



The US mid-term elections: domestic and foreign policy issues

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As the US mid-term elections approach, the Democrats and Republicans are tied, approximately, in the opinion polls. The Republican Party have been tipped to gain control of the Senate but the Democrats are currently slightly ahead in overall opinion polls. There are a significant number of undecided voters, however, who could influence the outcome of the upcoming elections.

This note brings together some polling information and summarises some of the main issues and recent news stories that may affect the result.

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1 US polls

The Democrats are slightly ahead of the Republicans in two recent overall polls for the mid-term elections:

1.1 Generic Congressional Vote

CBS News

July 29–August 4, 2014
1,344 adults nationwide

Democratic	41%
Republican	37%
Depends/Not sure	17%

CBS News / The New York Times

June 20–22, 2014
1,009 respondents
Margin of error: +/- 3.0

Democratic	42%
Republican	39%
Don't know/No answer	9%
Depends	7%
Other	2%
Won't vote	1%

Source: *Politico*

These results show a decline for the Democrats from a [Pew poll](#) in April:

Challenging Midterm Landscape for Democrats

Based on registered voters

	April 2006	March 2010	April 2014
Midterm vote	%	%	%
Rep/Lean Rep	41	44	47
Dem/Lean Dem	51	44	43
Other/Don't know	8	12	9
	100	100	100
Think of vote as for or against the president?	April 2006	Feb 2010	April 2014
For the president	17	24	16
Against the president	34	20	26
President not much of a factor	46	51	54
	3	5	4
	100	100	100

Survey conducted April 23-27, 2014.
Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER/USA TODAY

Major news outlets, think-tanks and independent organisations, as well as the two main political parties, regularly conduct polls in order to track public opinion and attempt to predict the outcome of elections. The polls are currently very close, with Democrats only 3-4 points ahead. With 16-17% of respondents claiming they are undecided on who to vote for, the outcome of the election is too close to call.

1.2 Approval of Members of Congress

Approval ratings for Republicans in Congress are generally lower than those for Democrats, according to Pew, although approval for Congress in general is relatively low.

At present the Democrats control the Senate and the Republicans the House of Representatives. In mid-May, the *Washington Post* estimated that the Republicans had a 77% chance of gaining a majority in the Senate at the mid-terms, a reduction over their previous estimate.¹

1.3 Approval of President Obama

In July President Obama came top of a Quinnipiac University poll for the worst president since World War II.² George W Bush came second, five points lower on 28%. Analysts point out that two-term presidents tend to bottom out in the middle of their second term.

2 Future leaders

Hillary Clinton is the clear favourite to win the Democratic nomination. She is also forecast to beat Republican opponents, with Paul Ryan and Jeb Bush forecast to gain 41% against Clinton's 48% and Mick Huckabee and Rand Paul to gain 40% against Clinton's 49%, in a recent poll for Quinnipiac University. Chris Christie for the Republicans is projected to get 38% against 47% for Clinton.³

There has been a revival among military interventionists responding to the perceived weakness of the Obama foreign policy, and Hillary Clinton may be tempted to deploy her slightly more hawkish reputation. Clinton voted in favour of the invasion of Iraq. However, there does not seem to have been a dramatic move in public opinion towards favouring increased US military intervention. A majority of Americans appear to oppose any US military intervention in Ukraine, for example.⁴

3 Domestic issues

3.1 Environment

The administration has recently tried to revive its climate change policies, with the Environment Protection Agency setting out new rules in June 2014 to reduce emissions by 30% by 2030. Individual US states must submit their compliance plans by 2016.⁵ The rules are highly controversial in the US, with Republicans saying that they will push up the price of electricity and some politicians from coal-producing states saying that the economic impact

¹ 'Republicans have a 77% chance of taking the Senate', *Washington Post*, 16 May 2014

² 'July 2, 2014 - Obama Is First As Worst President Since WWII, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; More Voters Say Romney Would Have Been Better', Quinnipiac University

³ Politico, [Presidential polling page](#)

⁴ 'Poll: 58 Percent of Americans Want the US to Stay Out of Ukraine', Reason.com, 4 April 2014. Note that this poll was taken before the downing of the Malaysian airliner.

