding to voters' concerns over the war's duration and costs. Trump, for his part, continues to defend the conflict as essential to stopping Iran's nuclear programme. He has repeatedly insisted that he faces no time pressure to end the war and that the approaching midterms will not determine his decisions.

Whether the war continues to weigh on voters in November or diplomacy produces a settlement remains uncertain. Republicans must contain the electoral costs of a conflict the President has shown little inclination to end.

Immigration: A Narrowing Republican Advantage

Immigration was central to Trump's appeal in 2024. An August Pew Research Center survey found that 82 per cent of his supporters considered it very important to their vote, second only to the economy (Pew Research Center 2024).

Trump promised the largest deportation operation in US history, stronger southern-border security, expanded raids and detention by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the reinstatement of first-term restrictions. These included Remain in Mexico, requiring asylum seekers to wait there while US claims were processed, and tighter asylum rules. His administration reinstated the policy, resumed border-wall construction, and restricted asylum access.

Yet this policy success has not translated into sustained public support for the President's handling of immigration. An AP-NORC poll conducted in March 2025, shortly after Trump took office, put approval of his handling of the issue at 49 per cent. By August 2026, that figure had fallen to 39 per cent. This decline does not necessarily signal a broad rejection of stricter immigration controls. It points, however, to growing unease over the means used to enforce them. A July 2026 AP-NORC poll found that 47 per cent of Americans believed the administration had gone too far in deporting immigrants living in the country illegally (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research 2026). ICE raids, vehicle stops, and the deployment of federal immigration agents in American cities have thrust the methods of enforcement into sharper public scrutiny. For Trump, the political challenge lies in sustaining support for tighter immigration controls when the conduct of enforcement itself becomes a source of public concern.

The issue's prominence has also faded. Marquette Law School polling found that the share identifying immigration and border security as their most important issue fell from 14 per cent in January to 5 per cent in July 2026 (Marquette Law School Poll 2026). Republicans therefore face both weaker approval and waning public attention to an issue central to their 2024 victory.

Republicans nevertheless continue to place immigration at the centre of their electoral strategy. Between January and June 2026, Republican candidates and groups spent about US$53 million on immigration-related advertising, far outspending Democrats (Bustillo 2026). Their message combines border security, deportations, and crime with attacks on Democratic calls to abolish ICE. Democrats, meanwhile, are seeking to turn public concern over immigration enforcement into a political liability for Republicans. Yet disagreement within the party complicates this effort. At its August meeting, the

Democratic National Committee (DNC) approved two non-binding resolutions: one calling for concrete reforms to ICE and the other for its abolition. These competing positions reflect the party's difficulty in translating criticism of Trump's enforcement practices into a coherent alternative.

Such divisions complicate the conversion of public dissatisfaction into Democratic gains. Immigration may remain comparatively firmer Republican ground than the economy or the Iran war, despite its declining salience. Its electoral value will depend partly on whether Democrats reconcile criticism of enforcement with a coherent policy position.

Election Integrity: Federal versus State Control

A July 2026 CNN poll found 41 per cent approval of Trump's handling of voting rights and election integrity, his highest rating among the policy areas surveyed (Edwards-Levy 2026). This relative strength is striking given his refusal to accept the 2020 result and his subsequent efforts to overturn it. Six years later, he is again making election integrity central to his message, now advocating tighter federal safeguards from the presidency.

Presidential authority over elections is limited. State and local authorities administer registration, polling, mail ballots, and counting. The federal government can set certain national standards and enforce voting-rights laws, but greater presidential involvement raises questions about both the proposed safeguards and their legal basis.

Trump challenged this division through a March 2026 executive order directing the Department of Homeland Security to prepare state-by-state lists of adult US citizens and requiring states to share eligible mail-ballot voter lists with the Postal Service. It sought to prevent ballots being mailed to people absent from these lists and called for investigations of officials issuing federal ballots to ineligible voters. Republicans present these measures as safeguards against fraud and a means of strengthening electoral confidence.

