Forecasting a President-Centered Midterm: Leader-Centered Personalization in the 2026 US House Elections

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Abstract:

Forecasting models of US midterm elections rely on indicators such as presidential approval, economic conditions, incumbency, district partisanship, and the generic congressional ballot. This paper asks whether these indicators fully capture presidential influence when congressional competition is organized around a highly personalized leader. It distinguishes electoral nationalization, in which local contests respond increasingly to national parties and conditions, from leader-centered personalization, in which those forces are organized around an individual leader. The paper identifies three mechanisms through which personalization may shape district-level electoral choice: candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, and electoral translation through campaign framing. It then combines a prespecified district baseline with a structured qualitative assessment of leader centrality and these mechanisms to generate prospective expectations about whether personalization should reinforce, weaken, or leave the baseline unchanged. The diagnostic is applied prospectively to four competitive 2026 US House races. The paper also distinguishes explanatory from predictive value, that is, leader-centered personalization may clarify how congressional accountability operates even when separately measuring personalization does not improve forecast accuracy.

Keywords: election forecasting, political personalization, US midterm elections

Introduction

Election forecasting is valuable not merely because it produces predictions, but because it requires theories of electoral behavior to specify their expectations before the result is known (Rosenstone 1983; Lewis-Beck 2005; Mongrain and Stegmaier 2025). US midterm forecasts generally use economic conditions, presidential approval, party reputation, incumbency, and the generic ballot to model collective accountability for the president's party (Abramowitz 2006; Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010; Algara et al. 2025).

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The 2026 midterm elections present a particular challenge to this framework. Donald Trump is relevant to the election not only as an incumbent president whose popularity and economic record can be entered into a forecasting model. He also occupies an unusually central position within contemporary partisan identity, candidate selection, campaign communication, and perceptions of the political stakes. Republican candidates may signal loyalty to or distance from Trump, while Democrats may frame congressional control as a means of constraining his presidency. Voters may therefore approach a House race as a judgment towards both parties, or see it as an opportunity to empower or constrain a particular leader.

Existing research on the nationalization of American elections provides part of the explanation for this development. Congressional outcomes have become increasingly aligned with presidential voting, national partisanship, and evaluations of national political conditions, leaving fewer voters and constituencies that behave independently across electoral levels (Jacobson 2015; Hopkins 2018; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024). Yet nationalization and personalization are analytically distinct. Nationalization connects congressional contests to national partisan conditions; personalization asks whether those conditions are increasingly transmitted through relationships with an individual leader.

This paper asks: How does leader-centered political personalization alter the assumptions on which conventional midterm forecasting rests? The analysis focuses on competitive US House races and advances two related but distinct claims. The first is explanatory: personalization may clarify the processes through which national political conditions are translated through candidates and campaigns into district-level choices. The second is predictive and narrower: leader-centered information adds forecasting value only when prospectively observed evidence changes the direction or confidence of a prespecified district baseline.

The contribution of the paper is therefore not simply that candidates and campaigns matter in close elections. Rather, leader-centered personalization identifies a common national political force whose electoral implications may vary systematically across districts because candidates construct different relationships with the same leader and electorates differ in how they respond to this relationship. Through an integrative synthesis of forecasting, personalization, and congressional-election research, the paper develops three mechanisms – candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, and electoral translation – and applies them prospectively to four competitive House races: CO-08, NY-17, PA-10, and PA-08. Donald Trump is treated as an unusually intense illustration of this broader process rather than simply a unique or deviant case.

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Conventional Forecasting and the Baseline

Forecasting the US congressional elections encompasses heterogeneous approaches, including models based on political and economic fundamentals, aggregate measures of electoral intention, district-level information, and combinations of these inputs. This paper does not treat all of these approaches as a single 'structural' category. Rather, it establishes a parsimonious pre-election baseline against which the additional explanatory and predictive value of leader-centered information can be assessed (Lewis-Beck 2005; Mongrain and Stegmaier 2025).