⁵ 'EPA Proposes First Guidelines to Cut Carbon Pollution from Existing Power Plants', Environment Protection Agency press release, 2 June 2014

will be too great. The Administration maintains the plans will cut fuel bills by encouraging efficiency.

3.2 Health care

After serious teething troubles ‘Obamacare’ looks to be working better. Enrolment is above projections. The number of Americans without insurance has dropped.⁶ Costs appear lower than expected. However, polls suggest that the policy is still fairly unpopular:

[Obamacare Approval](#)

[Quinnipiac University](#)

June 24–30, 2014

1,446 registered voters nationwide

Margin of error: +/- 2.6

Oppose	55%
Support	43%
Don't know/No answer	2%

Source: *Politico*

The economy, jobs and the budget deficit seem to be the most important issues for voters, with the budget deficit slightly more important for Republican voters and jobs more important for Democrats.⁷

3.3 Immigration

Immigration continues to be a high-profile issue for the Administration. It recently announced new measures to deal with illegal immigrant children, asking Congress for \$3.7 billion for border security measures as well as strengthening systems to deal with the children after they have got to the US. Tens of thousands of unaccompanied children have crossed the US-Mexico border in recent months, reportedly fleeing gang activities in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Thousands are being held in interim shelters along the border while their refugee claims are processed. Congress has adjourned for the summer without approving any extra money to address the situation. Obama has called on Central American governments to help stem the flow of migrant children.

Republicans in the House have said that the measures will not go through; that much smaller amounts should be used and that they should be better targeted. Liberals have said that less money should be dedicated to border surveillance drones and more to humanitarian aid.

On the broader issue of illegal/undocumented immigrants, of whom there are said to be approximately 11 million in the US, the White House has a plan to strengthen border security, streamline legal immigration procedures, set out a route for immigrants to gain citizenship and crack down on employers who hire illegal immigrants.⁸

Republican leaders blocked a vote on changes to immigration legislation in May 2014, casting doubt on whether any legislation could be passed this year.

⁶ ‘Obamacare enrolment expected to surpass 7.5 million’, *MSNBC*, 10 April 2014

⁷ Pew research Center, [The 2014 Midterm: Congressional Vote, Top Issues](#)

⁸ The White House, [Immigration](#)

3.4 Washington gridlock

The Supreme Court made a significant judgment in June 2014 when it ruled that the White House had breached the Constitution by using recess appointment procedures when the Senate had declared itself to be in session in 2012. Critics of the judgment say that the Senate was holding short pro-forma sessions every few days with most Senators on holiday simply to block appointments to the National Labor Relations Board.

The House of Representatives has voted along party lines in favour of a law suit against President Obama for overstepping the powers of the presidency. Critics say that the Administration has been forced to use more executive authority because of Republican obstructionism. For example, Speaker John Boehner has refused to call a vote on raising the minimum wage or approving funds to tackle the influx of unaccompanied children from Central America. Democrats have accused Republicans of wasting time and money. Some Republicans wish to go further and are advocating impeachment. Legal scholars have questioned whether Congress is able to prove injury by the president and prevail in court.⁹

4 Economy

It was announced in July that US unemployment had fallen to 6.1%.¹⁰ Earnings growth is predicted to pick up slightly. Analysts say that an interest rate rise is unlikely to be announced soon by the Federal Reserve, but another point's reduction in the unemployment rate would bring the interest rate sharply up the agenda.

The Economist reported that the economy grew by 4% in the second quarter of 2014 and has forecast that annual real GDP growth will be 2.2%. It has also predicted that consumer spending will grow steadily in the coming months, supported by strong job creation, low interest rates and low levels of household debt.¹¹

However, economic recovery has also roused inflation concerns. There is a risk that prices could rise but wages will not. Economic growth has mainly been driven by consumption, but household spending depends on purchasing power and, so far, growth in wages has been modest.¹²

The improved forecasts do not appear to have had much impact on ordinary Americans, however, who are not fully convinced that the jobs market and the economy in general are improving.¹³ Familiar stories of poorly-paid and part-time jobs may explain this.

