



## After the Fact | [Midterm Outlook: What's on the Minds of Voters?](#)

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### TRANSCRIPT

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**Dan LeDuc, host:** From The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. We're days away from the midterm elections—and this is “After the Fact.”

*[Music]*

*[Archived news clips play]*

**PBS anchor:** We turn now to the politics of the midterm elections.

**NPR anchor:** Welcome to election season.

**Voice of America anchor:** Will that slowly improving economy be enough to bring voters out to the polls? That's the question this November.

**NPR anchors:** How low is voter turnout? Midterm turnout has been low for years.

*[Music]*

**Dan LeDuc:** Turnout for the last midterm was the lowest since World War II. But it's likely to be different this year. Our data point for this episode: 61 percent. The Pew Research Center says 61 percent of registered voters say they're more enthusiastic about voting than in past congressional elections. And that's the highest it's been in two decades. The center's director of political research, Carroll Doherty, has been studying the numbers and joins us now to talk about what's on voters' minds.

*[To Carroll]* It seems like enthusiasm is incredibly high in comparison to previous years. How does this sort of shake out for you at this point in the game?

**Carroll Doherty, director of political research, Pew Research Center:** Enthusiasm is up. Certainly from 2014, but that's a fairly low bar—

**Dan LeDuc:** That's a low bar.



**Carroll Doherty:** —to cross, because 2014 was the lowest turnout in 70 years. Seventy or so years. So it's pretty clear that turnout will be higher than that. How high it goes, little hard to tell at this point. But what's interesting is enthusiasm seems pretty high among members of both parties. You see a little bit of a different pattern this year than in previous midterms. In 2006, say, you had one sort of depressed party, which was the Republicans, and Democrats very enthused. This time, both parties seem pretty enthusiastic about the elections to come.

**Dan LeDuc:** So why are people more enthusiastic this year? I mean, a record high.

**Carroll Doherty:** A record high. And you know, it's fascinating. It's among members of both parties, where you see 67 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans saying they're more enthusiastic about voting this year. For Democrats, that's much higher. It's almost double the share saying they're more enthusiastic than said that in 2014. I mean, that's a really big jump in one year. Republicans, not so much.

To the answer of why, well, I think people do see the stakes in this election. They really do. They see this as a very important election. And [on] the issue of party control, which has been a growing factor in voters' minds over the last 20 years, [a] particularly high—record share—say that the issue of which party controls Congress after the election will be a factor in their vote.

**Dan LeDuc:** Now, every midterm is really sort of a focus on whatever party is in the White House. The opposing party usually steps forward. That might explain some of that dramatic jump among Democrats.

**Carroll Doherty:** That certainly does. I think the president explains part of it, as well. We see the president as a factor for 60 percent of voters. That's as high as it's been for any president in recent years. And I think, you know, what you see is Democrats in particular are motivated to come out and vote against the president. Sixty-six percent of Democrats say they see their midterm vote as a vote against the president. Forty-eight percent of Republicans see their vote as a vote for the president, which is relatively high for a party that controls the White House. I mean, that's much lower than the Democrats, obviously, but relatively high in historical terms.

**Dan LeDuc:** I mean, typically, we look at midterms as really about voting for that local person who's going to take your case to Congress, right?

**Carroll Doherty:** Exactly. All politics is local is the old saying. And that's still true, to some extent. I mean, the quality of the candidate, the degree to which they match their district or state, that's all still important, but these national trends are more important than ever.



**Dan LeDuc:** And is this notion of a nationalized midterm something that you're seeing a progressive trend about over time, or have there been just sort of blips or this year with this particular—

**Carroll Doherty:** It's been a pretty steady rise. And I think that's the nature of our politics today. It's becoming more nationalized. You know, again, we're a federal system, and local issues matter and candidates matter, and you see many candidates running against the tide of their state or district, but by and large, these national trends are becoming more prominent.

**Dan LeDuc:** And it's a fascinating time because, of course, the nation itself is pretty divided.

**Carroll Doherty:** Right.

**Dan LeDuc:** What are the top issues on people's minds, beyond sort of a national referendum, perhaps, on just the trend of where we're going?

