

Midterm Mania
Understanding the 2026
U.S. Midterms

JJ Kramer

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For Marije.

**And for Olle & Jonas,
in the hope that, while growing
up, they may see many more
governments *of the people, by
the people, for the people.***

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1

What? Elections? Again?

A question I get a lot: *Why are there so many elections in America?*

Well, when Americans head to the polls, they don't just pick a president or a senator. They vote for governors, sheriffs, judges, school board members and state legislators. No other democracy on Earth asks its citizens to weigh in on so many different offices, so often.

The reason lies deep in the country's political DNA. The United States was built on a fierce distrust of centralized power. Instead of a strong national government making decisions from the top down, authority was divided—between states, between cities and counties, and even within local communities. The result is a patchwork of governments, each with its own officials who must be chosen by the people.

This decentralized system means elections happen constantly and everywhere. Federal elections—for Congress and the presidency—get the spotlight. But beneath that, there are 50 different states, more than 3,000 counties, and tens of thousands of cities, school districts, and special-purpose governments, all running their own elections. Most of these races fly under the national radar, but they shape daily life far more directly than anything happening in Washington.

In midterm years like 2026, the sheer volume is staggering. All 435 U.S. House seats are up for grabs. About a third of the U.S. Senate will be contested. And most states will hold elections for governors, attorneys general, and secretaries of state. Thousands of state legislative seats are on the line. Layer on judicial elections, mayoral races, ballot initiatives, and local

referendums, and it's not unusual for a voter to face a ballot that's dozens of pages long.

Why so many? Because Americans have long believed that power should be accountable—and the best way to hold officials accountable is at the ballot box. Whether it's a state supreme court justice ruling on abortion rights or a local commissioner deciding how to fix potholes, the system insists that voters should have a say.

Of course, this dizzying number of races brings challenges: voter fatigue, low turnout for local races, and ballots so crowded that they sometimes overwhelm even the most civically engaged citizens. But it's also a defining feature of American democracy—messy, sprawling, and deeply rooted in the idea that government is only as strong as the people willing to participate.

The 2026 midterms are no exception. If anything, they promise to be even bigger, noisier, and perhaps more consequential than usual.

2

The road to 2026: What do I need to know?

2.1 Why Midterms?

Midterms are hardwired into the U.S. political system. The U.S. Constitution mandates that every seat in the House of Representatives is up for election every two years, while roughly one-third of the Senate seats are contested on the same schedule. This setup isn't just a formality—it's a built-in feedback loop. It gives voters a regular chance to reshuffle the deck in Washington, and often in their statehouses and city halls too—halfway through a president's term.

They're called "midterms" because they land in the middle of a president's four-year term—two years after the last presidential race, two years before the next. Always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years, they give voters a mid-course chance to weigh in.

The word "midterm" didn't really catch on until the early 1900s—but the elections themselves go all the way back to the 1790s, with the very first Congress. And don't let the name fool you: these are full-fledged general elections. Voters don't just pick members of Congress—they often choose governors, mayors, judges, and plenty of other officials who shape daily life at every level of government.

2.2 What's at stake in 2026?

Let's start at the top: Congress. In 2026, 33 of the 100 Senate seats are up for grabs—and the winners get comfy six-year terms starting in 2027. Over in the House, it's a full reset: all 435 seats are on the ballot, every last one. Right now, the House is hanging by a

thread—220 Republicans, 215 Democrats—leaving parties no room for error. Midterms tend to smack the president’s party around a bit, so expect a feisty fight. Whoever wins Congress this round gets a big say in what laws pass, what doesn’t, and how the chessboard looks heading into 2028.

Governors get the headlines, but they’re not the only ones up for a performance review in 2026. Voters will also pick lieutenant governors, attorneys general, secretaries of state, and even state treasurers—basically, the folks who keep the state’s executive engine humming (and the checkbook balanced). These roles may sound less flashy, but they carry real power, especially over how elections are run. In tight states, flipping one of these offices can tip the scales for years. So yeah, both parties are circling these races like hawks with clipboards.

Want to see where the real action is? Look at your state capital. State legislatures may not trend on social media, but they write the rules that shape everyday life—like who gets to vote, how schools are funded, and whether your electricity bill spikes or stays sane. They also draw the maps that decide who runs where. In 2026, they’ll be center stage for fights over education, voting rights, and criminal justice. Add ballot measures to the mix—those yes/no questions on your ballot—and voters become lawmakers for a day. These aren’t side dishes. They’re the main course in how power gets cooked and served.

Judges may wear robes, not campaign buttons—but don’t be fooled, they’re on the ballot too. In 2026,