5 International relations

5.1 Security/Defence

The President's West Point Military Academy speech 28 May 2014 re-iterated the Administration's general approach to foreign policy:

First, let me repeat a principle I put forward at the outset of my presidency - the United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand

⁹ 'House Votes to Sue Obama for Overstepping Powers', *The New York Times*, 30 July 2014

¹⁰ 'US unemployment falls to 6.1% - and should keep on falling', *Guardian*, 3 July 2014

¹¹ 'US: In brief', *The Economist*, 8 August 2014

¹² 'US recovery rouses inflation concerns', *The Financial Times*, 1 August 2014

¹³ 'Midterm Election Indicators Daunting for Democrats, No Improvement in Perceptions of Job Market', Pew Research Center, 5 May 2014

it - when our people are threatened; when our livelihood is at stake; or when the security of our allies is in danger.¹⁴

But he also insisted that US military action could not be the only or main component of US leadership in every instance: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail”.

President Obama stated that terrorism remained the “most direct threat to America at home and abroad”. He welcomed individual empowerment while acknowledging that it also increased the capacity of terrorists to do harm. He called for a change of counterterrorism strategy, “drawing on the successes and shortcomings of our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan -- to more effectively partner with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold”.

The speech marked some new departures:

- More partnerships with other countries in counterterrorism. The administration has asked for funding of \$5 billion to set up a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund to work with countries from South Asia to the Sahara, particularly on training.
- More help for the more moderate elements opposing the Assad government in Syria.

Drone strikes will continue to feature as a counterterrorism tool although under a somewhat more transparent legal framework requiring disclosure by the Administration.

Recent polls have shown that the largest number of Americans on record – almost 60% - believe US power is weakening. Some American scholars have argued that if the US does not overcome internal dysfunctions such as congressional gridlock and excess partisanship, it will lose its influence on the world stage.¹⁵

5.2 Europe

The US wants Europe to sort out its economic difficulties and take more responsibility for its own defence, including ensuring stability in the wider European neighbourhood. The US leadership ‘from behind’ in the action against the Qaddafi regime in Libya was an example of this. However, subsequent instability in Libya has shown up the difficulties of establishing security in such situations. This chimes with the West Point speech comments about counterterrorism partnerships.

Persuading Europeans to spend more on their own defence will not be easy, given the pressure on European public finances. This is one of the reasons why the US is in favour of the UK staying in the EU, where, as one of only two serious military powers in Europe, it may be able to help convince other Member States to increase their commitment, while discouraging EU Common Foreign and Security Policy from drifting into rivalry with NATO.¹⁶

Russia and Ukraine

The US and the European Union have increased economic sanctions against Russia for supporting pro-Russian separatists fighting Ukraine Government forces. Ukraine and

¹⁴ ‘Obama West Point speech in full with analysis’, *BBC News Online*, 29 May 2014

¹⁵ ‘Is the US in decline?’ *The World Today*, August & September 2014

¹⁶ ‘Transatlantic triage? European and UK ‘grand strategy’ after the US rebalance to Asia’, Chatham House, September 2013

Western governments have accused Russia of fomenting instability in Ukraine by arming the rebels. Russia denies these accusations.

The shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July has exacerbated the situation in Ukraine. US and Ukrainian Government officials allege that a Russian-made missile was used to shoot down the plane from rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine. Russia and the rebels have denied involvement. There has been renewed fighting in the area around the crash site, hindering the mission to investigate and recover remains. A team of US military specialists were sent to Kiev to assist the recovery effort.

