



Midterm mania:

How Trump energizes fans and foes alike

GUEST ARTICLE
BY STEFAN NIEMANN, ARD

His name is not on the ballot, yet it all seems to be about him: Donald Trump. When Americans return to the polls for the midterm elections on Nov. 6, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives, one-third of the 100 Senate seats and no less than 36 governorships will be contested. That day also marks the middle of Trump's term. It's halftime for the 45th president of the United States. There is no doubt about it: The results of this year's midterm elections will shape the future of Donald Trump's presidency. But did his first two years in the White House change the way people vote, the way politicians campaign? And did the self-proclaimed disruptor in chief succeed in shaking up America's democracy? My answers: YES, YES and NOPE — and that's good news. I HOPE.

A study conducted in June among 2,002 adults by PEW Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank," found: "Compared with recent midterms, more voters ... say their view of the president — positive or negative — will influence their vote for Congress. A 60% majority say they consider their midterm vote as essentially a vote either for Donald Trump (26%) or against him (34%). These are among the highest shares saying their view of the president would be a factor in their vote in any midterm in more than three decades."

To the barricades! Voter mobilization ... on both sides

Twitter Trump, this self-centered, protocol-defying, provocative president, seems to deepen America's divide. I only see unconditional admiration or absolute condemnation. Many conservatives shake their heads because of his often shameful behavior — making America right again is the wet dream of Christian zealots. At the same time, progressives unite to stop Trump from destroying the liberal America they love. While this president serves as a role model for activists of the so-called alt-right movement and encourages them to openly lobby for their nationalist, xenophobic and racist agenda, I have no doubt that he also mobilizes America's left. Ironically, maybe as much as Obama did — although under a different pretext, of course. Take the swingleft.org movement, founded the day before Trump's inauguration: Its volunteers focus on contested constituencies and pump all their campaign resources into them to swing House seats from Republican to Democrat—sometimes far away from where the activists themselves live.

Greatest leader of all time vs. lame duck

So, will the Republicans defend their respective majorities in both chambers of the US Congress and have Trump's back for another two years? Or will he have to deal with a 116th Congress that is partly or entirely dominated by Democrats, and thus share the fate of his predecessor, Barack Obama, who found himself blocked by a powerful opposition?

The midterms matter so much because there's an awful lot at stake. I'm certain victorious Democrats would crush the Republican legislative agenda in Congress. If they took over either the House (possible) or the Senate (unlikely), they could block the Obamacare repeal as well as additional cuts to Medicare, Social Security and welfare. If they won the House back, Democrats would gain new momentum to investigate the Trump administration. Whether that might even lead to the president's

Democrats rebel while Republicans tend to toe Party line

impeachment — I find that impossible to predict. But the impeachment process starts in the House and might become more likely should that chamber be controlled by the president's political enemies (even though it would take two-thirds of the Senate to actually remove a president from office).

Post-power shift in the midterm elections: Democratic rebellion, Republican loyalty?

Results of primary races show a shift in patterns of the past when Republicans (or rather Tea Party crusaders) often challenged GOP leaders and Democrats fell into the party line. In 2018, it seems to be the other way around: Democrats rebel while Republicans tend to toe the party line. In fact, Republicans in Congress have turned into a club of spineless opportunists who betray most conservative principles and have abandoned all pride to please this president, one who gave them what they never expected to see: the triumph over Hillary Clinton.

In one Democratic Party primary in New York, we saw Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez land the biggest upset victory so far: The 28-year-old liberal activist and first-time candidate crushed Joseph Crowley, a veteran lawmaker who was deeply rooted in the Democratic Party establishment. He was even being tapped as a potential speaker of the House. The New York Times calls Ocasio-Cortez's victory "a stunning illustration of the energy on the left this year."

Regardless of the outcome, I'm quite optimistic that in the end, these midterms will not have been about HIM, but about something much bigger: about checks and balances, rule of law and freedom of the press. In short: about America's democracy and its unique ability to reinvent itself and emerge stronger.



Stefan Niemann

is US correspondent and director of the ARD Studio in Washington, DC.