Democrats emphasise shielding a predominantly state-administered system from political pressure. Twenty-three Democratic-led states challenged the order, arguing that it restricts ballot access and undermines state authority. In August, the Supreme Court allowed some provisions to take effect, while the Postal Service and mail-ballot measure remained blocked for November. Democrats argue that federal interference poses a greater threat than the fraud Trump invokes.

Public opinion suggests that neither party can claim exclusive ownership of voters' concerns. A July 2026 Gallup–Kettering poll found that 67 per cent worried about political pressure on election officials, 57 per cent about ballots being mishandled, and 53 per cent about ineligible voting (Maese and Jones 2026). These concerns overlap, leaving both parties with the task of explaining how their approach would protect the credibility of the electoral process. The political contest will turn partly on which understanding of election integrity voters find more persuasive: tighter safeguards against fraud or stronger protection against political interference. The underlying question of federal authority also extends to the debate over crime, where Trump has defended intervention in American cities as part of his law-and-order agenda.

Crime: Federal Intervention and Public Safety

Republicans hold an advantage on crime. A July 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that 43 per cent of Americans considered their views closer to Republican policies, compared with 29 per cent who favoured Democrats (Daniller et al. 2026). Trump attributes falling violent crime and murder rates to tougher policing and federal intervention.

In August 2025, he declared a crime emergency in Washington D.C, deployed thousands of National Guard troops, and temporarily brought the police department under greater federal control. In Memphis, he established the Memphis Safe Task Force combining federal agencies and National Guard support. These interventions underpin his case for a stronger federal public-safety role.



The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) 2025 Uniform Crime Reporting data, released in August 2026, recorded a 9.3 per cent annual decline in violent crime, an 18.1 per cent fall in murder and non-negligent manslaughter, and an 18.5 per cent drop in robbery (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2026). At the Nassau County Police Academy in Long Island on 14 August, Trump called this the 'single largest reduction' in violent crime in American history and urged voters to trust Republicans on public safety.

Democrats are contesting Trump's bid to claim credit for this improvement. They point out that crime was already falling in 2023 and 2024 under Biden, questioning how much of the subsequent decline can be attributed to Trump's policies. Falling crime in Democratic-run cities such as New York, Chicago, Boston, and Cleveland also allows them to argue that local policing and violence-prevention programmes were producing results. Their midterm message combines effective policing with action against gun trafficking, stronger mental health and addiction services, and community violence prevention. They have also questioned the National Guard deployments, arguing that these interventions serve Trump's pursuit of federal control more than the requirements of public safety.

The contest concerns both the causes of falling crime and whom voters trust to sustain the improvement. Challenging Trump's claim of credit will not necessarily erase the Republican advantage, especially in close races. Abortion and religion present different opportunities and constraints.

Abortion Rights: A Continuing Electoral Divide

The Supreme Court's 2022 Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization decision overturned Roe v. Wade, ending the federal constitutional right to abortion and returning regulatory authority largely to the states (Hurley and Chung 2022). It also sharpened abortion's electoral significance.
In 2024, Kamala Harris promised to restore federal protections and centred reproductive freedom. Trump claimed credit for overturning Roe through his Supreme Court appointments, while Republicans dropped support for a national ban from their platform. This allowed him to retain anti-abortion support while limiting the risk of alienating moderates opposed to a nationwide ban.

Trump still maintains that states should decide abortion policy and has not endorsed a national ban. However, parts of his administration and the anti-abortion movement push for stronger federal intervention. Attorney General Todd Blanche has discussed using the Justice Department to challenge abortion-medication access and state protections for

providers (Moseley-Morris 2026). Republicans must reconcile these demands with Trump's position on state authority.

Democrats emphasise protecting access, opposing a national ban, and restoring federal protections similar to Roe. They link reproductive rights to healthcare, household costs, and women's personal freedom. Planned Parenthood Votes and Reproductive Freedom for All have jointly pledged more than US$70 million for the midterm cycle (González 2026).

