



What to Expect from the U.S. Midterm Elections

By GMF Experts

This election could bring an even cockier Trump or put Europe in the partisan crossfire. –*Derek Chollet*

A wave of veteran candidates are running and a number of leadership positions will change. –*Reta Jo Lewis*

There are more women candidates than ever in this election. The “pink wave” is already affecting the GOP. –*Corinna Horst*

Washington has failed to fully address foreign interference in elections. –*David Salvo*

The new Congress, like the old, will value alliances more than the administration. –*Ian Lesser*

Trump’s control over the GOP and the division among Democrats leaves a United States that will remain divided and distracted. –*Jamie Fly*

Days after the election, the battle for 2020 will begin. –*Jonathan Katz*

An Inflection Point for America’s Democratic Future

–*Derek Chollet, Executive Vice President*

For the future of American politics, the 2018 congressional elections will likely be the most consequential in over two decades, at least since the 1994 Republican takeover led by Newt Gingrich. Yet regardless of the outcome, do not expect a major improvement in relations between the United States and Europe. In fact, things will likely get worse.

Consider the two possible scenarios. First, the Republicans hold back the Blue Wave. This may seem improbable, but recent polls suggest they will likely maintain control of the Senate, and could hold onto control of the House. Current estimates show Republicans with about the same odds of keeping the House majority as Donald Trump had winning the presidency in 2016.

If the GOP prevails, it will be seen as a reaffirmation of everything Trump has stood for and a vindication of the manner in which he has done so. Trump will have once again defied expectations and made



history — doing something presidents from Harry Truman to Barack Obama failed to do — and he will be sure to remind us all every day.

This would mean, if one can imagine it possible, an even bolder and cockier Trump who believes he is politically bulletproof. He will be a leader in total control of his party and every branch of government, with a fresh mandate and complete confidence to implement his policy instincts. Congress would be an accelerant not a brake, and we should expect brash action on everything from trade to the Mueller probe on Russia. Another likely consequence would be a transatlantic relationship careening off the cliff.

What if the Democrats win the House? With one-half of one branch of the U.S. government outside Trump's control, there would be a meaningful check on his policies. Democrats would pursue a policy agenda that would be more congenial to Europe on issues like trade, climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, NATO's future, and arms control. And if Trump is politically wounded, there is greater chance he will be more vulnerable to pushback from the few Republican moderates left on Capitol Hill, or even a primary challenge in the 2020 election.

Yet Democratic control in the House will also give the president more of an enemy to target, and Europe will likely get caught up in the partisan cross-fire. For example, consider this scenario: when European leaders visit Washington, in addition to their meetings with administration officials they will also pay a customary trip to Capitol Hill. There they will meet with the Democratic Speaker of the House and key Committee chairs. Democratic leaders will travel abroad to send a different message about America in the world (as many Republican Hill leaders have been doing for the past two years).

How will Trump react to all this? You can already write his early morning tweet, fueled by conspiracy and grievance: "You want to talk about COLLUSION and TREASON? The treasonous DEMOCRATS are colluding with Europeans to undermine America!" So the danger is that the transatlantic relationship

will become yet another victim of partisan tribalism — which will only get more intense as the 2020 election approaches.

Moreover, regardless how the midterms end up, Washington is buzzing with rumors that more of those Administration officials who allies have looked to for continuity and reassurance — such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, or Chief of Staff John Kelly — will follow UN Ambassador Nikki Haley (and H.R. McMaster, and Gary Cohn, and Rex Tillerson...) out the door.

Seen this way, the midterms will be an inflection point for America's democratic future. It is hard to envision an outcome that will bring more stability in the short term. We will either see an emboldened president with fewer checks on his power, or an embattled president struggling with a Democratic-controlled Congress over constitutional authority.

Therefore, it is best to assume that after November Washington will remain so distracted and divided that there will be little bandwidth for ambition in the world — beyond disruption.

