

## 2026 Midterm Elections

89 Days Out: The Ascendant Left and the Democratic Party

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### Election Dashboard

**Bottom line** Voters lean Democratic, Republicans lead on money; \$4 gas keeps affordability the top issue.

#### Presidential approval

Net, approve minus disapprove

**-20.6**

2nd-term low



Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 5 · line since Feb

#### Generic congressional ballot

National polling average

**D +6.5**

Democrats lead

Peak D+7.1 (Jun) → D+5.9 → recovering

Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 5 · line since Feb

#### Gas price, national average

Regular grade, AAA

**\$4.08**

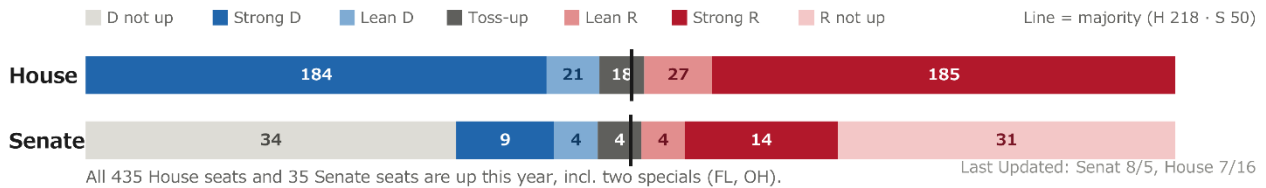
Up 28% y/y

Mid-Jan \$2.83; spiked on the Iran war

AAA · Aug 5 · line since Feb

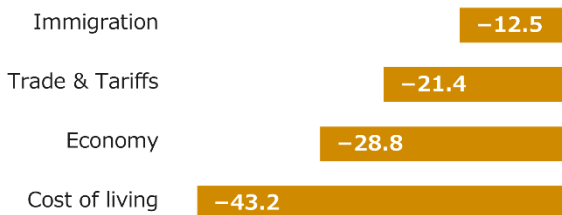
#### House and Senate race ratings

Cook Political Report



#### Approval by issue area

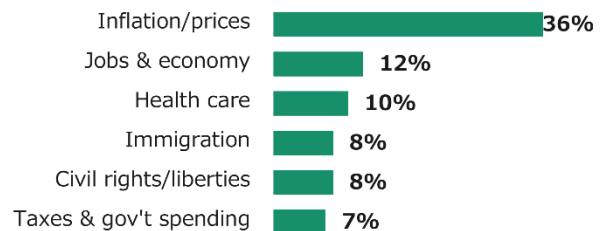
Net, Silver Bulletin



Issue-area averages · early August

#### Voters' most important issue

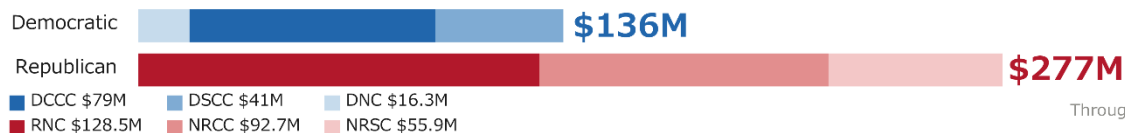
Economist/YouGov



Jul 31-Aug 3 · registered voters

#### Party committee cash on hand (six national committees)

FEC filings



Through Jun 30, 2026

\*For each party, the total combines the national committees (DNC/RNC), House campaign committees (DCCC/NRCC), and Senate campaign committees (DSCC/NRSC). Republicans hold roughly twice as much. The DNC separately reports \$18.5 million in debt.

#### Next up

Next major primary: Aug 11 Wisconsin Gubernatorial Democratic Primary, in which DSA member Francesca Hong is the frontrunner.

**Election Day: Tue, Nov 3 · 89 days out**

Sources: Silver Bulletin (approval, generic ballot) · Cook Political Report (ratings) · Economist/YouGov (top issue) · AAA · FEC

Prepared Aug 5, 2026

- Progressive Abdul El-Sayed beat the Democratic establishment's preferred candidate in Michigan's August 4 Senate primary. It was a major breakthrough for the left: winning a statewide primary in a battleground state, while progressive candidates also picked up several House primary wins that same night. At this point, the party leadership can no longer treat the left as a fringe movement.
  - But that does not mean the left has taken control of the party. El-Sayed won the primary by about one point, despite facing record spending from an AIPAC-linked super PAC. And in Missouri, an establishment incumbent won easily. Money, incumbency, and the party establishment still matter.
  - The broader political environment is also working in the Democrats' favor. Trump's approval rating is near the lows of his second term, while the generic ballot and most major election forecasts currently lean Democratic.
  - At the same time, the left's rise is sharpening the party's internal debate. Progressive candidates can bring enthusiasm and turnout, but the socialist label can still hurt with independents and swing voters. The Democrats' main challenge this cycle will be figuring out how to turn the left's energy into wins in November.
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## **Michigan's results, and the next test in Wisconsin**