Most conventional models of midterm election prediction rely on referendum logic. Voters are understood to evaluate the incumbent administration and translate that judgement into support for, or punishment of, the president's party. Tufte's (1975) account placed presidential standing and economic performance at the center of midterm outcomes. Some models emphasize retrospective accountability; others interpret midterms as partisan balancing or incorporate strategic responses by candidates and parties to the anticipated national environment (Abramowitz 2006; Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010).

A related but distinct tradition relies on aggregate measures of electoral intention, especially the generic congressional ballot. This measure summarizes the relative standing of the parties without requiring forecasters to model every district separately and has featured prominently in forecasts of national vote and seat change (Abramowitz 2006; Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010). Recent work also shows why presidential approval and party brand should not be treated as interchangeable. Algara et al. (2025) find them conceptually and empirically distinct and report that party-brand evaluations provide greater leverage for congressional than presidential outcomes. This distinction also illustrates why explanatory and predictive value should not be conflated. A generic ballot or approval measure may successfully track an electoral outcome without representing the political process that generated it. Lewis-Beck and Tien (2010) distinguish explanatory fundamentals from 'tracking' variables for precisely this reason. Likewise, evidence that personalization helps explain how voters assign responsibility does not by itself establish that separately measuring personalization will actually improve a forecast.

For the conventional and aggregate forecasting approaches relevant to this paper's argument, three assumptions are especially relevant. The first is aggregation. National indicators summarize large numbers of individual electoral decisions, while candidate-specific and district-specific influences appear as variation around the broader pattern. The second is temporal continuity. Historical relationships between national conditions and congressional performance must remain sufficiently stable to inform subsequent elections. Lastly, the third is cross-level correspondence. National indicators must retain

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sufficiently stable relationships with district-level votes and seats to support prediction. This assumption does not require a forecasting model to identify the causal mechanism producing that relationship. This is because predictive regularity may persist even when the process through which national conditions become district-level choices is left unspecified.

These assumptions are sources of both strength and limitation. They make fundamentals-based and aggregate forecasts parsimonious, transparent, replicable, and capable of being issued before late campaign developments have fully unfolded. The diversity of methods represented in the most recent 'PS: Political Science and Politics' forecasting issue, such as including regression models, polling, citizen expectations, machine learning, and combined forecasts, also underscores that no single specification defines contemporary election forecasting (Mongrain and Stegmaier 2025). Leader-centered analysis is therefore not proposed here as an alternative to 'conventional forecasting' as a whole. The narrower question is whether prospectively observed leader-centered information adds predictive value to a prespecified district baseline.

To make this comparison transparent, the prospective application defines underlying district competitiveness using the 2026 Cook Partisan Voting Index (Cook PVI Report 2026). Cook PVI measures each district's presidential voting relative to the nation using the 2020 and 2024 elections, and is analytically distinct from Cook race ratings, which incorporate expectations about the current contest. Following an existing classification of congressional competitiveness (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2020), districts rated EVEN, D+1, or R+1 are treated as baseline-even, whereas districts between D+2 and D+4 or R+2 and R+4 are treated as baseline-tilted. The generic congressional ballot is reported separately to capture the national electoral environment on September 4, 2026, a pre-election observation date at the time of this paper being written, while incumbency and the previous House result are included as contextual indicators. Neither is used to determine whether a district is classified as baseline-even or baseline-tilted, and the indicators are not collapsed into a single composite measure. Current race ratings are used only to identify electorally competitive contests and do not determine the baseline expectation. This separation between national electoral conditions, underlying district partisanship, and concurrent race assessments follows the broader logic of House forecasting models that combine national polling with district-level information (Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2018).

Electoral Nationalization and Leader-Centered Personalization

In order to build the argument, the paper requires a clear distinction between electoral nationalization and leader-centered personalization. Nationalization concerns the increasing influence of national parties, issues, and political conditions on congressional

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contests. Personalization, on the other hand, concerns the growing importance of individual political actors in organizing how those forces are interpreted. In other words, nationalization concerns the level at which electoral competition is structured, while leader-centered personalization concerns the political actor around whom that national competition is organized.