Key Numbers and Races

—*Reta Jo Lewis, Esq., Senior Fellow and Director of Congressional Affairs*

As we approach the final weeks until the 2018 midterm elections, the stakes are high for both the Republican and Democratic parties as they look toward the 116th Congress. Historically speaking, Congressional midterm elections in the United States are often defined by low voter turnouts and a loss of seats for the sitting president's party. A study by Brookings shows that the last 21 midterm elections have seen the president's party average a loss of 30 seats in the House of Representatives and 4 seats in the U.S. Senate, especially when the president has an approval rating below 50 percent. As such, the midterm elections are seen by some as a referendum on the president's party and a moment for significant gains by the minority party. President Trump's approval ratings since

taking office have remained near 40-45 percent, indicating that the Republicans majorities are in real danger. Furthermore, a September 2018 Pew poll of registered Democrats found that 67 percent of respondents felt renewed enthusiasm about voting for their party as opposed to 36 percent in 2008. Even after the fight over Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation gave the Republicans a bump in support, many analysts agree this did not significantly reduced support for Democrats.

“ **Regardless of results, leadership roles and priorities in the Senate will shift after the election.**”

This year's election features 35 Senate seats, currently with 26 held by a Democrat and 9 by a Republican. Of those 35 seats, control of the Senate will hinge on the outcome of 9 toss-up races in which the candidates are virtually tied. President Trump carried five of these states in the 2016 election, so with the races still too close to call the environment seems more favorable for Republicans. In fact, recent polling data from FiveThirtyEight shows Democrats with only a 20 percent chance of taking control of the Senate.

Female voters and candidates are a big story in this election. Record numbers of female candidates are running (see section on Republican Women). People are also watching for female and young voter turnout. Youth voter advocates hope that the power of nationwide grassroots movements, such as those aimed at reducing gun violence, could mobilize youth voters, whose midterm election turnout is historically around 20 percent. But this time around a recent PEW poll shows 62 percent of millennials, aged 22 to 38, are “looking forward” to voting.

Another interesting feature of the midterms is the wave of military veterans and former national security officials running for Congress, many of them running as Democrats. If elected in significant numbers, this group could become very influential in helping to forge U.S. defense, diplomacy, and development policy for years to come. These new

leaders could strongly influence transatlantic affairs, particularly by ensuring security cooperation through the Congress, similar to what we have seen with the European Deterrence Initiative (See Some Good News for NATO section).

Regardless of results, leadership roles and priorities in the Senate will shift after the election. The current Senate Armed Services Chairman Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) replaced the late Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) after he stepped down to receive treatment for brain cancer. As Chairman, Sen. McCain was a frequent critic of the Trump administration and Defense Secretary James Mattis; Inhofe on the other hand is a strong supporter of President Trump and his foreign policy agenda. Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) is retiring which leaves openings for new voices to shape matters of foreign policy and national security. All eyes are on Sens. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Richard Burr (R-NC), and James Risch (R-Idaho) to fill the foreign policy leadership vacuum left by Sens. McCain and Corker.

Democrats are, according to polls, better positioned to take the majority in the House of Representatives. A Democratic House majority would likely focus on policy issues such as protective immigration measures, a review of the defense budget, and election and cybersecurity. Immigration would be a top priority; expected legislation could focus actions to protect recipients of the immigration policy Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and examine the viability of a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border. It is probable that Democrats would introduce measures to shore up U.S. election infrastructure against foreign interference (see Foreign Threats to Elections section).

If the Democrats gain control of the House, the House Armed Services Committee chairmanship could go to Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA), a top Democrat on the committee since 2011. The House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA) is retiring and the Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) has a difficult re-election

race. Thus, two crucial foreign policy chairmanships could be available to Democrats if they capture the majority.