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, I have to say that, in our field period, we were right on the cusp of Brett Kavanaugh's nomination and the controversy around him, and the hearing involving him and Christine Blasey Ford. So you know, a large percentage in both parties, somewhat more Democrats than Republicans, said Supreme Court appointments would be very important to their vote.

I think that's a very interesting sign. It could be a little bit temporary, based on the moment.

But the traditional issues still are there—the health care, the economy, you know, things like that. And I think some of the big gaps you see, some traditional areas, like the environment—which Democrats prioritize more than Republicans, long have. The economy is interesting because Republicans prioritize it a little more. I think they see it as kind of a winning issue for them.

**Dan LeDuc:** Hmm. So the top issues—health care, economy, gun policy are some of the other things that you have gleaned from your latest findings. But let's dive even a little deeper beyond that, which is if you back a Republican candidate or back a Democratic candidate, your perspectives are quite different is what the polling is showing. So talk a little bit about that.

**Carroll Doherty:** Different sets of priorities for both sets of voters. It's really interesting. They're voting on different issues. I mean, health care is a really important issue for Democrats. You see it a lot in congressional ads. You see it a lot on the campaign trail.



Not so much for Republicans, which is really a shift from years ago, because in 2010 the Republicans were running against the Obama health care plan. And so now it's flipped around, and Democrats are really making health care a central issue much more than Republicans.

**Dan LeDuc:** What else is in that category, or in these categories of sort of almost two views of America?

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, I think one of the more interesting ones that gets less attention is terrorism, which was a prominent issue for so long and now is still a pretty highly rated issue for Republicans. They see it as very important. Only 51 percent of Democrats say it's a very important issue for them.

**Dan LeDuc:** We're less than two decades after 9/11, and it's amazing how people's perceptions are changed.

**Carroll Doherty:** Yeah. And it used to be kind of an issue that crossed party lines, and now not so much anymore.

**Dan LeDuc:** Let's go through some of the others. Gap between rich and poor, racism, some of the other questions that you put forward.

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, these are the really—kind of the front new issues for Democrats surrounding racial justice, inequality, economic inequality, sexism, things like that.

**Dan LeDuc:** We're seeing that now—this is sort of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movement, all of that stuff playing out in the actual subject matter of the election.

**Carroll Doherty:** And we saw it—we just released a poll yesterday on national problems and perceptions of national problems, and you see a similar pattern there, where you see far more Democrats than Republicans saying issues around gender, transgender issues, sexism, racism, are bigger problems than Republicans see them.

**Dan LeDuc:** That sort of almost two views of America, is that a relatively new phenomenon? What's been the trend? I mean, we've seen a divided America for a while, but is there anything new here?

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, I think the divisions have just continued to widen. I think that's what we've seen. They were wider under Obama than they were under George W. Bush, and they're wider still—in terms of political values, basic attitudes about life in the United States, political values—than they were under Obama. They're wider now. And you see that continuing, that trend of polarization.



**Dan LeDuc:** Whoever wins these elections is going to have a hard time finding middle ground to govern.

**Carroll Doherty:** It is really true. There are very few issues that the parties can seem to work together on. I think one is, interestingly enough, is drug addiction. I think you see similar shares of Democrats and Republicans describing it as a problem. Democrats—

**Dan LeDuc:** This is the opioid crisis that's facing—

**Carroll Doherty:** —generally, the opioid crisis.

**Dan LeDuc:** —the nation, yeah.

**Carroll Doherty:** You see, one of the interesting statistics we had over the past year is that almost identical percentage of Democrats and Republicans say a close family member or close friend had experienced drug addiction. So both sides are experiencing it. Seems to be the potential, at least, for common ground. We saw a bill move through Congress. And I think there's some potential there. So perhaps not all is lost in the political division.

**Dan LeDuc:** Let's start talking a little bit about the voters themselves and what you learned in this latest round of polling.

Let's break down who the voters are this year sort of age by age, the old generational question. You know, the Silent generation, the Baby Boomers are the ones who are the most active participants usually, but they're getting older. Millennials and the Gen Xers are fast approaching their numbers. What are the numbers?

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, Millennials are projected to surpass Baby Boomers in the population sometime probably next year, but it's going to be a while before they really take over in the electorate.