Public opinion gives Democrats an advantage on the issue, although the nature of that support requires closer attention. A July 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that 42 per cent of registered voters agreed with the Democratic Party's abortion policies, compared with 32 per cent who agreed with Republicans (Daniller et al. 2026). A May 2026 Gallup poll, however, showed a near-even division over when abortion should be legal: 48 per cent favoured legality in all or most circumstances, while 49 per cent favoured prohibition or access only in limited circumstances. At the same time, 53 per cent identified as pro-choice, compared with 42 per cent who described themselves as pro-life (Hogenboom-Jones 2026).

Support for a woman's right to choose can therefore coexist with support for particular restrictions. Democrats must convert support for reproductive freedom into votes. Republicans retain room to campaign on restrictions, while balancing their anti-abortion base against wider resistance to a complete national ban.

Religion: A Partisan Divide

In 2024, Trump won 81 per cent of White evangelical Protestants and 55 per cent of Catholics, while Harris secured 70 per cent of religiously unaffiliated voters (Hartig et al. 2025). Yet an April 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that 70 per cent considered Trump 'not too' or 'not at all' religious. Even 51 per cent of White evangelicals shared this view, although 69 per cent approved of his presidency in January (Rotolo and Smith 2026b). His appeal rests more on advancing religious conservatives' priorities than on perceived personal religiosity.

The White House Faith Office, established in February 2025, engages faith-based organisations and protects religious liberty. The Religious Liberty Commission, created in May, examines religious education, school prayer, conscience protections, and faith-based institutions' rights. The administration presents these initiatives as protection against government discrimination and restrictions on religious expression. They also demonstrate that religious conservatives' concerns feature in its governing agenda.

The wider partisan divide centres on the place of religion in government and public policy. An April 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that 27 per cent of Republicans and Republican-leaning voters supported making Christianity the official religion of the United States. Another 55 per cent wanted the government to promote Christian moral values without establishing an official religion. Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters, only 8 per cent supported an official Christian religion, while 58 per cent said the government should neither establish Christianity nor promote Christian values. Support for the separation of church and state reflected a similar divide, at 68 per cent among Democrats compared with 41 per cent among Republicans (Rotolo and Smith 2026a). The disagreement, therefore, extends beyond religious affiliation to competing understandings of how government should relate to faith.

Democrats question federal preference for one religion. In July 2026, Democratic lawmakers introduced a resolution reaffirming church–state separation and rejecting federal imposition of particular beliefs, following Commission recommendations for a greater religious role in public institutions. Their emphasis on equal treatment and limited government power courts religious minorities and the growing religiously unaffiliated electorate.
Republicans must translate religious conservatives' support into turnout. Trump addressed the Faith and

Freedom Coalition in June 2026; its 'Project Vote Chase' now seeks to mobilise religious voters (Faith & Freedom Coalition 2026). His White evangelical approval nevertheless fell from 78 per cent in February 2025 to 69 per cent in January 2026 (Rotolo and Smith 2026b). Substantial support persists, but participation cannot be assumed: policy commitments must give these voters a compelling reason to vote.

Political Leadership and the Battle for Congress

Established leaders and emerging figures will shape how these issue debates translate into campaigns and congressional seats.

Trump 2.0 and the Midterms

Trump's uneven record leaves Republican candidates weighing how closely to associate with him. His support matters for base turnout, but competitive constituencies also require independents dissatisfied with aspects of his presidency. Candidates must balance presidential backing with responsiveness to local concerns. The appropriate balance varies by race, although his dominance makes distancing congressional campaigns from his record difficult.

Trump and Vice President JD Vance headlined the Dallas midterm convention on 9 and 10 September, focusing on tax relief, border security, trade, and American manufacturing. The Iran war's absence from the announced agenda suggested an effort to foreground electorally useful policies and keep a damaging conflict out of the spotlight. Whether Republicans can sustain this distinction depends partly on the war's course and domestic costs.

House Speaker Mike Johnson leads the defence of the House majority, while Senate Majority Leader John Thune concentrates on holding the Senate. National Republican Senatorial Committee chair Tim Scott raises funds and supports candidates in key Senate races. Their task is to tailor the national message to constituencies that will determine congressional control.