The election of the 116th Congress is also expected to bring about a rebalancing of House leadership. Despite some challenges coming from her own party, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has made it clear that she will run for Speaker of the House if Democrats take control. On the Republican side, the imminent departure of Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) has left leadership of the House Republicans open for competition. Shifts in leadership will naturally affect the priorities of the parties and Congress as a whole. Though our colleagues argue that major foreign policy shifts should not be expected (see Do Not Look for Foreign Policy Change section), our allies can expect a number of new faces in the Congress and in key foreign policy leadership positions.

Do Not Look for Foreign Policy Change

–Jamie Fly, Senior Fellow and Director of the Future of Geopolitics and Asia Programs

If history is any indication, Democrats will do well in the November midterm elections. According to Charlie Cook of The Cook Political Report, “the president’s party almost always loses House seats, which has happened in 35 out of the 38 midterm elections (92 percent) since the end of the Civil War.”

Democrats are banking on anti-Trump fervor to create a blue wave that they hope will sweep them into power in the House of Representatives (and maybe Senate) and in a position to take back the White House in 2020. Yet the political story of recent weeks has been the resurgence of Republican energy in many races. President Trump is barnstorming the country, attempting to energize his base to vote in the midterms, which is often one of the greatest challenges for U.S. congressional campaigns because turnout in non-presidential years often hovers around 40 percent.

The president has been helped by his opposition. Trump has consolidated his support among Republicans with the successful Senate confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Many Republicans who had been openly skeptical of Trump admired his steadfast support for his nominee, who came under fire for alleged sexual misconduct as a young man. Many Republicans viewed the Democrats’ antics as they attempted to block Kavanaugh as evidence of a mob mentality taking hold of the Democratic Party. Images of angry progressives clawing at the doors of the Supreme Court or a Republican Senator and his wife chased out of a DC restaurant by screaming protesters have played on an endless loop across conservative media.

In part because of this, the Republican Party is more the party of Donald Trump today than at any point since his acceptance of the party’s nomination in July 2016. Despite his polarizing effect on the country, the president’s approval among Republicans is near 90 percent. Trump supporters see a booming economy, the lowest unemployment rate in nearly 50 years, a stock market that has achieved more than 100 record highs since Trump’s inauguration, a successful effort underway to remake the federal courts with conservative judges, tax reform legislation passed, and popular foreign policy moves supporting Israel.

The Democratic opposition is focused on energizing the urban elites. The Democrats will face significant challenges if they do win back the House. Angry opposition to Donald Trump is not a governing strategy. Democrats remain divided about many key policy issues as well as tactics. While Nancy Pelosi appears to want to remain speaker, a new generation of House Democrats will be eager to turn a new page and present a different face to the country. Some activists want a Democratic majority to immediately attempt to impeach the president. Others want to legislate and provide a policy contrast to Republicans. In the Senate, a whole host of prospective 2020 Democratic presidential candidates are already beginning to jostle for attention and airtime, a dynamic that factored heavily into the Kavanaugh battle (see section on U.S. Presidential Candidates).

The net result is a United States that will remain divided and distracted for the last two years of Donald Trump's first term in office. While many Republicans in Congress still have significant foreign policy disagreements with the president, the politics of Democratic opposition will make it more difficult politically for them to serve as a check on Trump administration actions. While Democratic opinion leaders in Washington criticize the president's treatment of allies, his handling of relations with Russia, and conduct of negotiations with North Korea or withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement, there is little evidence that many voters are prioritizing these issues. In fact, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey in June found that only 6 percent of registered voters indicated that foreign policy and terrorism was a top priority for them. In this election, like most, foreign policy will play a minor role. Americans are divided on Russian interference and the Iran agreement. Many Americans across both parties support the president's demands for greater burden-sharing by allies, fairer trade deals, and a skepticism of ongoing overseas commitments, especially in the Middle East. It will thus be difficult for Democrats to claim much of a mandate for specific foreign policy goals if they do take the House. If they do decide to advance an alternative agenda to the president's, their tactics may increase Republican support for the president even more.

