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A MIDTERM ELECTION LIKE NO OTHER

November's Congressional Elections Will Help Shape the Next Chapter of the American Experiment

Over the coming months, I will organize four events hosted by TEPAV on the November 2026 U.S. congressional elections. This article is the first step in that journey.

American midterm elections are often viewed through the urgency of the moment and tend to serve as a referendum on the sitting president and the direction of the country. That can make the president's party more vulnerable as voters judge whether campaign promises have been kept and what course they want for the remaining two years of the presidential term. But unlike in a parliamentary system, congressional elections are not simply a vote of confidence in the government. Candidates, their personalities, local standing, campaign strategies, fundraising and the particular concerns of their constituencies all play a decisive role.

But this election requires a longer view.

Before asking whether Republicans will retain their majority in Congress, or whether Democrats will take control of the House, the Senate, or both, we should begin with more fundamental questions:

- What were these institutions created to do?
- What kind of political system were they intended to preserve?
- What happens when the balance between them shifts?
- And, most importantly, what is Congress expected to do when presidential power expands?

The purpose of this series of articles—and of the four events that will follow—is not simply to follow another American election campaign. It is to use this election as an opportunity to

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

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think together about the condition of the American experiment: about liberty and power, representation and accountability, institutions and political norms, and ultimately about the state of American democracy itself.

A Country Does Not Remain as It Was at Birth

No individual remains exactly as he or she was at birth. Neither does a nation.

Countries grow. They accumulate experience, wealth, power, memories, achievements and grievances. No founding generation can anticipate every challenge a country will face, nor does it need to. Its task is to define the principles at the core of the nation—what it should stand for, and what it should not. Around those principles, institutions and traditions are built. As circumstances change, countries reform and adapt. They learn from their failures—or fail to learn from them. Sometimes they progress. Sometimes they regress.

Institutions can mature, but they can also decay. From one generation to the next, political norms can grow stronger through consistent observance or weaker through repeated violation. Practices once regarded as unacceptable can gradually become controversial, then tolerable, then familiar, and eventually normal.

America is no exception.

The United States that goes to the polls in November is obviously not the country that declared its independence 250 years ago. Nor should anyone expect it to be.

The America of 1776 tolerated slavery. Women possessed almost no political rights. Native Americans were excluded from the political community being created around them, while also being displaced, dispossessed, and killed as the country expanded. Those who sought freedom and self-government for themselves did not extend those same principles equally to everyone who fell outside their vision of the union. This contradiction marked the beginning of a long struggle over the meaning of American citizenship—a struggle fought not only on battlefields, but also through generations of political and social change.

America's history is therefore not the story of a perfect political system somehow corrupted by later generations. It is the story of an ongoing experiment.

To connect the founding vision with today's America, what deserves our attention is the place of the principles at the center of this ongoing experiment: government by consent, liberty under law, representative government, the separation of powers and the restraint of concentrated political authority.

To understand why those principles mattered so deeply to America's founders, it helps to remember how their argument began.

From Rebellion Against Power to the Problem of Governing

The conflict that separated thirteen British colonies from the British Empire² did not begin as a demand for independence, nor was it simply a revolt against taxation. The deeper argument concerned authority: who possessed the right to govern, by whose consent, and within what limits.

The Stamp Act, Townshend duties, and later confrontations with London gradually transformed disputes over taxation into questions about representation and political legitimacy. General

² Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, dirs., *The American Revolution*, episode 1, "In Order to Be Free (May 1754–May 1775)," written by Geoffrey C. Ward, PBS, 2025.

Thomas Gage, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America, recognized that the colonists' objection was not principally their inability to pay, but their belief that Parliament was exercising authority over them contrary to their rights. By the time fighting began at Lexington and Concord, one colonist's recollection reduced the argument to a remarkably simple proposition: "We always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to."³

But removing British rule solved only one part of the problem. The much harder question was what to put in its place.

The first American answer—the Articles of Confederation—left the central government too weak to perform many of the tasks expected of a functioning national government. By 1787, the challenge confronting the Constitutional Convention was almost paradoxical: How could the country construct a government powerful enough to govern effectively without recreating the concentration of authority against which Americans had rebelled?

That tension is essential to understanding the American system.

The founders did not distrust government because they believed government unnecessary. Nor did they believe that democratic elections alone were enough to prevent the abuse of power. Their challenge was to reconcile liberty with authority.

Robert Levy of the Cato Institute, writing about the founding documents, summarizes the dilemma well: the new government had to be strong enough to secure rights against domestic and foreign threats, but not so strong that it became oppressive itself. The answer was to grant power and then divide, enumerate, check, and balance it.⁴

The objective was therefore not merely democracy, but certainly an attempt to create a form of democratic government.