Research on electoral nationalization shows a close relationship between congressional and presidential voting. As state and local party systems have become more closely aligned with their national counterparts, voters increasingly approach elections at different levels through common partisan considerations. Congressional voting has consequently become more closely correlated with presidential voting, while district-specific factors, including incumbency, constituency service, and candidate reputation, have become less capable of protecting candidates from national partisan tides (Jacobson 2015; Hopkins 2018; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020).

For forecasting, nationalization can increase the information contained in national indicators because district-level outcomes respond more consistently to common partisan factors. Personalization describes a different process. The personalization literature examines the growing importance of individual politicians relative to collective organizations, especially political parties, in political communication, voter evaluation, and electoral choice (McAllister 2007; Rahat and Sheafer 2007; Garzia 2014). It does not imply that parties cease to matter, but rather that partisan competition may increasingly be embodied and communicated through political figures like the President.

For this paper's argument, it is especially important to distinguish decentralized personalization, which is centered on the individual congressional candidate, from centralized or leader-centered personalization, which is organized around a national party leader (Rahat and Sheafer 2007). Decentralized personalization resembles the personal vote traditionally associated with congressional incumbency i.e. candidates cultivate distinct reputations and relationships that may allow them to outperform their party's electoral baseline. Leader-centered personalization, on the other hand, has a different cross-level implication. Instead of differentiating a congressional candidate from national politics, it can bind that candidate more closely to a national leader whose political identity and authority extend across electoral levels.

Nationalization and leader-centered personalization can therefore coexist, but one does not automatically produce the other. A nationalized election does not need to be leader-centered, and a highly visible political leader does not need to become central to every district contest. Nationalization tells forecasters that congressional races are connected to the national political environment, whereas leader-centered personalization asks whether and how that environment is organized around a particular political figure. In a conventional referendum framework, presidential approval contributes to expectations

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about support for the president's party. Under leader-centered personalization, congressional candidates may construct different relationships with the same president, as loyal partners, selective allies, independent representatives, or institutional checks/balances, and therefore campaigns may differ in whether they make that relationship central to the electoral choice. Leader centrality is therefore not synonymous with presidential popularity or formal endorsement, it concerns the substantive role the leader plays in defining the electoral choice.

Three Leader-Centered Mechanisms

The distinction between nationalization and personalization becomes consequential for forecasting only if leader-centered politics can be linked to district-level electoral choice through identifiable processes. The three leader-centered mechanisms developed in this paper, namely candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, and electoral translation, are not intended as an exhaustive account of congressional voting. Ideology, candidate quality, policy preferences, demographics, and partisanship, among other established influences, remain consequential. Rather, these three mechanisms are selected because each specifies a distinct way in which the same nationally salient leader can produce heterogeneous electoral implications across congressional districts.

Candidate Alignment

Candidate alignment concerns the political relationship congressional contenders construct with the president. Co-partisans may present themselves as loyal partners, selective allies, independent representatives, or internal critics, while opposition candidates may campaign as conventional partisan alternatives or as institutional checks on presidential authority. Such positioning can matter because voters do not need to reward or punish every member of the president's party equally. Gronke, Koch, and Wilson (2003) show that representatives' perceived support for the president interacts with presidential approval in shaping evaluations of congressional incumbents. Leader alignment is nevertheless analytically distinct from ideological proximity. Candidates may share the president's policy positions while cultivating an independent political identity, or signal personal loyalty through endorsements, appearances, and rhetoric beyond policy agreement. Candidate ideology and quality therefore remain separate influences on congressional choice rather than components of leader centrality (Buttice and Stone 2012).

Public alignment can also provide voters with information about the candidate-president relationship. Presidential endorsements, joint appearances, and campaign rhetoric can make that relationship visible, but their electoral effects are not uniformly positive. Ballard, Hassell, and Heseltine (2021) find that Trump's 2018 endorsements generated financial benefits for endorsed candidates, while also increasing support through greater donations for their opponents and, as a result, reducing endorsed candidates' vote

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shares and likelihood of winning. Experimental evidence likewise shows that a Trump endorsement can move evaluations of a Republican candidate in different directions across partisan audiences (Blatte, Piccoli, and Zachem 2024).

