

Cast your vote: An overview of the midterm elections in November

By Newsela Staff on 10.15.18

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Image 1. The U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., is the home of the legislative branch. On November 6, 2018, voters will choose 35 members of the Senate and all 435 members of the House of Representatives. Photo by: Tetra Images - Henryk Sadura/Getty Images

What are the midterm elections and why are they important?

Midterm elections take place in the middle of each four-year presidential term. This year, the midterms will take place on Tuesday, November 6. They include races for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Statewide elections, such as gubernatorial races, are also part of the midterms. Local elections, like those for school board or city council positions, also take place.

Midterm elections are important because they can shift which political party has the majority in Congress. Currently, Republicans have control of all three branches of the federal government. At the head of the executive branch is Republican President Donald Trump. In the legislative branch

Republicans make up the majority of both chambers of Congress. Finally, with the recent confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh, conservative judges now hold five of the nine seats on the U.S. Supreme Court.

The House of Representatives

Republicans

235 seats

Vacant

7 seats

Democrats

193 seats



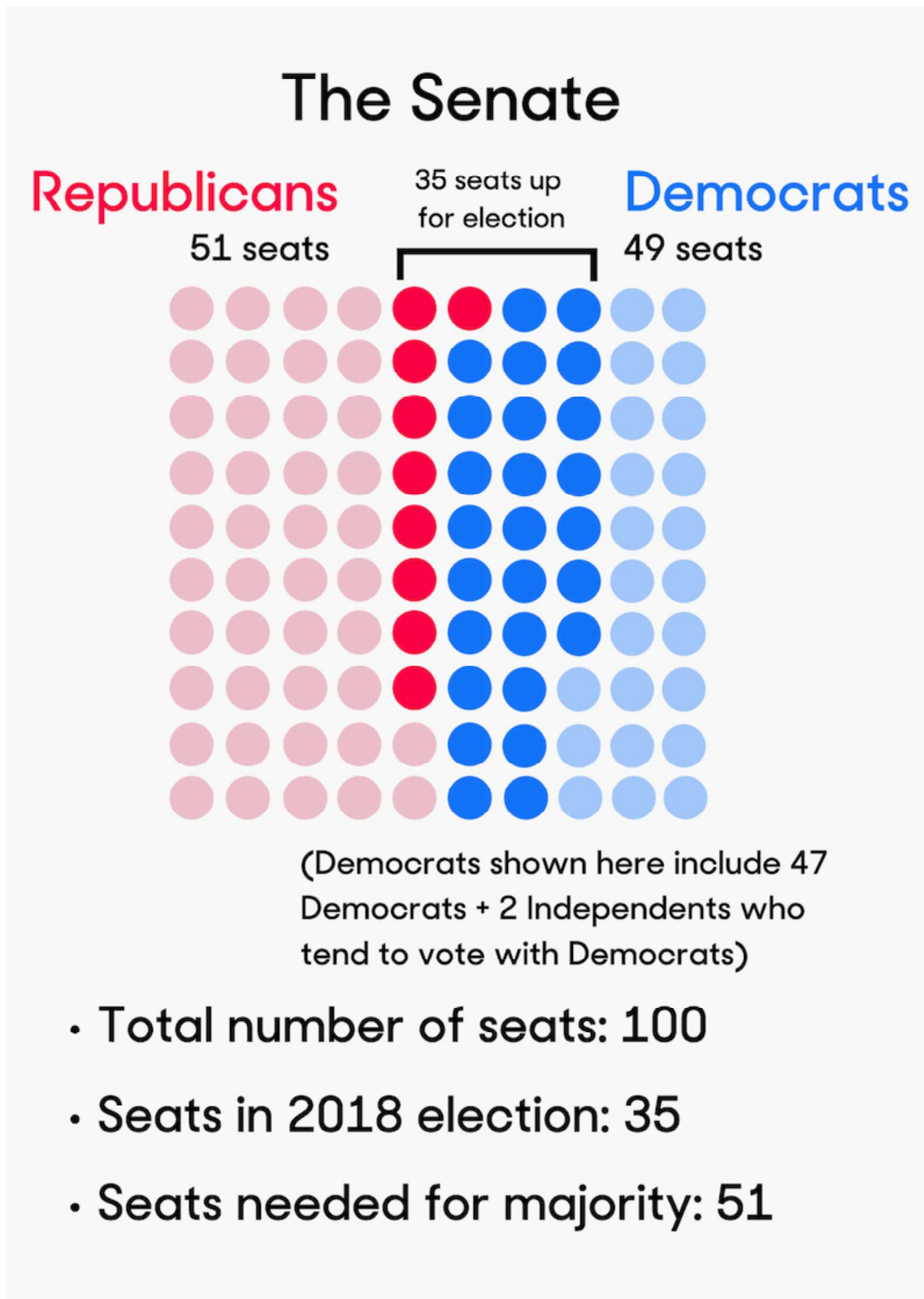
- Total number of seats: 435
- Seats in 2018 election: 435
- Seats needed for majority: 219

The House of Representatives

Because representatives only serve two-year terms, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives will be contested. Polls suggest that Democrats have a higher chance of taking control of the House than the Senate. The Cook Political Report predicts that 68 House races will be competitive, with 11 leaning Democratic, 26 leaning Republican and 31 considered tossups.