What Were They Trying to Protect?

At the center of the founding philosophy was the idea that rights did not originate with government. Government existed to secure them.

The Declaration of Independence⁵ spoke of rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and of governments deriving their legitimate powers from the "consent of the governed." The constitutional system that followed translated that philosophy into institutions.

The fundamental concern was concentrated power.

The experience of British rule had left the founding generation deeply suspicious of executive authority. At the same time, the founders were hardly uncritical admirers of unrestricted popular rule. They worried about faction, temporary passions, and the possibility that majorities themselves could become oppressive. Two of the most influential figures of the founding generation expressed those concerns directly. James Madison warned in *Federalist No. 10*⁶ about the instability and injustice that had destroyed earlier popular governments, while

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert A. Levy, "The Declaration, the Constitution, and America's 250th," Cato Institute, December 24, 2025. <https://www.cato.org/blog/declaration-constitution-americas-250th>

⁵ Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, July 4, 1776, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

⁶ James Madison, "Federalist No. 10" (1787), National Constitution Center, Historic Document Library, accessed August 27, 2026. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/james-madison-federalist-10-1788>

George Washington later warned that the domination of one political faction over another could itself become a form of despotism.⁷

The solution was therefore deliberately complicated.

Power would be divided vertically between the federal government and the states, and horizontally among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The Constitution was not designed to make political action effortless. Friction was part of the architecture.

The House of Representatives would be tied closely to the population and returned to the voters every two years. The Senate would represent states equally with senators serving six-year, staggered terms. The senators were chosen by state legislatures rather than directly by the voters, reinforcing the states' role in the national government. The president would possess an independent electoral mandate rather than depend upon maintaining the confidence of Congress. Courts would stand outside the electoral cycle while exercising their own constitutional function.⁸

Even the structure of Congress reflected compromise. The Connecticut Compromise reconciled populous and smaller states by creating a House based on population and a Senate in which every state would have equal representation. Federalism joined the states within a national constitutional structure while preserving substantial authority for the states themselves.⁹

The result was not a parliamentary system in which executive and legislative authority are largely combined. It was a presidential system in which institutions have different constituencies, different electoral clocks, and different sources of legitimacy.

For its time, this was an extraordinary experiment. The very notion of an elected national chief executive was unheard of, and the Constitutional Convention struggled over how to choose such a president. Some delegates favored selection by Congress, others a role for state legislatures, and others direct popular election. The eventual Electoral College was another compromise intended to keep presidential selection independent of Congress while preserving a role for the states.¹⁰

Some important features of that original design have since changed. Senators, once chosen by state legislatures, are now directly elected. Just as the presidential electors were originally expected to exercise independent judgment, they generally vote for the candidate chosen by voters in their state today. Political parties, mass media, national campaigns, and the growth of presidential power have also changed the political system in ways the founders could not have anticipated.

But one principle remains central.

No election was meant to give one person or one-party control over the entire system.

⁷ George Washington, "Farewell Address" (1796), National Constitution Center, Historic Document Library, accessed August 27, 2026. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/george-washington-farewell-address-1796>

⁸ Constitution of the United States: A Transcription," National Archives, September 17, 1787. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcrip>

⁹ Dan Greenberg, "The Electoral College Protects Minority Views and Discourages Fraud," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 26, 2025. <https://www.twincities.com/2025/01/26/dan-greenberg-the-electoral-college-protects-minority-views-and-discourages-fraud/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Why Congress Matters

That is what makes congressional elections fundamentally different from parliamentary elections.

When a parliamentary government loses the confidence of the legislature, the government itself may fall. In the American system, Congress and the president possess separate democratic mandates and fixed constitutional terms.

This can produce gridlock, frustration, and inefficiency. But efficiency was never the only objective. The separation was also designed to prevent too much power from falling into the same hands.

Congress makes laws. It controls appropriations. It conducts oversight and investigations. The Senate confirms key appointments. Congress can support a president's program, modify it, block it, or investigate how executive authority is exercised.

The House in particular was designed to return frequently to the electorate. Every two years, voters elect all 435 members of the House and about one-third of the 100 senators. The midterm therefore gives Americans something that does not quite exist in the same form in a parliamentary system: an opportunity to alter the balance of national political power without replacing the president.

This is why asking "Who will control Congress?" is important. Asking "What is Congress for?" is even more important.

A legislature that regards itself merely as an extension of a president when its own party occupies the White House weakens the very separation the constitutional structure was designed to preserve. Equally, a Congress that worries about executive power only when the other party holds the presidency is protecting partisan interests, not the power of Congress itself.