Germany/spying

Relations with Germany took a severe knock in 2013 after revelations by Edward Snowden that the US National Security Agency had bugged Chancellor Angela Merkel's phone and that American agents had recruited at least one member of the German intelligence service, the BND. In response to the second of these acts the German Government denounced the 'stupidity' of the CIA and expelled its bureau chief from Berlin.¹⁷ Germany is to investigate the Snowden allegations.

5.3 Middle East

Iraq

Iraq has once again become a problem since the 'surge' of the Islamic militant group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, now known as Islamic State) from northern Syria to take control of parts of Iraq. The US has sent approximately 300 military personnel to Iraq recently, ostensibly to advise Iraqi armed forces and protect US interests in Baghdad. This has had the unexpected result of commanders from the overseas Quds Force of the elite Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps doing a similar job to US elite forces. Syria has also carried out air strikes over the border in Iraq against Islamic State positions.

The US position is that a government of national unity in Baghdad is the only way to build a firm enough foundation for the Iraqi Government to push back against ISIS. This looks difficult to achieve, however, as Iraqi politicians continue to argue about government posts. Some commentators are suggesting that the US should prepare for the collapse of Iraq and should increase cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government.¹⁸

The US has moved an aircraft carrier into the Gulf but has said that US ground troops will not be going into combat in Iraq.

The US is holding talks with Sunni Muslim officials who have requested help in organising grass-roots fighting forces to counter the Islamic State. US officials believe breaking Sunni tribes away from the Islamic State is critical to the long-term security and territorial integrity of Iraq. Some officials have said that the effort is a cornerstone of developing a strategy to confront jihadists across the Middle East. There are also some officials who are sceptical that progress can be made whilst the Shiite-dominant government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, is in power.¹⁹

President Obama announced on 8 August that he had authorised an air strike against IS militants in northern Iraq. The Pentagon stated that two F/A-18 aircraft attacked artillery that was being used against Kurdish forces defending the city of Irbil. This is the first time that the

¹⁷ 'Germany asks top US intelligence official to leave country over spy row', *Guardian*, 10 July 2014

¹⁸ 'Washington should soften opposition to direct Kurdish oil sales', *New York Times*, 14 July 2014

¹⁹ 'US backs Sunni plan to fight Islamic State jihadists in Iraq', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 August 2014

US has been directly involved in a military operation in Iraq since the withdrawal of American troops in 2011. Obama stated that the US would act “carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide” against the Yazidi and Christian communities. He has stated, however, that he will not send troops back to Iraq. US planes have also carried out air drops of food and water, at the request of the Iraqi Government, to those who have been displaced during the conflict and are in need of supplies.²⁰

Obama’s approach to the crisis in Iraq has been criticised as weak and ineffective by some leading Republicans, including Senator John McCain, who believe the US should be doing more to intervene. They have described the current US policy as “too timid” and argue that they should be providing substantial training and equipment to the Kurds. On the other hand, prominent Democrats have defended Obama’s position, stating that the US should be trying to prevent genocide in Iraq while also helping Kurds protect their capital, but that the Iraqi Government should provide protection for its own people and that the US should not increase its use of military force.²¹

Iran

The Administration remains committed to pursuing a deal with Iran on its nuclear programme. Negotiators have made significant progress recently but gaps between the positions of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and Iran remain. The most important of these is the West’s insistence that Iran’s enrichment capacity should be limited enough to provide assurance that no ‘dash’ for a nuclear weapon could be carried out. The deteriorating situation in Iraq may help to bring the two sides closer together as it underlines shared interests in stability. The same might be said about Afghanistan. However, there are voices on both sides arguing against concessions.

Jason Rezaian, a reporter for the *Washington Post* who holds both American and Iranian citizenship, is being detained in Iran along with two photojournalists.²² The State Department has not released any information about their whereabouts or welfare but has called on the Iranian government to release them immediately.