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The midterms are likely to disappoint those expecting a significant change in U.S. foreign policy after November. If anything, they will mark the start of the 2020 campaign for the presidency. That race, and the fate of Donald Trump's re-election bid, will be the key determinant of U.S. foreign policy in the years to come. It remains to be seen whether the Democrats will be able to mount a foreign policy critique of the

president that resonates with voters and reverses the trend of the last ten years toward an America disengaging from its traditional leadership role.

Republican Women – Political Orphans or a Way to Revise Politics?

–Corinna Horst, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of Brussels Office

A historically high number of women are running for office in this midterm. This is especially true for the Democrat side, with 187 women candidates running for the House and 15 for the Senate. On the Republican party side, the numbers of women has increased only slightly (23 for the House and 6 for the Senate). In 2016 it was 120 Democrat and 47 Republican women for the House and 11 Democrat and 4 Republican for the Senate. Given President Trump's history of frequent sexist comments and the Republican support for Brett Kavanaugh despite sexual assault allegations against him, this is an important election for women and the role of women in the GOP right now is particularly intriguing.

Traditionally, the Republican party and its conservative ideology has hindered greater representation of women within the party. The party mainstream tends to reject appeals to minorities or minority-equality issues (“identity politics”) but instead positions itself as a champion of talent and individual choice. Republicans argue that “all issues are women's issues” because national security, the economy and immigration affect women just as much as they do men. Women have not been regarded as a separate group who have different life experiences that make them uniquely suited for office. Marsha Blackburn in Tennessee, the first Republican woman running for Senate in the upcoming mid-terms, represents this tradition: “I don't put my focus on being the first,” she said in a recent interview. “I think it's important to put the focus on why people should elect me, and on the record of accomplishment.”

But given the momentum of the #MeToo movement and the expectations of mobilized women going to the polls (likely in this election and the next) and increasing evidence that women are turning away from the GOP, the Republicans must find a way to respond.

There are some initial steps being taken.

First, the National Republican Congressional Committee selected New York Rep. Elise Stefanik to become the first woman to chair its recruitment efforts. Not only the youngest woman elected to Congress, Stefanik has put an emphasis on encouraging non-traditional candidates, including women, to seek office, arguing that the Republican party needs to better reflect the population at large.

Second, following the examples on the Democratic side, an increasing number of support initiatives are being created for Republican women running for office — from Republican Women for Progress, Maggie’s List, Winning for Women, and Women Run. As more Republican women consider running for office, these organizations assist with trainings, fundraising, campaign strategy, and endorsements.

Third, gendered language is slowing seeping into some campaigns. For example, Michelle Mortensen, a candidate for the Nevada primaries on the Republican side, had told voters to support her because she has a better chance of defeating the Democrats’ likely nominee, another woman. When Governor Phil Bryant recently appointed Cindy Hyde-Smith, currently the agriculture and commerce commissioner in Mississippi, to succeed retiring Senator Thad Cochran, he did highlight that Hyde-Smith is the first woman ever to serve as a U.S. senator from Mississippi. Rep. Martha McSally, who is running to replace retiring Sen. Jeff Flake in Arizona, skillfully mixes explicit references to gender with language traditionally associated with men such as fighter, warrior, leader — having previously been a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

If the “pink wave” of female candidates lands and Democrats gain control of the House in the midterm elections, Americans could see more minority representatives in Congress in 2019 than ever before. If, too, female voters turn away from the GOP (as some polls indicate) in even greater numbers, the Republicans will have to adapt.

More Republican women in political leadership positions would offer more diverse views from the Republican-leaning base, on gender and women’s issues as well as all other policy matters. Despite the conundrum of running with or against Trump, as well as how to tackle one’s identity as a woman politically, the surge of women stepping into the limelight means that the Republican party cannot avoid the woman candidate factor for much longer.

The U.S. Government Acknowledges a Foreign Threat to American Elections. Will It Act?