Candidate alignment therefore has no fixed electoral direction. Its implications depend on the president's standing, district composition, the visibility of the relationship, and the responses of supporters and opponents. Nor is alignment synonymous with leader centrality. That is, a candidate may receive a presidential endorsement while organizing the campaign primarily around local issues, or lack a formal endorsement while making opposition to the president central to the contest. In the prospective application within this paper, endorsements therefore constitute evidence about alignment rather than an automatic classification of a race as leader-centered.

Asymmetric Mobilization

Asymmetric mobilization concerns whether leader-focused preferences differ in their intensity and likelihood of being converted into participation. This mechanism builds directly on, rather than substitutes for, research on negative partisanship and affective polarization. Negative evaluations of the opposing party can strengthen partisan loyalty and electoral participation, while partisan identity and political emotion can increase campaign engagement (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Leader-centered personalization adds a narrower proposition, that is, some of these positive and negative partisan emotions may become concentrated on a particular political leader.

This distinction is especially plausible in the US elections. Reiljan et al. (2024) find that although affect toward parties and leaders is strongly related, the US is a unique case study in which leader affective polarization significantly exceeds party affective polarization. A highly personalized president may therefore generate participation through attachment, aversion, perceived threat, or a desire either to defend or constrain the leader, rather than solely through evaluations of governmental performance.

Asymmetry does not imply that personalization systematically favors one party. The same leader may mobilize committed supporters, provoke opposition participation, or attract irregular voters, while the relative strength of these responses can vary across districts. Consequently, similar levels of net presidential approval can coexist with different participation environments if the intensity and turnout propensity of positive and negative leader affect differ. Aggregate approval can therefore remain informative while failing to reveal which evaluations are most likely to become votes.

For the prospective diagnostic, however, mobilization must be distinguished from mobilizing rhetoric. A campaign's claim that supporters or opponents are energized is not evidence that turnout behavior has changed. Asymmetric mobilization is therefore

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treated as observed only where independent pre-election evidence, such as survey measures of leader affect, enthusiasm, or turnout intention, is available. Where such evidence is unavailable, the mechanism is recorded as unobserved rather than inferred from campaign communication or eventual election results.

Electoral Translation

Electoral translation concerns how candidates and campaigns define the relationship between national political conditions and the district-level congressional choice. The mechanism is especially relevant when a nationally dominant president is politically salient but absent from the House races. Candidates retain some capacity to adapt their positions and campaign strategies to constituency conditions (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Under leader-centered politics, they may foreground presidential support, emphasize selective independence, or localize the contest around constituency representation and policy. On the other hand, opponents may instead seek to nationalize the race by portraying them as extensions of presidential authority.

Electoral translation is therefore related to, but distinct from, leader centrality. Leader centrality describes the extent to which the president structures the meaning of the contest, whereas translation identifies the campaign strategies through which candidates strengthen, qualify, or resist that connection. It also links the preceding mechanisms, that is, candidate alignment captures the relationship candidates construct with the president, while mobilization concerns how electorates respond to that relationship. Translation then determines how prominently those relationships are incorporated into the electoral choice presented within the district.

For forecasting, translation matters only when it provides prospective information about how the district baseline should be interpreted. Successful localization may limit the relevance of a nationally polarizing president even where formal alignment exists. On the other hand, an opposition campaign may make that relationship electorally central despite a co-partisan candidate’s efforts to distance from the president. The relevant evidence is therefore not simply whether Trump is mentioned, but whether campaign communication makes the candidate–president relationship substantive to the congressional choice.

Taken together, the three mechanisms specify how the same national leader can enter different House races in systematically different ways. Candidate alignment captures the relationship constructed with the president, asymmetric mobilization concerns the intensity with which voters may respond, and electoral translation concerns how that relationship is incorporated into the district campaign.