### **(1) The Michigan Senate primary (August 4): voters picked change**

Abdul El-Sayed won the August 4 Democratic primary for retiring Sen. Gary Peters' seat, defeating Rep. Haley Stevens, the establishment favorite. With 95% counted, El-Sayed led 48.48% to 47.51%. Backed by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, he supports Medicare for All, refuses corporate money, and describes himself as a progressive, not a socialist.

This win matters because it came statewide in a battleground state, not in a deep-blue urban district where the Democratic primary effectively decides the election. Michigan voted Republican in the 2016 and 2024 presidential elections, so El-Sayed needed support beyond the left's usual urban base. That makes it harder for party leaders to dismiss the left as a force limited to a handful of safe districts.

He also won despite a major establishment effort to stop him. According to CNN, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer opposed his nomination and worked through Peters to persuade third-place candidate Mallory McMorrow to leave the race, consolidating support behind Stevens. El-Sayed won anyway.

Younger voters and Arab American and Muslim voters appear to have been key. Emerson's final poll showed El-Sayed leading by 42 points among voters under 50. Michigan's Arab American and Muslim communities had also shown their political strength in 2024, when more than 100,000 Democrats voted "uncommitted"<sup>1</sup> over Gaza.

Still, the result was much closer than expected. Emerson's final poll had El-Sayed ahead by 15 points; he won by about one. Nearly half of primary voters backed Stevens, and El-Sayed now has to bring many of them over.

In November he faces Republican Mike Rogers, who lost Michigan's 2024 Senate race to Elissa Slotkin by about 19,000 votes. Some polls show El-Sayed trailing Rogers by around seven points, while a late-July

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<sup>1</sup> The \*\*\*"Uncommitted" movement\*\* was a grassroots campaign during the 2024 Democratic presidential primaries that urged voters to cast their ballots for "Uncommitted" rather than a specific candidate, in protest against the Biden administration's policy toward Israel and Gaza. More than 100,000 voters in Michigan chose Uncommitted, and the movement subsequently spread to other states. One of its co-founders, Abbas Alawieh, is now expected to win the Democratic primary for the Michigan State Senate in 2026, illustrating how a protest movement that emerged over Gaza has evolved into an effort to elect candidates at the state level.

Mitchell poll had the race tied. Michigan could decide Senate control, making this a major test of whether a left-wing candidate can win statewide in a battleground.

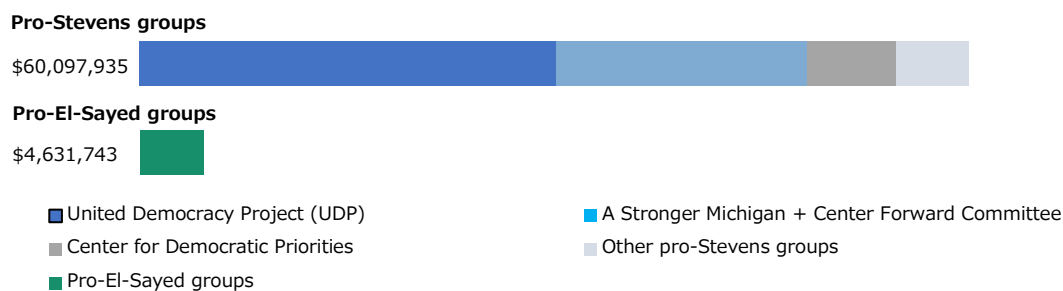
The broader issue is that Democrats still lack a clear post-2024 identity. The left is filling part of that vacuum with an economic populist message focused on affordability and reducing corporate influence. A one-point win does not mean the left now controls the party. But the establishment tried hard to stop El-Sayed and failed, making the left much harder to ignore.

## (2) Israel becomes the issue: how foreign policy turned into a fight over democracy

Money defined this race. FEC and FCC records put outside spending at more than \$60 million. Brendan Glavin of OpenSecrets said the total far exceeded the biggest Senate races of 2024.<sup>2</sup> The largest spender was AIPAC and its affiliated super PAC, the United Democracy Project, which spent roughly \$30 million supporting Stevens and attacking El-Sayed — its biggest investment ever in a single race.