—David Salvo, Deputy Director, Alliance for Securing Democracy

Everyone from senior officials in the Trump administration to the executives of the social media platforms have warned that foreign adversaries are attempting to influence the elections. Russian-linked actors have hacked political campaigns, phished Senate offices and Washington think tanks, and established websites and social media accounts to spread disinformation about divisive political issues in the United States.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government has failed to address many of the vulnerabilities that the Russian government exploited in its operation to interfere in the 2016 presidential election. For example, the tech platforms have acknowledged that Russian-linked operatives were buying politically-motivated ads on their sites in the run-up to the midterms, just as the Internet Research Agency, the Kremlin-linked troll farm based in St. Petersburg, did throughout the 2016 campaign. Yet partisanship in Congress

has so far scuttled attempts to pass legislation that would require the purchasers of political ads online to disclose their sources of funding.

In an effort to assist the states in improving their electoral infrastructure after Russian operatives probed or penetrated 21 states' election systems during the 2016 election, Congress allocated \$380 million for election security earlier this year. However, it then failed to pass additional legislation introduced later in 2018 that would have made even more federal resources and know-how available for state and local governments. Coordination between the states and Washington may be better than it was in 2016, but it is imperfect at a time when cyberattacks against U.S. election databases are increasing. Coordination is also important for public messaging, so Americans can have confidence in the integrity of the electoral system. In Florida, for example, county election officials, the Florida State Secretary of State, and Florida's two senators in Washington each publicly offered different assessments of the security of the state's electoral infrastructure.

Another vulnerability that has not been remedied since 2016 is the potential for foreign funding to make its way into the U.S. political system. Foreign funding in political campaigns is strictly prohibited by U.S. campaign finance regulations, but loopholes exist that can allow foreign actors to move money into the United States that is then used to unduly influence political campaigns. The FBI has been investigating whether Russia-linked actors, including government actors, did exactly this in 2016; yet, the Executive Branch and Congress have not fully closed off these loopholes, often involving real estate transactions and shell companies.

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The U.S. government also has not rectified structural weaknesses that impede a coordinated response to foreign interference operations. Several government agencies now have task forces to address the issue, but their disparate efforts are uncoordinated across the agencies. Bringing together the elements of government that work on cybersecurity, election security, disinformation, and illicit finance — in addition to the various analytical components of the intelligence community — is still sorely needed. The administration should appoint a senior-level foreign interference coordinator at the White House to direct the policy process on these issues. Congress should also establish a National Hybrid Threat Center at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to harness the intelligence agencies' various analytic capabilities on the threat of foreign interference under one roof.

More work must also be done to raise the costs on foreign actors who interfere in U.S. elections. The Trump administration has imposed more sanctions on Russian individuals and organizations for a variety of offenses, including election interference. However, the administration still has not fully implemented all of the sanctions authorities Congress legislated. More consistent messaging from President Trump that the United States considers foreign interference a threat to national security — and will take all necessary measures to defend against and respond to it — will be critical to deterring hostile actors from undermining our elections, breaking down partisan barriers to implementing defensive measures, and uniting Americans on an issue that still polarizes the electorate.

If there is a silver lining for the midterms, it is that a foreign interference operation of the size and scope of the Russian operation targeting the 2016 presidential election is unlikely to materialize by November 6. There has also been some bipartisan cooperation in Congress; the work of the Senate Select Committee of Intelligence, under the bipartisan leadership of Chairman Richard Burr and Vice Chairman Mark Warner, is particularly

noteworthy for exposing Russian disinformation campaigns designed to undermine our elections and amplify divisions between Americans.

The prevailing consensus in Washington is that the threat of foreign interference will not abate after Americans go to the polls November 6. Aside from Russia, other authoritarian regimes like China — already fingered by President Trump as a perpetrator of election interference during his speech at the UN General Assembly, although the evidence presented by the President does not necessarily constitute “interference” — possess the capabilities and the motivations to target U.S. elections in the future, including the 2020 presidential campaign. Time may have run out on making the midterms more secure, but there is no time like the present for government to start preparing for 2020.

