The 2026 Midterm Elections: What's in the Cards?

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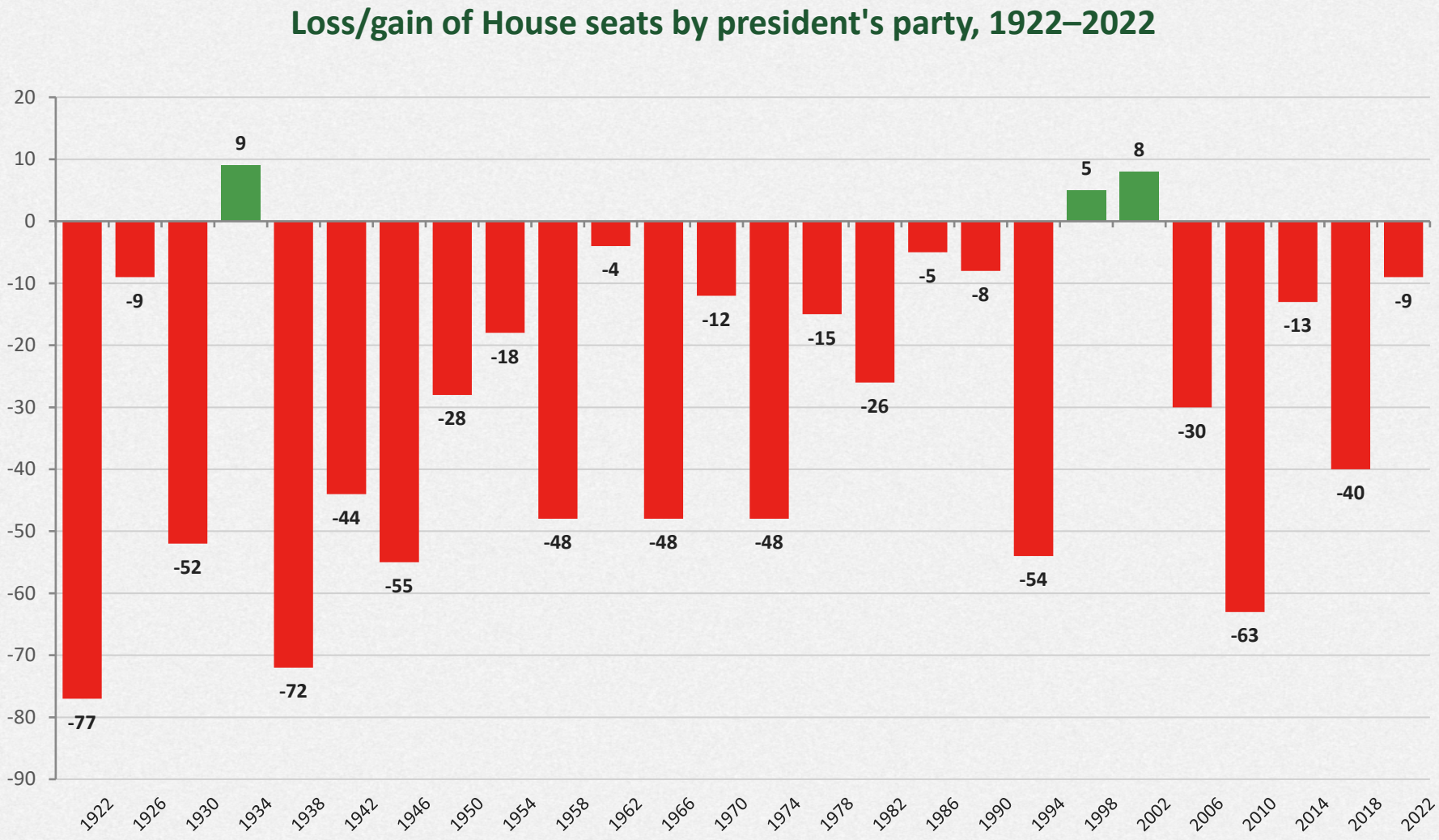
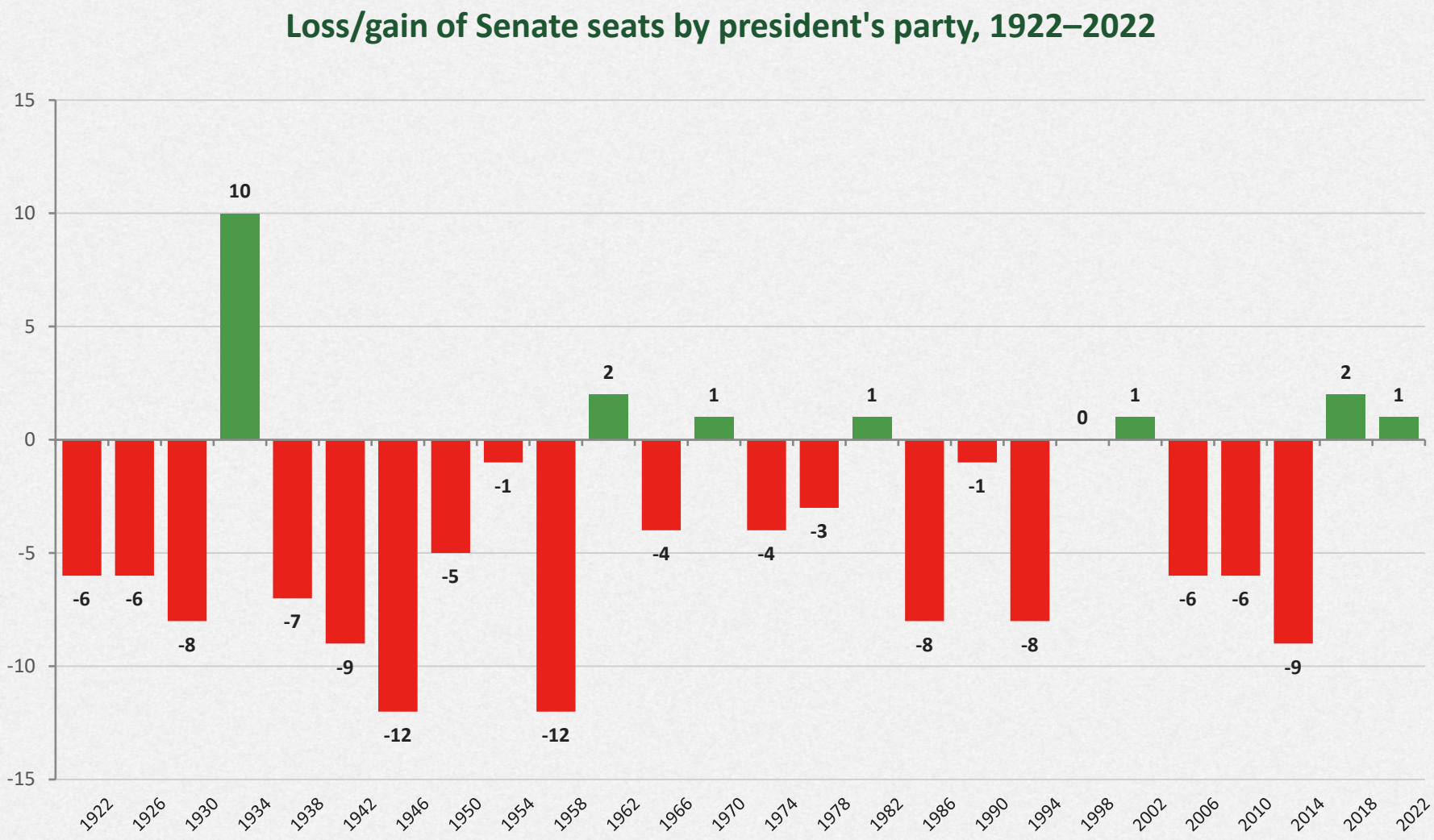
The National Landscape is Everything

