Forecasting a Democratic Resurgence? Partisan Accountability in the 2026 U.S. Midterm Elections

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Abstract

This article forecasts the 2026 U.S. midterm elections, building on the model developed by Algara et al. (2025) to predict the seats won by the president's party from the generic ballot, net presidential approval, midterm status, and the partisanship of the median seat at stake. First, we update our time series of presidential approval and the generic ballot through 2026, showing that the two evaluations remain distinct and diverge sharply this cycle. We validate the model with 34 rolling-origin forecasts per chamber using only pre-election information. Second, we forecast that Republicans are highly likely to lose the U.S. House, winning 196 seats [95% PI: 160, 221] with a 10% probability of retaining control at their 3-point generic ballot deficit. Third, our model forecasts Republicans narrowly holding the U.S. Senate with 51 seats [95% PI: 42, 61] and a 55% probability of control, reflecting an unusually favorable Senate class, although alternative specifications forecast a Democratic majority. Lastly, we measure how the House lines redrawn for 2026 shift partisan terrain, an effect our historically estimated model only partially absorbs, and show that the new maps could decide a close national contest but would not overturn the current House forecast.

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1 The 2026 Congressional Elections: A "Traditional" Midterm?

Conventional wisdom surrounding the 2026 U.S. midterm elections has evolved considerably since Republicans began the 119th Congress with unified control of the presidency and both chambers of Congress. In the 2024 elections, the GOP secured the White House and Senate alongside a narrow, five-seat House majority. Early assessments of the 2026 electoral landscape emphasized Democrats' difficult Senate map and Republicans' narrow, but durable, House majority, leading many observers to conclude that unified Republican control of Congress was likely to survive the first congressional elections of President Trump's second administration. As the political environment evolved, however, those expectations have changed substantially. Declining presidential approval, public opposition to the administration's tariff policies, the unpopularity of the "One Big Beautiful Bill" (Pew Research Center 2025b), deteriorating consumer sentiment about the economy (Wall Street Journal 2025), persistent Democratic advantages on the congressional generic ballot, and consistent Democratic overperformance in special elections have prompted election analysts across the ideological spectrum to characterize Democrats as increasingly favored to reclaim the U.S. House of Representatives.[1] At the same time, a Senate chamber that only months earlier was widely viewed as beyond Democratic reach has increasingly been described as genuinely competitive.

Changing expectations surrounding the House have been particularly striking. In January 2026, Erin Covey of the *Cook Political Report* concluded that "it's increasingly clear that Democrats are in a strong position to win control of the House this November," pointing to the president's unpopularity, special election results, and the generic congressional ballot as indicators that "point to a favorable environment for Democrats" (Covey 2026). By July, a group of six polling and elections experts interviewed by the *New York Times* unanimously agreed that Democrats were likely to retake the House of Representatives (New York Times 2026b). These assessments illustrate an emerging consensus that structural conditions have become increasingly favorable to Democratic gains in the House of Representatives.

Expectations surrounding the Senate have evolved more gradually. At the outset of the election cycle, conventional wisdom largely regarded Republican control of the chamber as secure, with Nathan Gonzales writing in *Roll Call* in January 2026 that "Senate Democrats still have a difficult path to majority" (Gonzales 2026). As the national political environment has deteriorated for the administration, elite expectations have become noticeably more cautious, and although many analysts continue to regard Republicans as modest favorites because of the distribution of competitive seats, the Senate is no longer widely viewed as safely Republican. Reflecting this shift, *Inside Elections*' June 2026 Senate ratings projected Democrats to gain two to four seats, leaving control of the chamber contingent on the outcome of a handful of highly competitive races (Inside

[1] We also note that consumer sentiment rapidly deteriorated over the second and third quarters of 2026 following the Trump administration's launch of the Iran War, which accelerated inflation concerns amid rising energy costs (NBC News 2026).

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Elections 2026).

These evolving expectations are also consistent with one of the most enduring regularities in American politics. Midterm elections have historically imposed electoral costs on the president's party, with opposition parties frequently gaining congressional seats during periods of declining presidential approval and public dissatisfaction with the national political environment (Tufte 1975; Abramowitz 2006). Indeed, the president's party has lost seats in the U.S. House in all but a handful of postwar midterm elections, and those losses are often sufficient to transfer chamber control. Consequently, deteriorating political conditions confronting an incumbent administration have historically generated expectations that the opposition party will improve its congressional position. From this perspective, contemporary forecasts of Democratic House gains do not represent an exception but instead reflect a broader historical pattern in which midterm elections serve as an important mechanism of collective electoral accountability.

At the same time, contemporary congressional elections are not simply a referendum on presidential performance. Increasing partisan polarization and the nationalization of American elections have strengthened the relationship between national partisan evaluations and congressional voting behavior. To that point, research at the voter level finds that partisanship and national evaluations are increasingly endogenous in the polarized age, pointing to a potential limitation of the classic referendum model (Montagnes, Peskowitz and McCrain 2019; Lebo and Cassino 2007). Consistent with previous findings, presidential approval and the generic ballot represent distinct dimensions of public opinion that shape electoral outcomes in different institutional contexts. Whereas presidential approval remains the principal predictor of presidential election outcomes, congressional elections are more directly associated with voters' evaluations of the competing parties as measured through the congressional generic ballot. Consequently, while midterm elections generally disadvantage the president's party, the magnitude of those losses depends on broader evaluations of the partisan coalitions competing for congressional control (Algara et al. 2025). A further structural consideration is the terrain on which these evaluations are rendered, as the seats actually at stake vary from cycle to cycle with the Senate class up for election and the House maps in effect.

These structural relationships, however, confront an unusual complication in the current cycle: an active wave of mid-decade partisan redistricting that began in Texas in August 2025, drew a Democratic counter in California (Pew Research Center 2025a), and accelerated once the Supreme Court's April 2026 decision in *Louisiana v. Callais* rendered Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act effectively unenforceable in redistricting and removed the final justiciable constraint on congressional line-drawing.[2] No forecasting model estimated on historical data can fully anticipate the effect of these new maps on the House seat count. We return to this complication in the closing section, where we quantify how much redistricting our forecast can potentially absorb.

