



U.S. Democracy: Midterm Elections



Offices in the U.S. Capitol, home to the legislative branch of federal government, are reshuffled every two years as all members of the House of Representatives and approximately one-third of senators are elected. © Wikimedia Commons

Midterm elections, so named because they occur in even-numbered years at the halfway point of a presidential term, determine which political party will control the two chambers of the U.S. Congress for upcoming two years.

This timing encourages pollsters and political pundits to view the outcomes as referendums on the policies of the current president, but that narrow interpretation can distract from the true importance of midterm elections.

As with the general elections, in which the race for the U.S. presidency is on the ballot, U.S. Election Day is the Tuesday following

the first Monday in November. Americans in most states also have the option to vote in advance, either in person, by mail or via the Internet.

In electing a new Congress every two years, American voters decide who will speak for them in crafting legislation, determining government spending and overseeing the activities of the executive branch.

In midterm elections, every one of the 435 House seats is filled by the will of the people, as expressed through the ballot box. Simultaneously, approximately one-third of the Senate also is elected, although that number can vary because senators sometimes

retire or die in the middle of their elected terms.

It is not unusual for U.S. elections to result in create a “divided” government in Washington, with one political party controlling the White House and the other controlling one or both chambers of Congress. That situation can make it more difficult to pass legislation but, conversely, can force greater compromise to break political logjams.

Americans seem very comfortable with creating divided governments, perhaps distrustful of empowering the federal government too broadly. Since 1968, only during the Jimmy Carter administration and the first two years of the Bill

Clinton administration has the same party controlled the executive and legislative branches.

As in every U.S. election, many factors affect voters' decisions. The state of the economy is usually a major concern as Americans are said to "vote their pocketbooks." A healthy domestic economy, or at least an economy that seems to be improving, tends to favor incumbents. In other words, if people feel financially secure they are more likely to re-elect the officials currently serving.

Voter turnout in midterm elections tends to be lower than in a general election.

"Independents" — voters not affiliated with either the Democratic or the Republican Party — are a growing component of the electorate, but party loyalty does not motivate these voters, and they are less likely to be influenced by party-based "get out the vote" efforts.

Also, the rise of the tea party movement, which advocates limited government power and reduced government spending, can create a schism within the Republican Party in some districts. Data from recent elections suggest that hard-fought primary contests disaffect voters who supported the losing candidates, prompting them to stay home rather than vote.

Midterm elections also can suffer from the so-called "enthusiasm gap." The high voter interest in a presidential campaign rarely carries over to the midterm election.

STATE AND LOCAL

Congressional races are a tiny fraction of the total number of elected posts U.S. voters will fill in a midterm election.

At the state level, voters will choose 36 governors and hundreds of state legislators. Voters also will select local officials like county executives, mayors, and city and town council members. Many of these jurisdictions also will choose attorneys general, treasurers, comptrollers and even judges.

The winners of these local races, although they lack the prestige and national import of congressional service, likely will have stronger effects on the day-to-day lives of their constituents as they serve out their terms, many working for small salaries or even without pay.

From emergency services like police and firefighters to the more mundane matters of trash collection and road maintenance, local governments are front lines of U.S. government and perhaps the truest illustrations of American democracy in action.



Nebraska, whose Art Deco capitol building in Lincoln was completed in 1934, is one of 36 states that elects its governor in the midterm elections. © Library of Congress