### Figure: Outside money in the Michigan Senate Democratic primary was heavily one-sided

Outside groups spent more than \$60 million in total. The AIPAC-affiliated United Democracy Project (UDP) put a record sum behind Stevens. It was the most expensive Democratic congressional primary ever, and most of the money flowed through super PACs, which face no contribution limits.



But AIPAC's support also became a liability for Stevens. At a July campaign stop, she was asked twice about the group without mentioning it by name. In the July 27 debate, she again avoided giving a direct answer about the relationship. El-Sayed tied her vote for \$3.3 billion in military aid to Israel to AIPAC's spending and framed the issue less around Israel itself than around who influences Democratic candidates. Sanders made the same argument, casting the race as a test of billionaire and super PAC influence.

The spending did not stop El-Sayed, but the one-point result suggests it mattered. His 15-point lead in the final Emerson poll nearly disappeared by Election Day. Money still moves elections; the problem for Stevens was that the money itself became part of El-Sayed's case against her.

Michigan was especially fertile ground for that argument. The state has the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the country, AIPAC has spent heavily in Democratic primaries against critics of Israel, and the Gaza issue has become closely tied to the left's broader attack on money in politics. El-Sayed turned what could have been a narrow foreign-policy dispute into a wider argument about who has influence inside the Democratic Party.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/07/how-michigan-became-most-expensive-democratic-primary-ever-haley-stevens-abdul-el-sayed-aipac/>

### (3) The opinion shift underneath the party's fight

The party fight reflects a broader shift in public opinion. In Gallup's February survey, 41% of Americans sympathized more with the Palestinians and 36% with the Israelis. This was the first time sympathy for Palestinians have led since Gallup began asking the question in 2001. A year earlier, Israel led 46% to 33%.

The shift is strongest among Democrats and younger voters. Only 33% of Democrats now sympathize more with Israel, while independents favor the Palestinians by 11 points. Among 18- to 34-year-olds, 53% sympathize more with the Palestinians and just 23% with Israel. Republicans remain strongly pro-Israel at 70%, leaving a record-wide partisan gap.

That creates a growing mismatch inside the Democratic Party. Much of the base has moved on Israel, while many elected officials and major donors remain firmly pro-Israel. AIPAC's spending in Michigan put that divide on display, and El-Sayed's win showed that a candidate can survive it even in a statewide battleground primary.

The shift also goes beyond the Democratic left. Support for Israel has declined among younger Americans across party lines, including Republicans. That suggests the long-standing U.S. consensus around Israel is becoming less automatic as younger voters make up a larger share of the electorate.

### (4) The other races that night: four wins, one loss, and where the line sits

Missouri's 1st District went the other way. Wesley Bell, the AIPAC-backed incumbent, defeated former Rep. Cori Bush 59.2% to 36.9%, far wider than his 5.5-point win over her in 2024. The result is a reminder that the left's momentum does not automatically translate into victories. Bell had the backing of Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Congressional Black Caucus and several unions. Where incumbency, organization and a challenger's weaknesses line up, the establishment can still win comfortably.

**Figure: The major Democratic primaries on August 4**

| Race            | Left candidate     | Establishment        | Race profile                                                            | Result            |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Michigan Senate | El-Sayed           | Stevens              | Battleground state, statewide; outside spending over \$60M              | Left win          |
| Michigan 7th    | Lawrence           | Brink, Maasdam       | Toss-up battleground; moderate vote split between two candidates        | Left win          |
| Michigan 12th   | Tlaib (incumbent)  | Jackson              | Safe Democratic seat; majority Black and Arab district                  | Left win          |
| Michigan 13th   | McKinney           | Thanedar (incumbent) | Safe Democratic seat, majority Black; challenge to a sitting Democrat   | Left win          |
| Missouri 1st    | Bush (former rep.) | Bell (incumbent)     | Safe Democratic seat; comeback bid by the member AIPAC unseated in 2024 | Establishment win |

Note: Michigan Senate figures at 95% counted; others near-complete. Michigan's 12th and 13th and Missouri's 1st are safe Democratic seats, so the primary winner is all but assured of victory in November

Michigan's 7th District is a more important test. Democrats won it in 2018, Republican Tom Barrett took it back in 2024 by 3.7 points, and Trump carried it by about one point. Unlike a safe Democratic seat, the nominee here has to win a genuine battleground.