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A Structured Prospective Diagnostic for the 2026 House Elections

The framework presented in this paper can contribute to forecasting only if its classifications are made before electoral outcomes are known. The analytical unit is therefore the individual U.S. House district, and the target of the diagnostic is the expected partisan direction and confidence of a district contest rather than national House vote share or chamber control. The prospective application uses information publicly available through September 4, 2026. Evidence emerging after that date does not determine the classifications reported here.

The analysis begins with a prespecified district baseline that is independent of leader-centered campaign information. Underlying district competitiveness is identified using district partisanship, with races close to the national partisan midpoint treated as baseline-even and those displaying a clearer partisan advantage treated as baseline-tilted. The national generic congressional ballot provides common information about the broader electoral environment, while incumbency and previous House performance are reported as contextual indicators. Current race ratings are used only to identify electorally competitive contests rather than as the baseline forecast itself because such ratings already incorporate information about candidates and campaigns.

Leader centrality is assessed through a structured qualitative comparison of candidate-president positioning and campaign framing i.e. presidential endorsements and public positioning, the party candidates' campaign homepages, policy materials, and campaign ads or press releases available from the beginning of the election cycle through to the observation state. Independent evidence concerning presidential affect, enthusiasm, or turnout intention is not used to classify leader centrality, that is considered separately under asymmetric mobilization.

Leader centrality is classified as low when the president is largely incidental to the meaning of the congressional choice, moderate when presidential alignment or opposition recurs but competes with candidate-centered or district-centered appeals, and high when one or both campaigns substantially organize the contest around supporting, opposing, enabling, or constraining the president. The classification therefore concerns the substantive role performed by presidential leadership in the campaign rather than the raw frequency with which the president is mentioned.

For the predictive exercise this paper tests the framework on, leader centrality is treated as a pre-election diagnostic characteristic of the district campaign rather than an independent causal treatment. The analysis, therefore, does not claim that leader-centered framing causes electoral competitiveness, as competitiveness itself may shape campaign strategy. As a result, current race ratings and polls are not used to classify leader centrality, reducing the risk of endogeneity, that is, reintroducing late-stage information already generated by competitiveness.

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This is a structured qualitative diagnostic method rather than a formal content analysis. The purpose is not to transform campaign communication into a numerical index but to make the evidence underlying each judgment transparent and comparable across cases. Candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, and electoral translation are consequently considered separately. Candidate alignment concerns whether a candidate presents the relationship with the president in terms of strong identification, selective cooperation, independence, or opposition. This is analytically distinct from ideological proximity alone. Electoral translation assesses whether campaigns localize the contest or explicitly connect the House choice to enabling or constraining presidential authority. Asymmetric mobilization is treated more cautiously as it is assessed only where independent pre-election evidence concerning leader affect, enthusiasm, or turnout intention is available.

The purpose of the diagnostic is to generate prospective rather than retrospective expectations. Where leader centrality is low, leader-centered politics should not materially alter the prespecified district baseline. Where centrality is high and the available evidence points in the same partisan direction as the baseline, personalization should reinforce the expected result or increase confidence in it. Where high centrality produces leader-centered pressures running against the baseline, personalization should reduce the expected margin or confidence and, in balanced contests, may alter the directional expectation. Where leader centrality is moderate or the mechanisms point in competing directions, the appropriate implication is reduced confidence rather than an assumed directional adjustment.

Directional leader-centered pressure is inferred from candidate alignment, mobilization evidence, and the way a campaign connects the candidate to the president. Where the evidence does not support the directional inference, the diagnostic changes confidence instead of reversing the district baseline.

These expectations make the framework assessable after the election without allowing outcomes to determine the diagnosis, thereby making the framework testable. Evidence would count against the predictive value of the framework if prospective leader-centered adjustments systematically move expectations farther from observed outcomes, if districts classified as highly leader-centered display no discernible difference from otherwise comparable lower-centrality contests, or if leader-centered information repeatedly adds nothing beyond the prespecified district baseline.