Perhaps Some Good News for NATO, but Little Else

—*Ian O. Lesser, Vice President*

Two years of experience with the Trump administration has left Europe — or at least those inside the “Brussels bubble” — with little to show for their efforts in engaging Washington on trade, climate, and foreign policy. Europe has traditionally sought predictability from U.S. administrations, and predictability has been in short supply. The central question for many observers is whether the Trump administration and its policies are an aberration, or whether they reflect durable changes in American society and politics. The outcome of the midterms is sure to be less consequential for transatlantic relations than many Europeans imagine. Even assuming Democratic control of the House, and perhaps the Senate (by all accounts, a more distant prospect), the prospects for policy change are uncertain.

The TTIP experience suggests that the transatlantic trade agenda was already troubled before the advent of the Trump administration. The Iran nuclear deal always had its critics in Congress and there are plenty of hawks on Iran in both parties. Having

withdrawn the United States from the JCPOA, European supporters of the agreement cannot be sanguine about reversing this decision or fending off secondary sanctions. On the Paris climate accords, Congressional pressure might possibly lead the administration to a compromise of some sort. More likely, with an eye on the 2020 presidential race, the administration will seek to reinforce its tough, unilateral approach on this and other issues to keep the base on board.

“**NATO policy is one area where the midterm elections might make a practical difference.”**

Similarly, there is little prospect that the administration will suddenly discover the virtues of the EU per se as an international partner. Views on Brexit and other key questions are unlikely to change, and bilateral diplomacy is likely to remain the center of gravity in transatlantic relations. This is especially uncomfortable for decision-makers in Brussels as the EU seeks to project a more energetic and cohesive global strategy. This has not been an easy project, and the absence of American interest has not helped. Efforts toward European “strategic autonomy,” including a stronger defense identity (and spending) have been given new impetus by Washington’s perceived unreliability. More fundamentally, the interest in a stronger and more independent European defense capability is driven by the need to hedge against the steady rise of distractions for American power in Asia.

NATO policy is one area where the midterm elections might make a practical difference. Opinion in the Senate has served to constrain what might otherwise have been an even more assertive approach from the administration. This was evident during the July 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels. Congress and the administration see eye to eye on the need for European allies to spend more on defense. This will not change after the midterms, whatever the outcome.

But Congress is more naturally inclined to see inherent value in alliances, and to recognize the independent American interest in European security. Early in the Trump administration, there was considerable concern in NATO — and EU — circles about the durability of the U.S. commitment to the Alliance, including Article 5. Today, NATO policy appears as a relatively stable element in the transatlantic equation. Congressional politics around this issue are unlikely to change significantly. And Congressional control over national security spending means that major, expensive changes in U.S. military posture affecting European security — including redeployments elsewhere — would face strong Congressional scrutiny.

Even if the outcome of the midterm elections is unlikely to produce significant changes in the policy landscape as seen from Brussels, the results will be watched closely, and seen as a bellwether for what Europe faces from across the Atlantic and in its own societies in the years ahead.

U.S. Presidential Candidates: On Your Mark, Get Set, Go

—Jonathan D. Katz, Senior Fellow

When polls close on November 6 multiple presidential contenders, primarily democrats, will be lining up like runners at the starting block. They are ready to take on each other and the likely Republican candidate incumbent President Donald Trump.

Regardless of the midterm election outcomes, the 2020 Presidential election is about to take center stage. Likely one of the most contentious in modern American history, it promises an unpredictable impact on U.S. political, economic, and foreign policy for the next two years. It comes at a time when Americans are increasingly polarized based on party affiliation, Republican versus Democrat, and on issues of priority, including economic and social matters, including gun control, healthcare and immigration.