Whether these evolving expectations are supported by the structural fundamentals of the 2026 election cycle remains an empirical question. Professional election handicappers synthesize polling, fundraising, candidate quality, district-level developments, and campaign dynamics to

[2] *Louisiana v. Callais*, No. 24-109, 608 U.S. ___ (2026), decided April 29, 2026.

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produce qualitative assessments of the electoral landscape. Forecasting models instead provide an independent benchmark grounded in the long-run historical relationships between national political conditions and congressional election outcomes. Comparing contemporary political expectations against historically validated forecasting models, therefore, provides an opportunity to evaluate whether prevailing narratives are consistent with the structural fundamentals that have historically shaped congressional elections.

This article builds on and revises our previous forecasting framework (Algara et al. 2025) to examine collective partisan accountability during the 2026 U.S. congressional elections. Leveraging updated measures of presidential approval and the generic ballot, alongside original data on the partisanship of the seats at stake in every cycle since 1938, we estimate a unified forecasting model designed to predict partisan seat totals in both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate. We evaluate this model with rolling-origin, before-the-fact validation before generating forecasts for the 2026 midterm elections.

Our forecasts sharpen the dominant expectations that have emerged over the course of the election cycle while revealing a fundamental difference between the two chambers. The national political environment strongly favors Democratic gains in the House of Representatives, making Democratic control the clear expectation under current conditions. The Senate tells a different story. Although structural conditions have improved substantially for Democrats relative to expectations at the beginning of the cycle, our model forecasts Republicans as narrow favorites to retain the chamber, because the referendum on the president's party must run through an unusually favorable Senate class for the incumbent party. In sum, these findings suggest that the 2026 midterm elections are likely to produce divergent verdicts from a single national environment: a House election that increasingly favors Democratic control alongside a Senate that Republicans are modestly favored to hold on the strength of the terrain.

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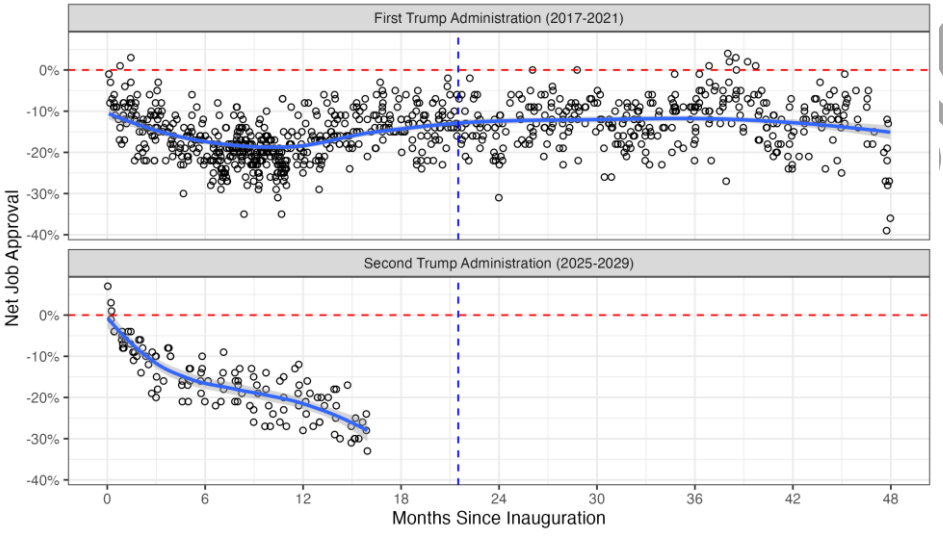
2 Updating the Survey-Marginal Data

We first update the survey-marginal data underlying the Algara et al. (2025) model. Presidential approval data come from the *Roper Center* and draw on both of the Center's collections, combining live-interviewer probability surveys archived under its Longstanding Methods collection with online surveys archived under its Recently Developed Methods collection. Generic ballot data were manually collected from the *Roper Center* and *RealClearPolitics* (1937–2018), provided by *FiveThirtyEight* (2018–2024), and supplemented with data from *FiftyPlusOne* for generic ballot polls released after the 2024 election cycle. Following Algara et al. (2025), we use Stimson's (1998) dyad-ratios model to estimate a latent quarterly time series of net presidential approval and the incumbent party's generic ballot advantage, extending the series from 1937 Q3 through 2026 Q2 (N = 356 quarters). In this paper, "incumbent party" refers to the president's party (not the party currently holding a given chamber's majority).

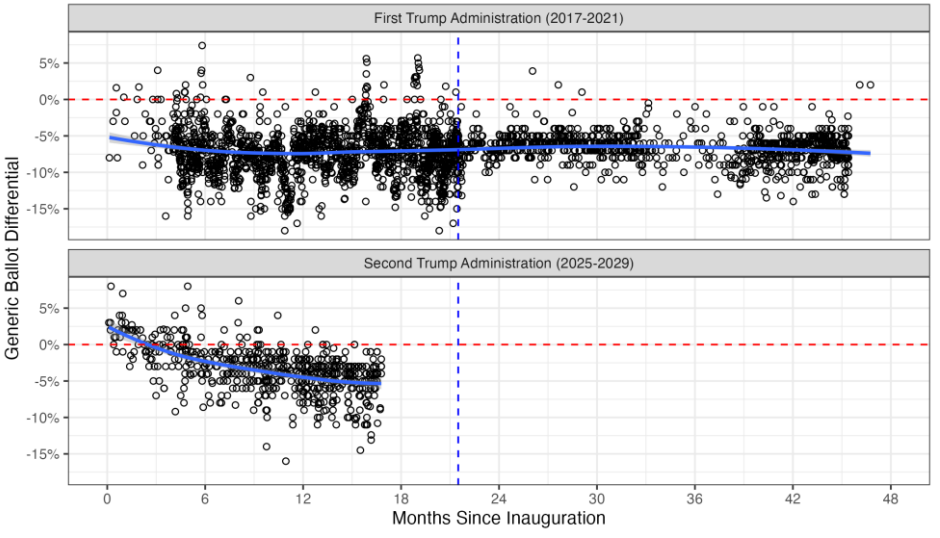
Figure 1 presents the updated raw survey marginals, comparing net job approval and the generic ballot differential across the first and second Trump administrations. Positive values indicate a Republican advantage. Panel (a) shows that the decline of President Trump's approval in his second