Prospective Application to Four Competitive 2026 House Races

To demonstrate how the diagnostic framework can be used before election day, the paper applies it to the following four competitive House races, which are selected to provide variation in underlying district partisanship while remaining electorally consequential: CO-08, NY-17, PA-10, and PA-08. The purpose of the cases is primarily

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illustrative rather than representative. The purposive case selection, instead of representative, is done to provide variation across the dimensions relevant to the theoretical framework development in the paper instead of simply estimating an average effect across all House races (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

All four are rated ‘Toss Up’ by the Cook Political Report (2026) at the time of writing, and their underlying PVI scores range from ‘EVEN’ to ‘R+4.’ This allows the same prospective procedure to be applied to districts ranging from an even partisan baseline to a modest Republican partisan advantage and, importantly, to distinguish formal presidential endorsement from the broader concept of leader centrality. Limiting the application to Republican incumbents in Toss Up races holds constant incumbency status and co-partisanship with President, while allowing for underlying district partisanship to vary from EVEN and D+1 to R+3 and R+4. The two PA cases further provide a useful within-state contrast under a shared statewide and national political environment. The rationale behind choosing all incumbent Republican races is to avoid comparing a Democrat incumbency against a safe Republican, and vice versa, which would’ve made it difficult to measure any effect of leader personalization to show.

The cases are therefore used as contrasting prospective illustrations of how presidents can enter competitive congressional races differently. The selection does not depend on eventual electoral outcomes, which remain unknown at the time of writing, and the cases are not presented as statistically representative of competitive House districts. Instead, they permit the same structured diagnostic to be applied across different district baselines and different observable configurations of candidate-president relations and campaign framing. This is especially useful for distinguishing presidential endorsement from the broader concept of leader centrality.

For each case, Table 1 shows the prespecified district baseline, observable evidence bearing on candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, electoral translation, qualitative assessment of leader centrality, and the ex ante implication for the district baseline. All analyses use information publicly available through September 4, 2026.

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Table 1: Prospective Leader-Centered Diagnostic for Four Competition 2026 House Races

District, Baseline, and Candidates	Leader Centrality	Principal Mechanism/ Evidence	Ex Ante Implication
CO-08 EVEN – baseline even Cook Rating: Toss Up Gabe Evans (R, incumbent) vs. Manny Rutinel (D)	High	Trump endorsed Evans. Rutinel explicitly links Evans to Trump. Limited subgroup evidence also indicates negative Trump affect among Latino voters.	Modest democratic-direction adjustment from the EVEN baseline. No categorical Democratic forecast.
NY-17 D+1 – baseline even Cook Rating: Toss Up Mike Lawler (R, incumbent) vs. Cait Conley (D)	Moderate	Conley ties Lawler to Trump. Lawler emphasizes local delivery and political independence. Mobilization evidence is unobserved.	No directional adjustment. Reduced confidence.
PA-10 R+3 – baseline tilted Republican Cook Rating: Toss Up Scott Perry (R, incumbent) vs. Janelle Stelson (D)	High	Strong Perry and Trump alignment. Stelson links Perry to Trump on tariffs, costs, and governance. Mobilization evidence is unobserved.	Weakening of Republican advantage. Reduced confidence. No directional reversal.
PA-08 R+4 – baseline titled Republican Cook Rating: Toss Up Rob Bresnahan (R, incumbent) vs. Paige Cognetti (D)	Low	Trump endorsed Bresnahan. However, both campaigns predominantly localize the contest. Mobilization evidence is unobserved.	No material leader-centered adjustment. Republican-tilted baseline retained.

Note: Cook PVI is used to establish district baseline. All four contests were rated 'Toss Up' by Cook Political Report at the observation date. Race ratings are used only for case selection. 'Unobserved' mobilization indicates that no suitable independent district-level pre-election evidence was identified and does not imply that mobilization was absent. Detailed evidence are reported in Appendix A, Table A.1. Sources: Cook Political Report (2026), Trump (2026a-c), Manny for Colorado (2026), Elect Gabe Evans (2026), Hernandez (2026), Lawler for Congress (2026), Izaguirre (2026), Cait Conley for Congress (2026), Janelle Stelson for Congress (2026), Rob for PA (2026a, 2026b), and Paige Cognetti for Congress (2026).