The principle has to work in both directions.

The Constitution in Practice

The rules of a political system are made to serve the common good, but rules alone are never enough. Every political experiment, including the American one, also depends on sound judgment and common sense. A constitution does not operate itself.

Institutions exist on paper, but human beings give them meaning. Congress can meet, courts can rule, and elections can take place even as the political culture around them changes.

Constitutional democracy therefore rests not only on formal rules, but also on political habits: acceptance of legitimate political opposition, respect for institutional boundaries, compliance with lawful judgments, restraint in exercising public authority, and willingness to accept electoral defeat.

It also depends on legislators being prepared to exercise independent judgment even when doing so is politically inconvenient.

These habits become norms and gain strength through continuous observance, and they weaken through numerous violations. What one administration does becomes available to the next. What one Congress tolerates becomes easier for another to tolerate. Over time, behavior once seen as unacceptable can be excused as partisan politics, then become familiar and eventually normal.

But norms, too, have limits. They depend on people in power choosing to respect them, even when breaking them may offer a political advantage. A democracy should not depend entirely on the good faith of those in power—or on the good fortune of having leaders willing to restrain themselves. When important safeguards rely too heavily on voluntary compliance, some may need to be written into law and supported by stronger institutional safeguards.

Democratic erosion, when it occurs, does not necessarily require the abolition of elections or the disappearance of institutions. The institutions may remain while the expectations and habits that sustain them gradually change.

That brings us to November 2026.

Why This Midterm Is Different

Every midterm election matters. This one carries several additional layers.

The first is Donald Trump's second presidency and the exceptional character it has assumed—in his demeanor, his decisions, and his approach to presidential power.

His supporters see a president elected to confront an establishment they believe is detached from the people, and they support his determination to carry out his 2024 mandate. His critics, including many Democrats and some Republicans, see a president concentrating power, pushing past legal and political limits, and weakening constitutional government at home and the rules-based international order abroad.

The November election will therefore inevitably become a judgment on Trump and his administration. But because this is the American system rather than a parliamentary one, voters will not be deciding whether Trump remains president. They will decide how much congressional support—or congressional resistance—his presidency will encounter during its final two years.

That makes control of Congress a constitutional question as well as a partisan one.

The political environment is already difficult for Republicans. Recent national polls of the generic congressional ballot have put Democrats ahead, although by different margins. In late August, Economist/YouGov showed Democrats leading 46 to 40 percent; Reuters/Ipsos, 41 to 35 percent; Emerson, 51 to 43 percent; Morning Consult, 46 to 42 percent; and Echelon Insights, 50 to 45 percent. As of August 28, the RealClearPolitics polling average put Democrats at 48.2 percent and Republicans at 41.8 percent, a Democratic lead of 6.4 points. The margins vary, which is reason enough to be cautious, but the overall direction is clear.¹¹

The battle has already begun over who gets to vote with whom

Redistricting normally follows the decennial census. Yet the 2026 election is being shaped by an unusually aggressive mid-decade struggle over congressional maps.

In 2025, Texas undertook a new congressional redistricting effort intended to improve Republican prospects. California responded with its own plan explicitly designed as a partisan counterweight. California's Proposition 50 replaced the previously drawn congressional map with one expected to make five Republican-held seats more favorable to Democrats. The political arguments on both sides were strikingly similar: each accused the other of a power grab designed to manipulate control of Congress before voters reached the ballot box.

¹¹ 2026 Generic Congressional Vote," RealClearPolling, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/state-of-the-union/generic-congressional-vote>

This matters beyond Texas and California.

It places a basic feature of representation itself—the boundaries determining which citizens vote together for a representative—inside the partisan contest over control of Congress.

The courts are part of that struggle as well. In *Louisiana v. Callais*, decided in April 2026, the Supreme Court substantially narrowed the circumstances under which Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act can justify the creation of an additional majority-minority district. The Court held that Louisiana was not required to create the second such district at issue and that the race-conscious map was unconstitutional.¹²

Whatever one's political preference, the broader significance is difficult to miss: the rules governing representation are changing during an election cycle in which control of the House may depend on a small number of seats.

The rules of campaign power have changed too

Another important change came on June 30, 2026.

In *National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission*¹³, the Supreme Court struck down federal limits on coordinated expenditures by political parties in support of their candidates, overruling a 2001 decision that had upheld those limits. The majority concluded that the restrictions violated the First Amendment and that existing contribution limits, disclosure requirements, and rules against earmarking were sufficient to guard against circumvention. The dissent argued that removing the limits would make it easier for large donors to channel money to candidates through political parties.