term outpaces his first-term decline, with net approval in June 2026 approaching -30 points, more than 10 points more negative than that of the 2018 midterms. Panel (b) shows a different pattern on the generic ballot: Republicans currently trail Democrats by roughly 5 points in the raw polling marginals, a deficit nearly as high as in the 2018 midterms.[3]

Figure 1: Net Presidential Approval and Generic Ballot Differential During Trump Era



(a) Net Job Approval



(b) Generic Ballot Differential

Note: Within each panel, the two administrations share an identical horizontal axis measured in months since inauguration. The blue dashed line marks the midterm election at roughly 21.5

[3] The forecasts in Section 4 instead enter the latent generic ballot series that the dyad-ratios model recovers from these marginals, which places the Republican deficit at 2.99 points in 2026 Q2. Because the latent series pools polling houses and question wordings while discounting sampling error, its value need not match the raw average of recent polls.

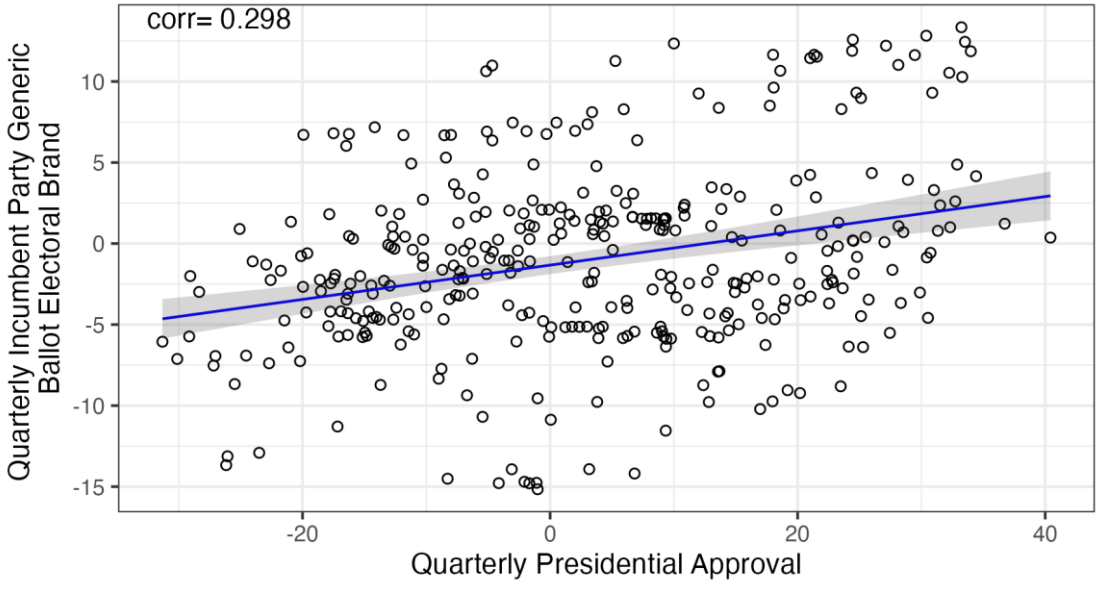
months into each term (November 6, 2018, and November 3, 2026). Data on the second Trump administration run through June 15, 2026.

Comparing the two Trump terms reveals a clear divergence: Trump's net approval has fallen even more steeply in his second term than in his first, but the Republican generic ballot deficit in 2026 generally remains smaller than that of his first term. We treat this discrepancy cautiously. The volume of generic ballot polling in 2025–2026 remains lower than in the comparable 2017–2018 window. Still, this pattern is consistent with the theoretical distinction motivating this model: presidential approval and the generic ballot are related but empirically separable, and the current data suggest they may be moving somewhat independently of one another this cycle.

3 Revisiting the Algara et al. (2025) Forecasting Model

One of the main contributions of Algara et al. (2025) was to show empirically that the generic ballot and presidential approval are measuring two distinct considerations held by the national electorate. To test whether this still holds after the 2024 election cycle, we replicate the Algara et al. (2025) analysis in Figure 2. As one can see, presidential approval and the incumbent party's standing on the generic ballot are weakly correlated at $\rho = 0.30$. This replication lends support to the consideration of the generic ballot and presidential approval as distinct predictors of U.S. national election results.

Figure 2: Presidential Approval and Incumbent Party Congressional Generic Ballot Differential



Note: N = 356 quarters from 1937 Q3 to 2026 Q2. Bivariate OLS model results for Figure 2: β = 0.11 [HC2 Robust Std. Error = 0.02; 95% CI: (0.071, 0.141); R^2 = 0.09]. Appendix Figure A1 shows the temporal variation in presidential approval and incumbent party generic ballot differential over time.