The battle for the U.S. Senate

Senators serve six-year terms, and their terms are staggered so that they are not all voted on at once. This year, 35 of 100 Senate seats are up for grabs in the midterms.

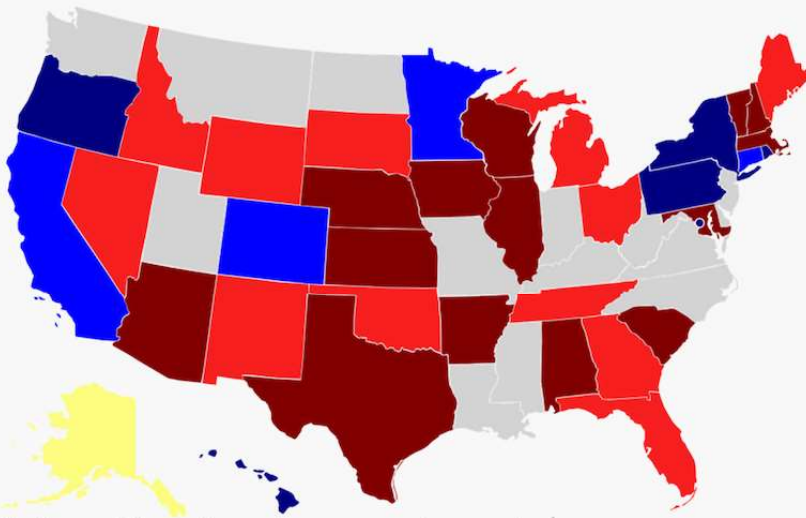


seats, two became vacant earlier this year. These are the seats that were held by Al Franken, a

Democrat from Minnesota who resigned in January and Thad Cochran, a Republican from Mississippi who resigned in April . The governors of Minnesota and Mississippi appointed senators to fill those two seats, and voters will now choose who will complete their terms. A majority of the remaining 33 seats, 23 of them, are currently held by Democrats. Eight are held by Republicans and two are held by independents. This is favorable for the Republicans, who only need to defend nine seats compared to the Democrats' 24, or 26 if you count the two Independents who tend to vote with Democrats.

What's at stake in state and local elections

Gubernatorial Races



Alaska and Hawaii not shown to scale.

- Democratic incumbent eligible for re-election
- Term-limited or retiring Democrat
- Republican incumbent eligible for re-election
- Term-limited or retiring Republican
- Term-limited or retiring Republican

- In an election, the incumbent is the person who currently holds the office
- 36 states will elect a new governor
- The U.S. territories of Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands will elect a new governor.

At the state level, voters will choose new governors in 36 U.S. states and three U.S. territories. There will also be elections for seats in 87 state legislative chambers. While these races tend to get less attention, they are no less important. In 2020, the United States will conduct a census. Congressional and state legislative districts are drawn based on census results, and in many states it is the job of governors and state legislators to do the drawing.

When politicians redraw electoral districts to benefit their own party, it's called gerrymandering. Because of this, even the process of choosing the boundaries of districts is political. This led to a Michigan state Supreme Court decision to allow a measure to appear on voters' November 6 ballot. Michigan voters will have the chance to decide whether to move responsibility for drawing district lines from state lawmakers to a committee selected by both parties.

At the local level, several major cities will hold mayoral elections. The cities include Newark, New Jersey; Phoenix, Arizona; San Francisco, California; Washington, D.C.; and Nashville, Tennessee. Local races may seem less critical than state or congressional races. However, your local representation impacts your day-to-day life more than you may realize. For example, decisions about schools and parks are made by local elected officials.

Understanding ballot measures

Voters will be choosing more than just candidates for various positions. They'll also be voting yes or no on what are called ballot measures, like the initiative in Michigan to change who draws the districts. Voting on ballot measures is a unique way for Americans to participate in democracy. That's because unlike most laws, which are decided by elected representatives, ballot measures are decided by the voters themselves.

How something becomes a ballot measure differs from state to state. In some states, any person or group can gather a set number of signatures in order for a measure to appear on the ballot. State or local lawmakers may also decide to put proposed legislation up for public vote.

Voters to decide on key issues

Many issues are on the minds of voters in the 2018 midterms. According to a Reuters poll conducted between June 5 and October 9, the top three issues among registered voters are the economy, health care and immigration. Other issues important to registered voters included Social Security, social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as education and the environment.

Which issues voters care most about changes based on party affiliation. Among Democrats, health care was the most important issue, while for Republicans it was immigration and the economy.