No doubt the results of the upcoming midterms elections will be impactful for national politics, especially if Democrats take back the House of Representatives. A split Congress would make it difficult for the Trump administration to move forward on key agenda items and bog down the White House with Trump-related investigations. Midterm outcomes could impact foreign policy, including in the area of sanctions, and U.S. engagement on climate change, democracy and human rights — issues democrats are increasingly concerned about.

With that said, November elections are a critical factor going forward and the warm up act for an historic clash that is likely to lead to a more divided and distracted America. There are several other key factors, in addition to the mid-term elections, that are likely to impact the 2020.

First, the economy and its success has always been a major factor in determining the outcome of U.S. presidential elections. The U.S. economy has been growing steadily since the financial crisis of 2008. The current unemployment rate is 3.7 percent, the lowest it has been since 1969. Under President Obama and now President Trump the U.S. has its second longest economic expansion in its history. This should benefit Trump's re-election in 2020. However economists are now raising the prospect that a recession could hit in the same year.

Other economic factors, including Trump's ongoing and future trade wars and their effect on the health of the U.S. economy, could also have an impact. Trump's re-election prospects in battleground states will be dimmer if certain sectors of the economy are hit by the new tariffs, including loss of jobs and shrinking disposable income. Of course, the state of the economy alone will not determine the election, but a strained economy, rising unemployment, and wage stagnation could spell trouble for the incumbent and his political party.

The second powerful unknown in the next general election is the outcome of the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign.

There is no deadline for the end of the investigation, and the parade of indictments of high level Trump associates may continue for an extended period. Will this investigation implicate President Trump directly, including disclosure of evidence of collusion with Russia or obstruction of justice? There is speculation that after the midterms that Trump will fire Department of Justice Attorney General Jeff Sessions and replace him with someone who could quash the Mueller investigation. Removing Mueller could set off a political firestorm and launch impeachment proceedings in Congress, especially if Democrats regain control of the House in a few weeks.

Third, another as-yet unknown that will shape the general election is who will lead democrats in 2020. As bad as Trump's disapproval rating may be, the Democratic field is wide open. Nominating the wrong candidate to take on Trump could leave democrats again outside the White House looking in. The democratic field is crowded and there are a lot of potentials jostling for the inside lane.

Although it is far too early to crown a democratic nominee, a mid-October CNN poll of likely Democratic voters put former Vice President Joe Biden at 33 percent with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders at 13 percent. However there were 14 other candidates bunched up between less than 1 and 9 percent. For democratic contenders, early polling does not guarantee a party nomination. Democrats will need to sort out a messy nominating process that is likely once again to pit the more centrist wing of party against the Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren left.

The bigger wildcard: Will there be another Republican, or more, to challenge Trump for the Republican nomination? A serious opponent is unlikely right now based on Trump's control of the Republican base and without a clear mathematical path to beat

him for the GOP nomination. In addition, history suggests that Republican front runners in early Republican presidential polls typically end up as the Republican nominee. Trump also has an enormous financial advantage over Republican and Democrat contenders having already raised over a \$100 million for his re-election campaign.

There are wildcards that could upset the apple cart. If Trump's polling numbers among Republican voters slides significantly (though unlikely) or the Mueller investigation leads to serious charges against Trump or congressional action such as impeachment, there will be Republicans waiting in the wings, including Vice President Mike Pence, Former Ohio Governor John Kasich, Former U.S. Ambassador to the UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and U.S. Senators Jeff Flake and Ted Cruz.

There is a long time between U.S. midterm elections and November 3, 2020, and too many unknown factors. These could include major Russian interference in the midterms and U.S. media discourse and entry of viable third-party candidate into the general election. Also it is not foreseeable how split control of Congress after the midterms (if the Democrats do win a majority in the House of Representatives) would advantage or disadvantage Trump and presidential candidates from both parties. For 2020, the only certainty is that we are headed into choppy waters as Donald Trump, and other Republican and Democratic contenders, wait for the starter pistol to launch what is likely to be the most divisive election cycle in modern U.S. history.