The practical effect is that national party organizations can coordinate more closely and spend more freely with their candidates.

That change comes at a moment when the political and legal landscape is moving unusually quickly. The American system was designed to create friction—to slow the exercise of power, require participation by different institutions and make major change difficult to accomplish without resistance or compromise. When Congress does not fully exercise its independent authority, some of that friction disappears.

The new campaign-finance environment also creates a tension within congressional elections. House and Senate candidates receive their mandates from individual districts and states. Yet congressional campaigns have become increasingly nationalized, and closer financial coordination may strengthen the relationship between candidates and their national parties.

The November contests will therefore be local and national at the same time. Voters will elect individuals, but those individuals will enter a Congress increasingly shaped by national party competition.

The November Test

This is what makes November 3 unique in the sequence of American midterms.

Americans will vote on the economy, affordability, immigration—including not only immigration policy itself, but also the way U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been directed to exercise its authority in communities and public spaces, creating deep fear and

¹² *Louisiana v. Callais*, 146 S. Ct. 1131 (U.S. 2026), decided April 29, 2026.

¹³ *National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission*, 146 S. Ct. 2404 (2026), decided June 30, 2026.

distress—foreign policy, and the many other issues affecting their daily lives. They will judge candidates and parties. They will decide whether the administration deserves support or restraint.

But underneath those immediate choices lies an older question: how should political power be distributed and restrained in a constitutional republic?

The system built to answer that question has survived civil war, economic depression, world wars, enormous social transformation and the rise of a presidency far more powerful than anything the founding generation could have imagined. It has also changed profoundly along the way.

That is not evidence that the experiment failed. Countries do not remain as they were at birth.

The more important question is whether the principles around which the experiment was built still command enough respect to shape political behavior: consent, representation, rule of law, institutional independence and restraints on concentrated power.

The 2026 congressional elections offer an unusually revealing test.

They will take place during a deeply polarizing presidency. They will be fought on congressional maps that have themselves become instruments of partisan competition. They will unfold under newly altered rules governing political-party spending. And they will determine whether the president's party continues to control Congress or whether voters place at least one chamber in the hands of the opposition.

Americans will not simply be choosing lawmakers. They will be deciding how power is distributed for the final two years of Donald Trump's presidency.

That is exactly the kind of decision the American constitutional system was designed to place before them.

There will be plenty of time between now and November to ask who is ahead, which districts will decide the House, which Senate contests matter most and whether the polls are moving.

First, however, it is worth remembering what is at stake.

America's experiment did not begin with the proposition that those who win elections should be free to exercise power as they please.

It began with a search for something much harder: a government strong enough to govern, democratic enough to represent its people, and restrained enough to preserve their liberty. That search has never really ended. Each generation is asked, in its own circumstances, whether it will tolerate the concentration and misuse of power, whether it will preserve the institutional and legal restraints designed to contain it, and whether it will move the country closer to the principles it claims to uphold.

The choice Americans make in November will not remain within America's borders. The United States exercises enormous political, economic and military influence in the world, and the way it treats the rule of law, constitutional restraint and democratic accountability inevitably sends a message beyond its own shores.

It will also help shape the future of the rules-based international order. That order has never been perfect, and American presidents before Donald Trump have also tested its limits, weakened established restraints and acted outside the principles the United States itself

helped promote. What distinguishes the present moment is the unusually open and often unapologetic manner in which some of those rules and institutions have been challenged.

Other governments—and other societies—are watching. If confidence in American leadership continues to weaken, smaller and middle powers may have greater reason to build new alliances, agreements and institutions of their own. The lesson may be similar to the one facing American democracy itself: norms and diplomatic understandings matter, but when too much depends on voluntary restraint, stronger rules, clearer obligations and meaningful consequences may become necessary.

The significance of the November election therefore goes far beyond a partisan contest between Republicans and Democrats. It will help determine which understanding of America—with all of its power, influence and ability to affect lives far beyond its borders—will prevail. Will voters judge political power mainly by how effectively it advances partisan goals, or will they also hold those who exercise it accountable to constitutional limits, institutional independence and the rule of law?

The American experiment has never been about achieving perfection. From the beginning, there was a profound distance between its proclaimed ideals and the reality experienced by many of its people. Its more meaningful measure has always been whether the country retains the capacity to recognize those contradictions and move closer to the principles at its core: liberty under law, government by consent, equality before the law, representative government and the restraint of concentrated power.

November 3 will therefore test more than the strength of two political parties. It will test the direction in which Americans want that continuing journey to move—and, because of America's place in the world, the example they want their democracy to set.