Israel and Gaza

With regard to the Gaza conflict, Obama has stated that Israel has a right to defend itself and cannot tolerate “missiles raining down on its cities” or tunnels under their land that can be used to launch terrorist attacks.²³ However, the White House has also condemned Israel’s shelling of a UN facility housing civilians, calling it “totally unacceptable and totally indefensible”²⁴ US officials are urging both sides to respect a humanitarian ceasefire in order to give innocent civilians a reprieve from violence.²⁵ Secretary of State John Kerry has also urged both sides to use the ceasefire to move towards broader negotiations.²⁶

5.4 China

There is increasing concern that China is pursuing a policy of ‘salami-slicing’ in the Far East: i.e. making small aggressive moves that the US does not think are serious enough to

²⁰ [‘Iraq: US air strike on Islamic State militants in Iraq’](#), *BBC*, 8 August 2014

²¹ [‘US presses Iraq strikes, Republicans criticise ‘ineffective’ Obama’](#), *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 10 August 2014

²² [‘Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian held in Iran’](#), *BBC News Online*, 25 July 2014

²³ [‘The President’s News Conference’](#), 1 August 2014

²⁴ [‘Gaza UN shelter attack ‘totally unacceptable’ – White House’](#), *BBC*, 31 July 2014

²⁵ [‘Gaza 72-hour humanitarian truce by Israel and Hamas begins’](#), *BBC*, 1 August 2014

²⁶ [‘Gaza: Israeli-Palestinian indirect talks begin in Cairo’](#), *BBC*, 6 August 2014

respond to, gradually undermining US allies' confidence in US protection and persuading them to seek accommodation with China rather than rely on the US. That is why arguments over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, contested between China and Japan, have wider significance. The US Administration has pledged to defend Japan's administration of the islands. Republicans have criticised the Administration's foreign policy as being weak, which they also blame for the Russian annexation of Crimea.

There is also a serious problem with Chinese hackers carrying out industrial espionage. An earlier espionage working group between China and the US was closed down after the US charged five Chinese military officers with hacking.

Despite the pivot, US policy has not sought confrontation with China, hoping that China's self-described 'peaceful rise' policy would turn out to be true. Lately, however, there have been increasing worries that this could be a smokescreen for more aggressive policy that the US will have to confront. The US and China's mutual economic dependency may not be enough to keep frictions at bay.

China has invited the US to co-operate in financing and building infrastructure in Africa and other parts of the developing world. Officials argue that partnership with China on infrastructure projects such as building dams would be an important breakthrough in collaboration at a time when military rivalry between the two countries in Asia is growing. However, some remain wary over US involvement.²⁷

5.5 Africa

During the first US-Africa summit, President Obama announced that US companies have pledged \$14 billion of investment in new projects, including a 'Power Africa' initiative to expand electricity generation across the continent.²⁸

Ebola epidemic

Approximately 50 US public health workers have been sent to West Africa to help fight the outbreak of Ebola. A senior US health official has said that the outbreak is out of control but insisted it can be stopped. Dr Thomas Frieden, director of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, announced the new US measures saying that "we do know how to stop Ebola. It's old-fashioned plain and simple public health: find the patients, make sure they get treated, find their contacts, track them, educate people, do infection control in hospitals"²⁹

Dr Kent Brantly, an American doctor, and Nancy Writebol, an American aid worker, who contracted the disease in Liberia, have been flown back to the US to be treated at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. Emory is one of four facilities in the US able to handle Ebola patients. Both have been given an experimental drug known as ZMapp and appear to be showing significant improvement.³⁰ The drug was developed by the biotech firm Mapp Biopharmaceutical Inc, based in San Diego. The use of the drug on the two infected Americans is raising questions as there is no proven treatment or vaccine for Ebola.

²⁷ 'Beijing invites US to link up over Africa', *Financial Times*, 5 August 2014

²⁸ 'Obama: Investment in Africa Depends on Security', *Voice of America*, 6 August 2014

²⁹ 'Ebola outbreak: US experts head to West Africa', *BBC*, 3 August 2014

³⁰ 'Second American Ebola patient wheeled into Atlanta hospital for treatment', *Chicago Tribune*, 5 August 2014