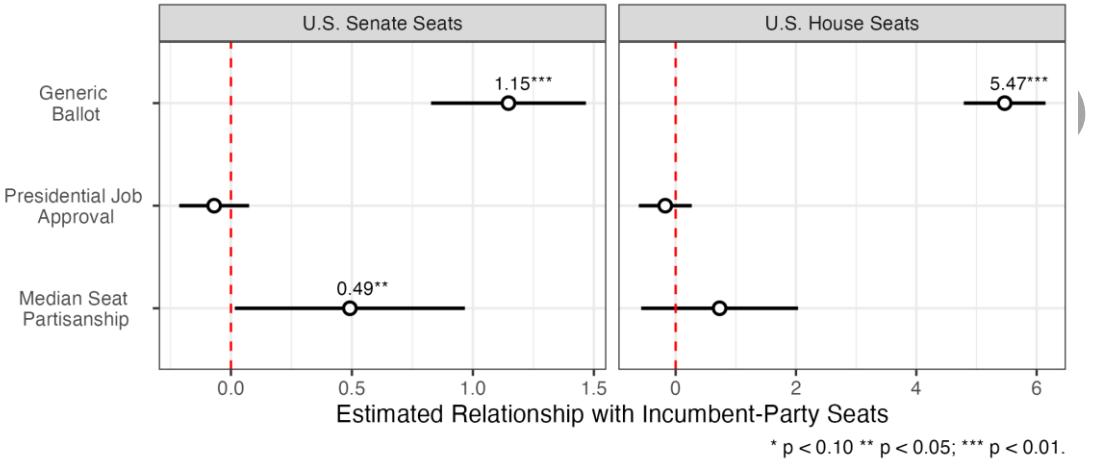
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Now that we have updated the novel time-series data and re-established presidential approval and the generic ballot as distinct evaluations held by the national electorate, we can turn to specifying the unified model we use to forecast congressional elections in both chambers. Building on Algara et al. (2025), we predict the number of U.S. Senate and U.S. House seats won by the incumbent party as a function of four theoretically motivated regressors: (1) the incumbent party's standing on the generic ballot, (2) net presidential approval, (3) an indicator for midterm election cycles, and (4) the partisanship of the median seat at stake in the cycle. The first two regressors register the electorate's distinct referenda on the party coalitions competing for congressional control and on the president; the third captures the structural penalty the president's party pays at midterm independent of either evaluation (Tufte 1975); and the fourth captures the electoral terrain on which these national verdicts are rendered. We measure the final regressor with original data spanning every congressional election from 1938 through 2024. For each cycle, we rank the seats being contested by the incumbent party's two-party vote share in the most recent presidential election (all 435 districts in the House and the 33 states of the Senate class up for election) and record the partisanship of the median seat (the 218th House district and roughly the 17th Senate seat). Because chamber majorities run through the median seat, this measure records the structural assistance or resistance that House maps and the Senate's class rotation offer the incumbent party in a given cycle, incorporating the malapportionment of the Senate and the districting of the House directly into the forecast. The survey-based regressors take their values in the third quarter of the election year, so every input to the model is observed in advance of the election it predicts.

Figure 3 presents the estimated relationships between the unified model's regressors and congressional seat outcomes across all elections from 1938 through 2024. The incumbent party's generic ballot standing is a strong predictor of outcomes in both chambers, as a one-standard-deviation increase in the generic ballot (a 5.6-percentage-point increase) is associated with gains of 6.4 U.S. Senate seats and 30.6 U.S. House seats. Net presidential approval, in contrast, bears no statistically significant relationship to seat outcomes in either chamber conditional on the generic ballot, replicating the finding of Algara et al. (2025) that approval does not predict congressional election outcomes at the House or Senate level. We retain the regressor on theoretical grounds because the president's standing carries distinct weight precisely when the two evaluations diverge, as they do in 2026. The median-seat measure behaves precisely as the theory anticipates: a Senate class one standard deviation more favorable to the incumbent party (5.3 points of median-seat partisanship) is associated with 2.6 additional Senate seats, while the corresponding House estimate is substantively small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, reflecting a chamber in which all 435 seats are contested in every cycle and the median seat changes little from cycle to cycle in the absence of redistricting.

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Figure 3: Estimated Relationships of the Generic Ballot, Presidential Approval, and Median Seat Partisanship with Election Outcomes



Note: Point estimates from the unified forecasting model estimated by OLS on all elections, 1938–2024, with the midterm indicator included in the model but not displayed. 95% confidence intervals estimated from HC2 robust standard errors. Full model results are available in Appendix Tables A4-A5 and summary statistics in Appendix Table A3.

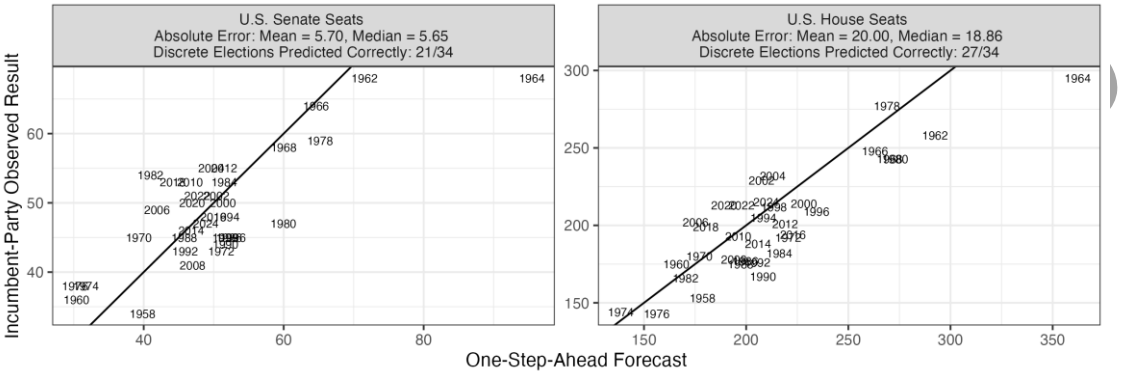
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We evaluate the accuracy of the unified model with a rolling-origin validation design that holds our forecasts to a before-the-fact standard. For each election year *t* from 1958 through 2024, we estimate the model on all elections held strictly prior to *t* and then forecast year *t* by entering that year's own covariate values, measured in advance of the election, into the re-estimated model. For example, to forecast the 2020 election cycle, we estimate the model on the 1938 through 2018 elections and enter the 2020 third-quarter generic ballot and net approval, alongside the partisanship of the median seat at stake in 2020, into the resulting coefficients. This design yields 34 genuine one-step-ahead forecasts per chamber, each resting exclusively on information available before the election it predicts, and it places every historical forecast in the same informational position our 2026 forecast occupies today. The earliest forecast rests on a training window of ten elections (1938 through 1956).