**Dan LeDuc:** Among those who are voting age.

**Carroll Doherty:** Among those who are of voting age.

As of November 2016, which is the most recent data we have available, an estimated 62 million Millennials were voting-age citizens, surpassing Gen X and moving closer to the Baby Boomers. And so eventually, the Millennials will pass the Baby Boomers as a share of the electorate, obviously. But they vote at much lower rates. Even now, even as they age. They are voting at lower rates than those generations did at that age.



**Dan LeDuc:** So that means, as we move forward, this large voting group could drive an overall lower turnout.

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, it's difficult to say because we've gone through—the only comparison points we've had are certain elections where there's been relatively low turnout, like 2014. So we're in new ground, new territory now. And it's possible that these trends might turn around. And we see higher engagement among young people than certainly in 2014.

**Dan LeDuc:** How do you measure enthusiasm or engagement, which is another word you'd used? Is it how people pay attention to the news, how they say they'll be actually showing up at the polls?

**Carroll Doherty:** People do tend to exaggerate their level of interest in politics, I think, somewhat. So you have to take that into account. But clearly, this is a high engagement, high enthusiasm election. Certainly much higher than 2014, as I said. And you see it in the news consumption. People are consuming more news about the election, up 12 or 13 points in the last six months or so.

**Dan LeDuc:** Wow.

**Carroll Doherty:** Yeah. The share of voters who say they're tracking election news very closely is up 12 or 13 points in the last six months. And I think we could go—see it go even higher as the election approaches.

**Dan LeDuc:** You know, at a time when there is this division between people's partisan viewpoints, do you have anything in your polling that helps explain where people get their information, how engaged they are in their news sources, and what those news sources are?

**Carroll Doherty:** Well, we've done a lot of studies on that in the past. And not surprisingly, you see polarized news environments now. People have the option, people have the choices to do that via social media, traditional media, TV, cable TV, things like that. And they take advantage of that. And that's been a factor in this. It's not the only factor. I think, you know, there are a number of other factors. Again, some of the messaging we see from political parties, you know, sort of driving up their own base sentiment, things like that over the last 20 years, the sort of negativity around politics generally, but media has certainly played a role.

**Dan LeDuc:** We talked a moment ago about sort of local politics, state-level politics. And those are still opportunities for political dialogue and common ground. How is that evidenced in your polling? What have you seen that are signs of that?



**Carroll Doherty:** Well, again, aside from these handful of issues where you do see some, you know, maybe some common ground at a national level, you see high regard for local and state governments among both Republicans and Democrats. Now, that's not new, but it has—

**Dan LeDuc:** They actually like their state government.

**Carroll Doherty:** —yeah, they do. The closer you get to home, the more they like the government. Again—

**Dan LeDuc:** Isn't that intriguing? I mean, because there is such a negative tilt towards Washington.

**Carroll Doherty:** Right. Right. And it's less polar. I mean, you see the examples in a state like Maryland, where a Republican governor is running very well in one of the bluest states in the country. And you know, this is not—local conditions still matter in some cases.

**Dan LeDuc:** We started our conversation, of course, talking about enthusiasm being at a record high. At a time of division, is at least enthusiasm a sign of optimism, maybe, for where we're headed?

**Carroll Doherty:** That's a really interesting question, because is the enthusiasm based on a sort of positive vision for their party and the outcome? And in many ways, it's not, unfortunately. It's sort of fear of the other party taking over. We've seen in our prior studies of partisan antipathy or dislike of the other side, it's not so much people are sort of voting for their own side as they're voting against the other side. And you can see that in the numbers that say they're voting for or against the president. Sixty-six percent of Democrats say they see their vote as a vote against the president. So there's a lot of negativity around this.

Now, that said, there are some positive signs out there. I think there are individual voices in both parties that are pleading for greater partisan cooperation. Question is, can they get over the structural impediments in politics that sort of make this cooperation so difficult, and whether the voters will go along, whether the voters feel like we've reached a kind of tipping point where we really do need to change things in Washington and bring more compromise and cooperation.

**Dan LeDuc:** So in the end, it's going to all be on us.

**Carroll Doherty:** It always is.



*[Music]*

**Dan LeDuc:** If you want to dive deeper, read the Pew Research Center's reports on our website. They include a new analysis of how younger and older voters are approaching the midterms. Point your browser to [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](https://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact).

And if you like what you hear on this program, subscribe and leave us a rating. It really helps us out.

Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."