Table 1 demonstrates why presidential endorsement and leader centrality should remain analytically distinct. All four Republican incumbents received Trump's endorsement, yet

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leader centrality ranges from low to high because the campaigns differ substantially in how they incorporate the president into the congressional choice. The contrast is clearest between PA-10, where Trump is integral to the competing campaign frames, and PA-08, where the contest remains predominantly localized.

The national context at the observation date is unfavorable to Republicans and to Trump personally. The RealClearPolling (2026) generic-ballot average placed Democrats ahead by 5.7 points, while an August 31 Reuters/Ipsos survey reported Trump's job approval at 33 percent and found strong enthusiasm about voting among 46 percent of Democrats compared with 31 percent of Republicans (Reuters 2026). These indicators are treated as common national context rather than evidence of district-level asymmetric mobilization. Since these national indicators are common to all four districts, they do not themselves generate cross-district leader-centered adjustments, as those arise from district-specific differences in candidate alignment and electoral translation. That distinction is important. Except for the limited Latino-voter evidence in CO-08, suitable independent district-level measures of leader-focused affect or turnout motivation were not available for the four illustrative contests at the time of writing. The diagnostic therefore does not infer mobilization from campaign rhetoric or from the eventual result.

Forecasting and Democratic Accountability

The significance of leader-centered personalization extends beyond whether an election forecast identifies the eventual winner. Midterm House races are conventionally understood as mechanisms of collective accountability through which voters reward or punish the governing party. Under leader-centered conditions, however, that accountability may become more explicitly relational. Voters may judge not only governmental performance or party control, but also the institutional relationship they would like to see between the individual legislator, Congress, and the president. Candidate alignment is consequential in this respect because strong identification with a president can blur the distinction between responsibility assigned to the executive and responsibility assigned to individual representatives. On the other hand, candidates who emphasize independence may attempt to preserve electoral autonomy even within a highly partisan national system. Opposition campaigns can push in the opposite direction by presenting congressional control as a means of checking presidential authority and portraying individual legislators as extensions of the executive. Electoral translation therefore concerns representation as well as forecasting. It captures whether candidates succeed in defining the House vote as a local legislative choice, a partisan judgement, or a decision about enabling or checking presidential power.

The prospective diagnostic framework cannot establish these causal processes from election outcomes alone. Its broader value is instead to identify, before the result is

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known, the contests in which the relationship between congressional candidates and presidential authority appear electorally meaningful. Trump represents an unusually intense illustration of this broader process rather than its only possible instance. The same logic should apply wherever legislative competition becomes systematically organized around loyalty to, distance from, or opposition to a dominant president.

Conclusion

Election forecasting is valuable because it requires expectations to be stated before outcomes are known, while making theoretical assumptions prospectively assessable. This paper has argued that nationalized House elections in the US may nevertheless vary in how common national political forces are organized around a particular president. Candidate alignment, asymmetric mobilization, and electoral translation identify three ways in which that variation may occur across various districts.

The diagnostic framework developed here begins with a pre-specified district baseline and asks whether leader-centered evidence observed before Election Day changes its direction or confidence. Applied prospectively to four competitive 2026 House races, the framework illustrates why formal presidential endorsement alone is insufficient to establish leader centrality: similar endorsements can be embedded in substantially different campaign strategies and district-level electoral choices.

The broader implications concern representation as well as predictive power. Where congressional competition becomes organized around loyalty to, independence from, or opposition to a president, House elections may also become choices about enabling or constraining executive power. President Donald Trump represents an unusually intense instance of this broader process. The 2026 US House elections, therefore, provide a prospective test of the diagnostic framework and an opportunity to examine how leader-centered personalization shapes congressional accountability within an increasingly nationalized political system.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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