Midterm elections might see bigger voter turnout

With so much at stake, you might expect that most Americans would want to participate in midterm elections, but historically speaking, voter turnout for midterms tends to be low. In presidential elections, the Pew Research Center estimates that roughly 50 to 60 percent of possible voters participate. In midterm elections, participation can fall below 40 percent.

However, there are signs that this could be changing. Close to a fifth of registered voters, about 37 million people, voted in House primary elections, Pew's research showed. While that sounds quite low, it represented a 56 percent increase since 2014. That year, 23.7 million people voted in House primaries. Voter enthusiasm is up, too. A Pew survey conducted in September found that voter enthusiasm is at its highest level during any midterm in more than two decades. Among the survey of 1,439 registered voters, 61 percent said they are more enthusiastic about voting than in past congressional elections. Enthusiasm was slightly higher among Democrats than among Republicans. Sixty-seven percent of Democrats expressed enthusiasm, compared to 59 percent of Republicans.

The higher enthusiasm among Democrats is related to something political scientists call "the presidential penalty." It is a preference of midterm voters to express dissatisfaction with the current president. Brown University political scientist Brian Knight wrote a paper on the presidential penalty in 2014. He noted that the president's party lost seats in 40 of the 43 midterm elections held between 1842 and 2012.

How can I learn more about the elections in my area?

Do you know who currently represents you at the federal, state and local levels? That's an important first step. According to the research group Haven Insights, just 37 percent of American adults can name their representative in Congress. Knowing who represents you in the government gives you a way to be involved, even if you're too young to vote.

You're never too young to learn about the issues and tell the people who represent you what you think. After all, it's their job to listen.

There are a number of online tools to help you get to know your local ballot. The website Ballotpedia does not favor any particular political party. The site provides voting information and sample ballots for every election. You can enter your address and learn about what will appear on the ballot in your area and the candidates who are running. USAFacts provides information about congressional candidates broken down by issue, including immigration, health care, education, and the environment, among many others, alongside statistics related to that issue.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Midterm elections might see bigger voter turnout."

Enthusiasm was slightly higher among Democrats than among Republicans. Sixty-seven percent of Democrats expressed enthusiasm, compared to 59 percent of Republicans.

Which of the following options BEST explains why Democrats are more enthusiastic than Republicans about the midterm elections?

- (A) Polls indicate that Democrats have a good chance of winning the open seats in both the House of Representative and the Senate during this year's midterm elections.
- (B) Research suggests that midterm voters tend to express their dissatisfaction with the current president's party; additionally, all three branches of government are currently controlled by Republicans.
- (C) Both Democrat and Republican voters have petitioned for a number of issues; however, more of the issues that Democrats tend to care most about will appear on this year's midterm ballots.
- (D) Democrat voters have access to many more online educational resources pertaining to voting information and ballots than Republicans do, including sites like Ballotpedia and USAFacts.

2 According to the article, voters have the opportunity to directly influence certain laws.

Which selection from the article BEST supports the idea outlined above?

- (A) Voting on ballot measures is a unique way for Americans to participate in democracy. That's because unlike most laws, which are decided by elected representatives, ballot measures are decided by the voters themselves.
- (B) Many issues are on the minds of voters in the 2018 midterms. According to a Reuters poll conducted between June 5 and October 9, the top three issues among registered voters are the economy, health care and immigration.
- (C) A Pew survey conducted in September found that voter enthusiasm is at its highest level during any midterm in more than two decades. Among the survey of 1,439 registered voters, 61 percent said they are more enthusiastic about voting than in past congressional elections.
- (D) According to the research group Haven Insights, just 37 percent of American adults can name their representative in Congress. Knowing who represents you in the government gives you a way to be involved, even if you're too young to vote.

3 Examine Image 3.

Which statement BEST explains the advantage of including this image in the article?

- (A) It indicates the percentages of Republicans and Democrats that are registered and educated in preparation for voting during the midterms this year.
- (B) It emphasizes the close electoral race between Republicans and Democrats during the midterms this year, and highlights the results of the 2018 midterm election.
- (C) It illustrates how many seats held by Republicans and Democrats are up for election this year and helps the reader to visualize how the majority could sway.
- (D) It portrays how Republican and Democrat lawmakers engage in gerrymandering in order to create districts that would likely vote for their political party.

- 4 Image 2 includes a bar that represents the seats occupied by Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives.

What is a disadvantage to presenting that information in this way?

- (A) The use of a single bar downplays the number of representatives and the potential for significant changes as a result of the midterm elections.
- (B) The use of a color-coded bar makes it difficult for the reader to understand the importance of the seven currently vacant seats.
- (C) The use of a single bar makes it confusing for the reader to realize that the House of Representatives holds elections every two years.
- (D) The use of a color-coded bar emphasizes the conflicts between Republicans and Democrats without recognizing their achievements.

Answer Key

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Midterm elections might see bigger voter turnout."

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