William Lawrence won the primary with 43%, but the moderate vote was split. Sen. Elissa Slotkin backed Matt Maasdam, while the Democratic Women's Caucus backed Angela Witwer Brink. Together, the two

moderates took 56.8%. That does not mean their votes would have combined neatly behind one candidate, but it does mean Lawrence did not win a majority of Democratic voters. Some local and congressional Democrats have openly questioned whether he can beat Barrett.

At the same time, Lawrence showed how left-populist issues can work outside deep-blue cities. His first TV ad<sup>3</sup> focused not on health care or Gaza, but on opposing a planned data center. The issue cuts across party lines through electricity costs, farmland and local development. His victory speech targeted “Silicon Valley billionaires” and “DC insiders.” Framing data centers as big business versus local communities is worth watching, both as a policy issue and as a campaign message.

#### **(5) Next up: the Wisconsin governor primary (August 11)**

The next test comes August 11 in Wisconsin’s Democratic primary for governor. State Rep. Francesca Hong, a DSA member, leads the latest Marquette poll at 38%, ahead of Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley, state Sen. Kelda Roys and Joel Brennan.

Republicans are already trying to shape the race. The Republican Governors Association sees Hong as the weaker general-election opponent and is running ads that could help her win the nomination. Rep. Tom Tiffany is the likely Republican nominee.

The stakes are high. Democrats are trying to win their first state-government trifecta since 2010, and much of the party establishment worries Hong would make that harder. Minnesota votes the same day, with progressive Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan favored in the Senate primary, giving the left two more tests in the Midwest.

### **The leadership's posture is shifting too**

The turning point came in November 2025, when DSA member Zohran Mamdani won the New York City mayor’s race. The left’s momentum carried into the 2026 primaries. Chris Rabb won Pennsylvania’s 3rd District in May. In New York, DSA-backed candidates won the 7th and 13th, while Brad Lander defeated incumbent Dan Goldman in the 10th. In Colorado’s 1st, 29-year-old democratic socialist Melat Kiros beat 15-term incumbent Diana DeGette. In Maine, Sanders ally Troy Jackson became the Democratic nominee after Graham Platner withdrew. The left has now won more than a dozen races this cycle.

The establishment has responded in three ways. The first is blocking left candidates in primaries. Schumer’s reported effort to consolidate support behind Haley Stevens in Michigan is the clearest example.

The second is open criticism. Rahm Emanuel argued in a July Wall Street Journal piece that the DSA is pushing positions that do not sell nationally and make it easier for Republicans to attack Democrats. Sanders’s response is that the status quo is failing and candidates such as El-Sayed and Flanagan reflect a growing grassroots movement.

The third is accommodation. Jeffries has taken the more pragmatic approach: after several of his endorsed incumbents lost, he congratulated every Democratic nominee in New York, including the socialists. If Democrats retake the House, he could end up leading the largest democratic socialist bloc the caucus has ever had.

That pragmatism runs both ways. In 2024, New York City’s DSA narrowly rejected a proposal to challenge Jeffries, reportedly after Mamdani urged members to avoid the fight. Parts of the left appear more interested in building influence inside the party than in taking on the leadership everywhere at once.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@wewill2026/video/7657161029406706975>

## What it means for the midterms

The left's rise cuts both ways for Democrats. Its biggest strength is turnout and grassroots organization. Democratic candidates have been overperforming in state legislative special elections, suggesting an energized base, while distrust of big business has created more room for candidates who reject corporate money. El-Sayed and Kiros both benefited from that energy.

The general-election risks are just as clear. The socialist label remains unpopular with independents, and Republicans will use it aggressively in swing races. Most left-wing victories have also come in safe Democratic seats or against weak incumbents, while control of Congress will be decided in suburban and semi-rural battlegrounds. El-Sayed's weaker numbers with independents show the problem. Bruising primaries can also drain money and deepen tensions with major donors.

The leadership now has to decide how closely to embrace the left. Push it away and Democrats risk alienating younger voters and activists; embrace it too closely and Republicans get an easier line of attack. Israel and Gaza create the same tension between younger and Arab American voters on one side and donors and moderates on the other.

The most likely approach is a division of labor: let left-wing candidates rely on their own grassroots strength in safe seats, while party money focuses on more moderate candidates in battlegrounds. Michigan's 7th District will be an early test of whether that approach holds.

These primaries did not make the left the majority of the Democratic Party. But they did show that it can no longer be dismissed as a movement limited to a few deep-blue cities. Its message has also shifted toward affordability, corporate power and other pocketbook issues, giving it broader reach.

The key question for 2026 is no longer whether the left has momentum. It does. The question is whether Democrats can turn that energy into wins in competitive races without losing the voters they still need in the middle.

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