Figure 4 displays each one-step-ahead forecast against the observed result. Consistent with the idiosyncratic nature of upper-chamber contests (Abramowitz 1988), the model predicts the correct majority party in 21 of 34 U.S. Senate elections with a mean absolute error of 5.70 seats. The model performs better in the U.S. House, predicting the correct majority in 27 of 34 elections with a mean

absolute error of 20 seats on the chamber's far larger seat base.[4]

Figure 4: Rolling-Origin One-Step-Ahead Forecasts and Accuracy



Note: Each forecast for year *t* is estimated using only elections held prior to *t*, with year *t*'s pre-election covariate values entered into the re-estimated model. Facet labels report accuracy statistics. Appendix Tables A6 and A7 report the complete year-by-year forecasts, and Appendix Table A8 and Figure A5 report the identical validation applied to the three alternative specifications.

4 2026 Forecasting Model Predictions and Discussion

Turning to our forecasts of the 2026 midterm elections, we estimate the unified model on all 44 elections from 1938 through 2024 and generate point forecasts at the observed 2026 covariate values, allowing the generic ballot to vary across a grid of plausible levels. Our uncertainty statements come from the model's own demonstrated forecasting record rather than from in-sample variance. The 95% predictive intervals attach the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles of the empirical one-step-ahead forecast errors from the rolling-origin validation, restricted to training windows of at least fifteen elections, to each point forecast, so the intervals carry residual variance by construction and hold constant width across ballot levels. We also report, at every ballot level, the probability that Republicans retain chamber control, computed as the probability that a forecast error drawn from a Gaussian kernel smoothing of the same error distribution carries the point forecast to or beyond the majority threshold of 218 House seats or 50 Senate seats, the latter reflecting the Republican vice president's tiebreaking vote.[5] To forecast the 2026 elections, we use the most

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[4] Appendix Table A8 and Figure A5 subject three alternative specifications with (1) the model without the median-seat regressor, (2) a LASSO selecting freely from the full candidate set including the median-seat measure, and (3) the fully specified eight-predictor regression to the identical rolling-origin design. No alternative specification records a lower error than the unified model across the two chambers. Across the six comparisons of mean absolute error in Appendix Table A8, one for each alternative in each chamber, the unified model records the lower error in four. The two exceptions are the LASSO in the Senate (5.48 against 5.70 seats) and the specification without the median-seat regressor in the House (18.45 against 20.00 seats), the latter consistent with the null House relationship of the median-seat measure in Figure 3. The LASSO records a modestly lower Senate error while performing substantially worse in the House, and the specification without the median-seat regressor reverses that pattern. The two alternatives with a lower error in one chamber record a higher error in the other.

[5] Replacing the kernel-smoothed error distribution with a Gaussian fitted to the same errors shifts no control

recently available covariate values.[6]

We forecast U.S. Senate and U.S. House elections across values of relative generic ballot support for the Republican Party ranging from -10 points to 5 points. At the current 3-point generic ballot deficit, our model forecasts Republicans winning 51.37 Senate seats [95% PI: 41.81, 61.48] with a 55% probability of retaining control of the chamber (Table 1). Even at a 5-point deficit, the forecast of 49.07 seats [95% PI: 39.52, 59.18] leaves Republicans with a 44% probability of control. The model, in other words, favors Republicans to hold the Senate narrowly in a national environment that runs several points against them, and the reason is structural rather than attitudinal: the Senate class up in 2026 constitutes unusually favorable terrain for the incumbent party, a feature we examine directly below.

Table 1: 2026 U.S. Senate Prediction Over Generic Ballot Levels

Generic Ballot Support Level	U.S. Senate Seats Won Estimate	95% PI Lower Bound	95% PI Upper Bound	Probability GOP Maj.
-10%	43.34	33.78	53.45	17%
-9%	44.49	34.93	54.59	22%
-8%	45.63	36.07	55.74	27%
-7%	46.78	37.22	56.89	33%
-6%	47.93	38.37	58.03	38%
-5%	49.07	39.52	59.18	44%
-4%	50.22	40.66	60.33	49%
-3%	**51.37**	**41.81**	**61.48**	**55%**
-2%	52.51	42.96	62.62	61%
-1%	53.66	44.10	63.77	67%
0%	54.81	45.25	64.92	73%
1%	55.96	46.40	66.06	78%
2%	57.10	47.55	67.21	83%
3%	58.25	48.69	68.36	88%
4%	59.40	49.84	69.50	91%
5%	60.54	50.99	70.65	94%

Point estimates derived from the unified referendum model (generic ballot, net presidential approval, midterm status, and the partisanship of the median seat at stake) estimated by OLS on all elections, 1938–2024. Only the generic ballot varies across rows: every forecast holds net presidential approval at its observed 2026 Q2 value of −28.35 (approximately 33% approve and 62% disapprove, near the floor of the 1938–2024 estimation window), sets the midterm indicator to one, and holds the median-seat partisanship at its 2026 value, a Republican two-party presidential vote share of 56.84 in the median seat of the Senate class up. Predictive intervals add the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles of the empirical one-step-ahead forecast errors from the rolling-origin validation (training windows of at least 15 elections, 1968–2024) to the point estimate. Pr(GOP Maj.) reports the probability that the incumbent Republican Party retains chamber control (218 U.S. House seats, and 50 U.S. Senate seats given the Republican vice president's tiebreaking vote), computed as the probability that a one-step-ahead forecast error drawn from a Gaussian kernel smoothing of the same error distribution carries the point estimate to or beyond

probability by more than roughly six percentage points and changes no substantive assessment.

[6] Covariate values are the most recently available as of June 2026. The notes to Tables 1 and 2 report the fixed values.

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the majority threshold. The bolded row denotes the incumbent party's generic ballot standing as of June 2026 (−2.99).