On the Democratic side, House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries is leading the effort to regain the House, placing affordability and the cost of living at the centre of the campaign. Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer faces the more difficult task of securing the four additional seats needed for a Senate majority. Beyond Congress, DNC Chair Ken Martin is working to strengthen voter registration and campaign organisation. The DNC's efforts include more than 100 registration events across 26 states (DNC 2026). These organisational investments will matter because dissatisfaction with the President does not automatically translate into Democratic victories. The party's leaders must connect that dissatisfaction to a persuasive electoral message and ensure that voters turn out in the races that matter.

Emerging Leaders: New Centres of Influence

The midterms also allow rising figures to test their ability to mobilise voters and shape their parties as Trump's term approaches its halfway mark.

Vance is expanding his role by campaigning for congressional candidates, returning to Ohio for an economy-focused rally, and preparing the opening-night keynote at the Dallas convention. He must show that his position in the administration can generate electoral support for other Republicans. Bringing voters to the polls could help him build a political base of his own for the post-Trump party.

On the Democratic side, challenges to established leaders are creating space for new figures and strengthening the influence of their supporters. Darializa Avila Chevalier, a 32-year-old democratic socialist and first-time candidate, defeated five-term Representative Adriano Espaillat in New York's 13th Congressional District (Strauss 2026). Her victory also signals the growing influence of New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani. All three candidates he backed in New York's congressional primaries won, with Avila Chevalier and Brad Lander defeating sitting Democratic members of Congress (Kofsky,

Troadec, and Oppenheim 2026). These results suggest that Mamdani's political reach is extending beyond city politics into the wider contest over the Democratic Party's direction.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has similarly used her prominence within the party's left wing to back candidates challenging more moderate rivals. In Michigan's Democratic Senate primary, she backed Abdul El-Sayed, while Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer supported Haley Stevens (Meyer 2026). El-Sayed's victory exposed the limits of establishment support in that contest and raised his own national profile. A physician and former public-health official, he campaigned on Medicare for All and affordability. His next challenge is to establish whether the agenda that secured the Democratic nomination can attract a broader electorate in closely divided Michigan.

Vance must develop electoral standing while remaining closely associated with Trump. Emerging Democrats must demonstrate that intra-party victories can broaden into general-election support. November will test the reach of both forms of influence.

Conclusion

The 2026 midterms will test whether the coalition that returned Trump to power can sustain Republican congressional control after two years of governing. The trifecta brought authority and accountability. Republicans must show that the exercise of power has improved voters' lives and warrants a renewed mandate.

Affordability remains central. Jobs, growth, and market gains offer a record to defend, but their political value depends on households experiencing greater financial security. Iran links strategic decisions abroad to everyday spending at home. Arguments about military necessity must compete with questions about the war's purpose, duration, and economic consequences.

Republican weaknesses do not make every issue favourable to Democrats. Crime and election integrity offer Republicans openings; immigration remains contested despite concern over enforcement. Abortion and religion shape loyalties and turnout. Voters' relative priorities will determine whether dissatisfaction outweighs attachment to the administration's agenda.

Democrats must offer a credible affordability agenda, reconcile internal disagreements, and win competitive constituencies. Republicans must mobilise Trump supporters while responding to less supportive independents. Candidate credibility, local concerns, and organisation will mediate the national mood. Emerging leaders must broaden their appeal beyond existing constituencies.

Retaining both chambers would preserve Republican legislative advantages; losing either would strengthen Democratic oversight and constrain Trump's remaining presidency. The results will also shape each party's leadership and direction beyond his term.

November will ultimately test the relationship between political loyalty and governing accountability. Control of Washington and gains in opinion polls cannot substitute for earning votes. The decisive question is which party connects its claims about America's future to voters' judgements of their present circumstances. •

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Designed By: Sarika Batra, Graphic Designer
Edited By: Shraddha Ratori, Editorial Consultant
Image Courtesy: Shutterstock

Recommended Citation
Sehgal. P and Tourangbam. M, (2026). Trump 2.0 at the Ballot Box: Power, Performance, and the Battle for Congress, Chintan Research Foundation (CRF), New Delhi

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