This forecast accords with how professional handicappers characterize the map. As the *Associated Press* summarizes the task facing Democrats, "they need to net four seats to retake the majority, and most of the 2026 contests are in states that Republican President Donald Trump easily won last November" (Associated Press 2025). Pundits generally agree that the two clearest Democratic targets are the "toss-up" seats held by retiring Republican Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Republican Senator Susan Collins of Maine. Beyond those two, *Sabato's Crystal Ball* identifies the most competitive Republican-held Senate seats as Alaska, Iowa, Ohio, and Texas (Sabato's Crystal Ball 2026). Democrats would need to win at least two of those four (in addition to Maine and North Carolina) to secure a majority. All four of these states, however, voted for President Trump by double-digit margins in 2024, which sets a high bar for Democrats to clear given how nationalized contemporary Senate elections have become (Algara and Bae 2024). Democrats must also defend two competitive seats of their own: an open seat in Michigan and one held by incumbent Senator Jon Ossoff in Georgia. The unified model formalizes exactly this structural advantage, measuring the Class II terrain directly rather than leaving it to qualitative adjustment.

This exposure imbalance sits atop a deeper structural asymmetry that our median-seat regressor measures directly. Only 13 of the 35 seats on the 2026 map (including special elections in Ohio and Florida) are Democratic-held, compared with 22 Republican-held seats, yet the more consequential fact concerns which seats are contested. Ranking the 33 states of the Senate class up in 2026 by the 2024 two-party presidential vote, the median seat is Alaska's, where President Trump won 56.84% of the two-party vote, flanked by Texas (56.94%) and Iowa (56.72%), and 21 of the 33 states with Senate races were won by Trump in 2024. The class median ranks at the 80th percentile of the class medians we observe from 1938 through 2024, the mark of a chamber whose equal-representation-by-state malapportionment has grown steadily less favorable to the Democratic Party. Because every state elects two senators irrespective of population, a party's Senate fortunes depend disproportionately on its strength in small, rural, and predominantly white states, precisely the geographic profile that has trended Republican over the past two decades (Johnson and Miller 2023; Lee and Oppenheimer 1999). Democrats could therefore hold a substantial national advantage on the generic ballot while still facing an elevated structural bar to converting that advantage into Senate seats. Whereas a chamber-agnostic seat-share model cannot capture this asymmetry, the unified model carries it into the forecast: the median-seat regressor contributes roughly four additional Republican seats in 2026 relative to the specification without it,[7] and it is the principal reason the model expects the same national environment to produce a Democratic House alongside a Republican Senate.

Turning to the U.S. House, our model is considerably more pessimistic about Republican

[7] Only the model without the median-seat regressor omits the terrain measure; it forecasts 47.61 Republican Senate seats (Appendix Table A11). The LASSO and eight-predictor regression retain the measure with less weight and forecast 46.93 and 47.79 seats, so the unified model alone forecasts a Republican Senate hold. House forecasts range only from 186.77 to 196.39 Republican seats, a Democratic majority under every specification.

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chances of retaining the chamber. At the current 3-point generic ballot deficit, Republicans are forecast to win 196.39 seats [95% PI: 160.02, 221.06] with a 10% probability of holding the 218 seats a majority requires (Table 2). The predictive interval does include narrow Republican majorities, an honest reflection of the model's historical House errors, but the probability column conveys the forecast plainly: Democratic control is the heavy favorite, and Republican retention does not reach an even chance until the party pulls roughly three points ahead of the Democrats on the generic ballot.

Table 2: 2026 U.S. House Prediction Over Generic Ballot Levels

Generic Ballot Support Level	U.S. House Seats Won Estimate	95% PI Lower Bound	95% PI Upper Bound	Probability GOP Maj.
-10%	158.11	121.74	182.78	<1%
-9%	163.58	127.21	188.25	<1%
-8%	169.04	132.68	193.71	<1%
-7%	174.51	138.15	199.18	<1%
-6%	179.98	143.62	204.65	1%
-5%	185.45	149.08	210.12	2%
-4%	190.92	154.55	215.59	6%
-3%	**196.39**	**160.02**	**221.06**	**10%**
-2%	201.85	165.49	226.52	16%
-1%	207.32	170.96	231.99	22%
0%	212.79	176.42	237.46	29%
1%	218.26	181.89	242.93	36%
2%	223.73	187.36	248.40	44%
3%	229.19	192.83	253.86	52%
4%	234.66	198.30	259.33	60%
5%	240.13	203.77	264.80	70%

Point estimates derived from the unified referendum model (generic ballot, net presidential approval, midterm status, and the partisanship of the median seat at stake) estimated by OLS on all elections, 1938–2024. Only the generic ballot varies across rows: every forecast holds net presidential approval at its observed 2026 Q2 value of −28.35 (approximately 33% approve and 62% disapprove, near the floor of the 1938–2024 estimation window), sets the midterm indicator to one, and holds the median-seat partisanship at its 2026 value, a Republican two-party presidential vote share of 52.50 in the median House district. Predictive intervals add the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles of the empirical one-step-ahead forecast errors from the rolling-origin validation (training windows of at least 15 elections, 1968–2024) to the point estimate. Pr(GOP Maj.) reports the probability that the incumbent Republican Party retains chamber control (218 U.S. House seats, and 50 U.S. Senate seats given the Republican vice president's tiebreaking vote), computed as the probability that a one-step-ahead forecast error drawn from a Gaussian kernel smoothing of the same error distribution carries the point estimate to or beyond the majority threshold. The bolded row denotes the incumbent party's generic ballot standing as of June 2026 (−2.99).

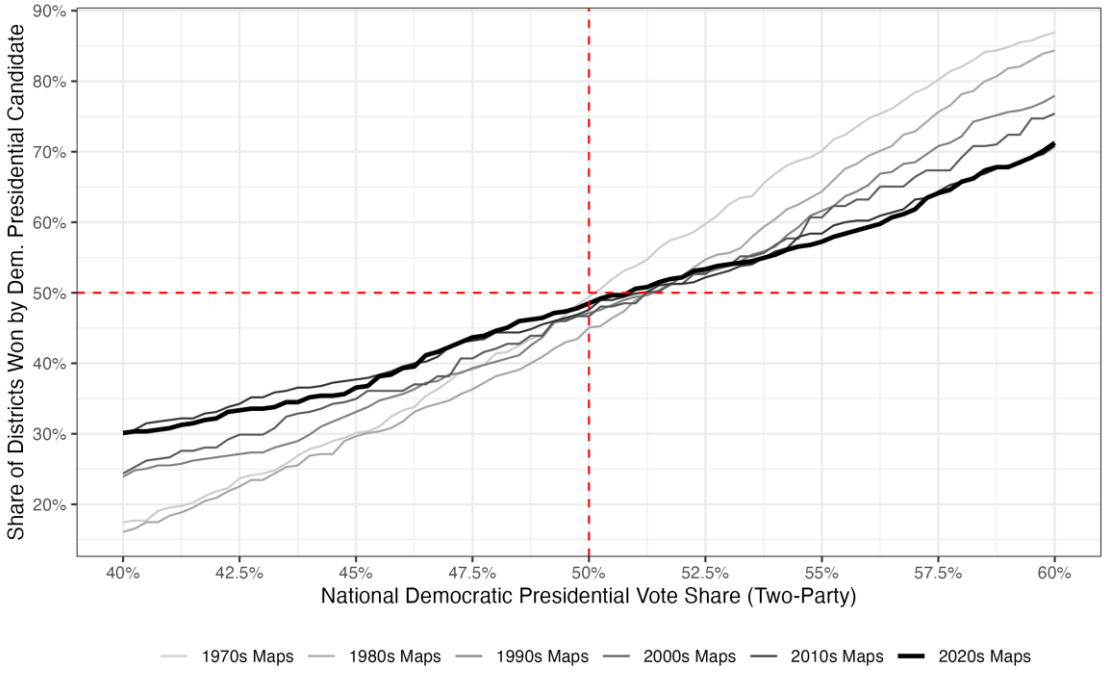
Taken together, our model forecasts divergent verdicts from a single national environment. A Democratic House majority stands as the clear expectation, while a narrow Republican Senate hold is the modest favorite – the same referendum fundamentals translated differently by the two chambers' terrain.

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5 2026 and Beyond: Partisan Accountability on Shifting Maps

Our forecasting models, like all models estimated on historical election returns, assume that the translation of national partisan sentiment into congressional seats will resemble the translation observed over the past nine decades. That translation is a product of district geography rather than a constant of American politics, and it can be measured directly. Using district-level presidential returns from 1968 to 2024, we identify the tipping-point district in each election cycle, the 218th-most-Democratic district that delivers a House majority, and measure its partisanship relative to the nation as a whole. The tipping-point district leaned more Republican than the nation in every election over this period, reaching roughly three points more Republican at the height of the post-2010 gerrymanders and standing at 0.8 points more Republican in 2024 (Appendix Figure A2). The 2024 elections illustrate the electoral consequences of this durable structural bias: Vice President Harris won 49.3% of the national two-party vote yet carried only 205 of 435 congressional districts (47.1%).

Figure 5: Baseline Partisan Performance of U.S. House Maps by Redistricting Cycle



Note: Lines display the share of congressional districts in which the Democratic presidential candidate would win the two-party vote at each level of the national two-party presidential vote, simulated under uniform swing from district-level presidential returns on the final maps of each redistricting cycle from the 1970s through the 2020s (1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020, and 2024). Districts are measured by presidential vote to isolate the partisan terrain of the maps from candidate-specific and incumbency effects. Red dashed lines mark the 50% thresholds. Appendix Figures A2 and A3 present the tipping-point district series and the corresponding curves including the 1960s maps.

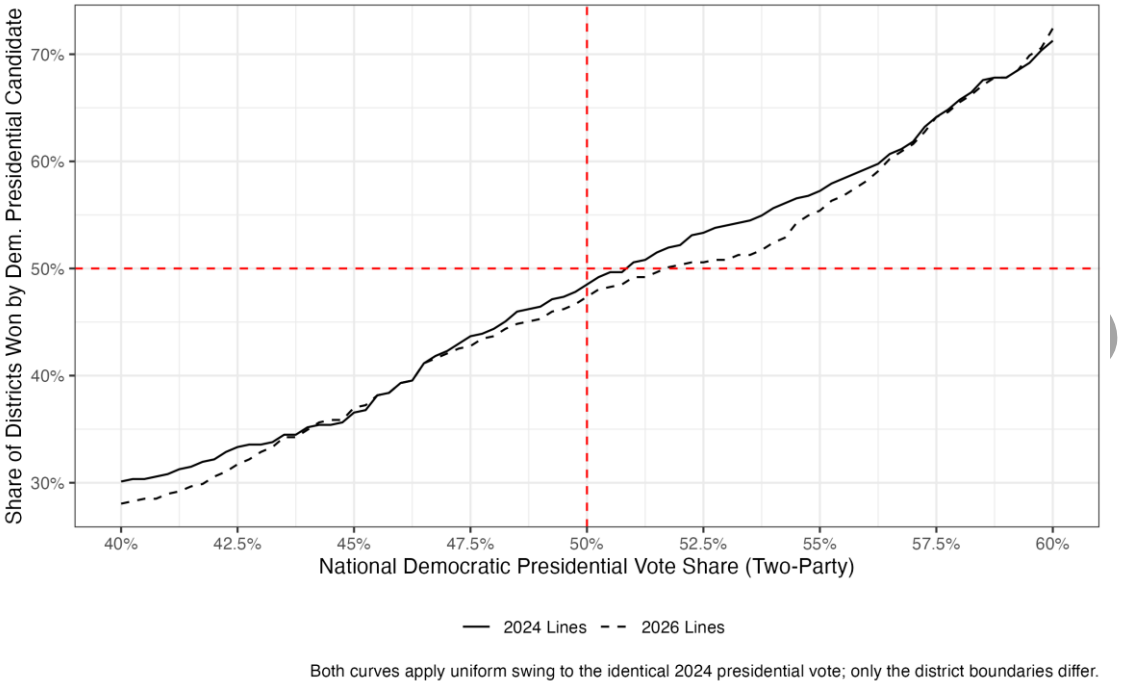
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Figure 5 places this bias in longer perspective by simulating, under the standard uniform swing framework (Gelman and King 1994), the share of congressional districts the Democratic presidential candidate would carry at every level of the national two-party vote on the maps governing each of the six redistricting cycles from the 1970s through the 2020s. Two patterns emerge. First, Democrats fail to carry a majority of districts at exactly 50% of the national vote under every map regime since the 1970s, and outside the unusually responsive maps of the 1970s they require roughly a minimum of 51% of the two-party vote to capture the median district. The second and more consequential pattern is the collapse in the responsiveness of House seats to national vote swings. Figure 5 shows that a 1-point national swing flips approximately 18 districts under the 1970s maps yet flips only roughly 8 districts under the maps drawn in the 2010s and 2020s. National partisan tides persist, yet modern maps contain far fewer competitive districts capable of reflecting them, a dynamic that entrenches narrow and insecure congressional majorities (Lee 2016).

The 2026 elections, however, will not be fought on the maps that generated the most recent point in this series. Ten states redrew their congressional boundaries for the 2026 midterms, altering 145 districts, and we compute the 2024 presidential vote for every district that will actually be contested in November using precinct-level calculations from *The Downballot* (2025). Holding the 2024 vote fixed and varying only the boundaries isolates the pure effect of mid-decade redistricting, as Figure 6 displays. The number of districts carried by the Democratic presidential candidate falls from 205 to 200, and the national two-party vote share delivering a majority of district baselines rises from 51.00% to 51.75%, matching the 1960s maps for the most demanding threshold in our seven-cycle record. Responsiveness declines further, from 8.50 to 7.25 districts per point of national swing. The tipping-point district moves from Arizona's 1st, 0.81 points more Republican than the nation, to Virginia's 1st, 1.75 points more Republican. The state decomposition runs as the politics would suggest: Florida (four districts), Texas (three), and five districts across six additional Republican redraws move twelve district baselines toward the Republican Party, against which California's counter-map, approved by voters as Proposition 50 (six districts) (CalMatters 2025), and Utah's court-ordered map (one) recover seven.

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Figure 6: The 2024 Presidential Vote Under 2024 and 2026 District Lines



Note: Solid line: the 2024 maps. Dashed line: the boundaries in effect for the 2026 midterm elections.

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This revised forecast does not treat the new maps as a caveat standing wholly outside the model. The House median-seat regressor takes its 2026 value from the redrawn maps, shifting the median House district from a 51.6% to a 52.5% Republican two-party presidential vote. Because the regressor's House coefficient is small and imprecise, however, that shift moves the forecast in Table 2 by less than one seat, well short of the five-district change in Figure 6. The redistricting question is therefore whether maps the model only partially absorbs could overturn its verdict. Contemporary estimates place the net Republican gain from mid-decade redistricting at 3 to 12 House seats relative to the 2024 maps (New York Times 2026a), and even crediting Republicans with the full upper bound of that range on top of our forecast of 196.39 seats would leave the party roughly ten seats short of a majority. The margin nonetheless matters, as our model forecasts approximately 213 Republican seats at generic ballot parity, a political environment in which a twelve-seat map shift would prove fully decisive. Mid-decade gerrymandering matters most precisely when the national verdict is weakest, deciding close contests rather than overturning decisive ones.

Looking beyond November, the Supreme Court's decision in *Louisiana v. Callais* transforms the institutional environment in which future congressional forecasting will operate. *Shelby County v. Holder* ended federal preclearance in 2013, *Rucho v. Common Cause* withdrew the federal courts from partisan gerrymandering claims in 2019, and in April 2026 *Callais* made the Section 2

requirement to draw majority-minority districts effectively unenforceable, removing the final justiciable constraint on congressional line-drawing. The relative partisan parity of the 2020s maps visible in Figure 5 owed much to Section 2 enforcement in states such as Alabama and Louisiana, precisely the channel the Court has now closed. The first post-*Callais* round is already evident in Figure 6, as the Alabama and Louisiana redraws each dismantled a recently created minority-opportunity district. Accordingly, we read the flat and biased curves of the 2020s maps as a plausible floor of pro-GOP bias, rather than a ceiling, for the maps that will govern the 2028 elections and those that will be drawn after reapportionment in 2030. Midterm elections serve as a central mechanism of collective partisan accountability (Tufte 1975; Algara et al. 2025), and a flattening seats-votes curve mutes that very mechanism. The curve, moreover, has become an object of party competition in its own right: whether Democrats can answer further Republican escalation in 2028 depends on trifecta contests in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Nevada, on the fate of Virginia's voided redistricting referendum and New York's pending constitutional amendment, and on the redistricting amendment Maryland has referred to its November 2026 ballot. The 2026 gubernatorial and state legislative elections are, in part, a contest over the terrain on which 2028 will be fought. Future forecasts can carry this shifting terrain into the model more directly than our 2026 forecast does. Measuring the House terrain relative to the nation, as the tipping-point district series in Appendix Figure A2 does, rather than as the raw partisanship of the median seat would separate the bias of the maps from the national tide, and recomputing that measure on the lines in effect as soon as states finalize their maps would bring each redraw into the one-step-ahead design before any election has been held under it. The deepest uncertainty confronting future congressional election forecasts is consequently not sampling variance around the generic ballot but whether the historical relationship between national verdicts and congressional majorities, the relationship underpinning nine decades of forecasting models, survives the coming redistricting regime at all.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X2YOSE (Algara et al. 2026).

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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