- The old adage that “all politics are local” does not apply this year.
- Midterm elections have always been, in part, referenda on the president’s leadership. Yet, partisan incumbents with strong affinity with their own constituencies could overcome an unpopular president in a competitive district.
- Intensified polarization and historically low presidential approval in a modern midterm cycle has changed that.
- The recent *Washington Post*/Schar School at GMU poll of two GOP-lean districts, the 1st and the 5th, evidence this changed dynamic.
- The authoritative Cook Political Report declared that among the hundreds of polling outfits, only six are consistently reliable and accurate, including the *Post*/Schar poll that has accurately called every race it has polled since it began in 2016.
- Let’s start with the national landscape as though it is any normal midterm cycle.

Midterm Tendency - House Elections

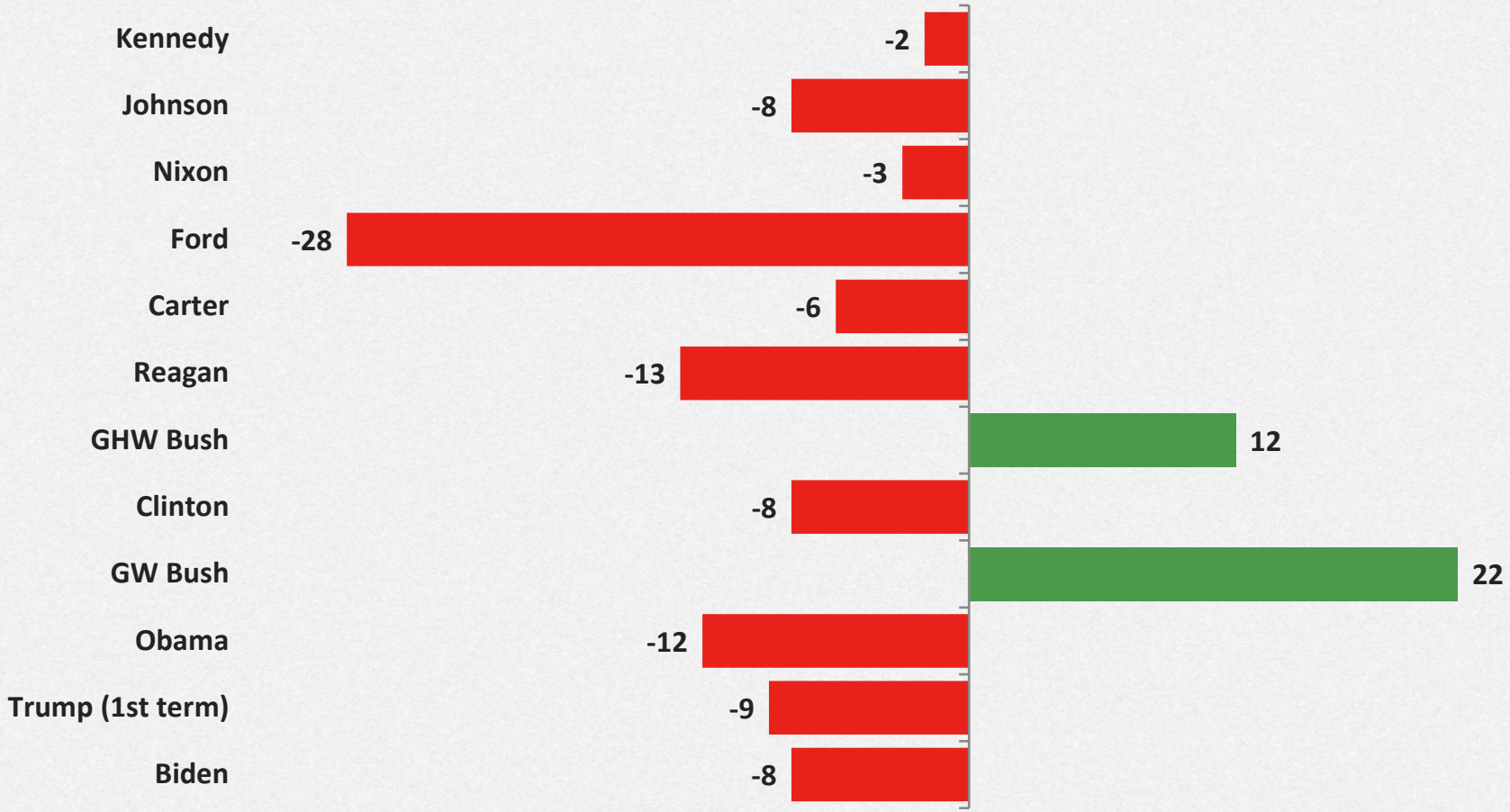


Midterm Tendency - Senate Elections

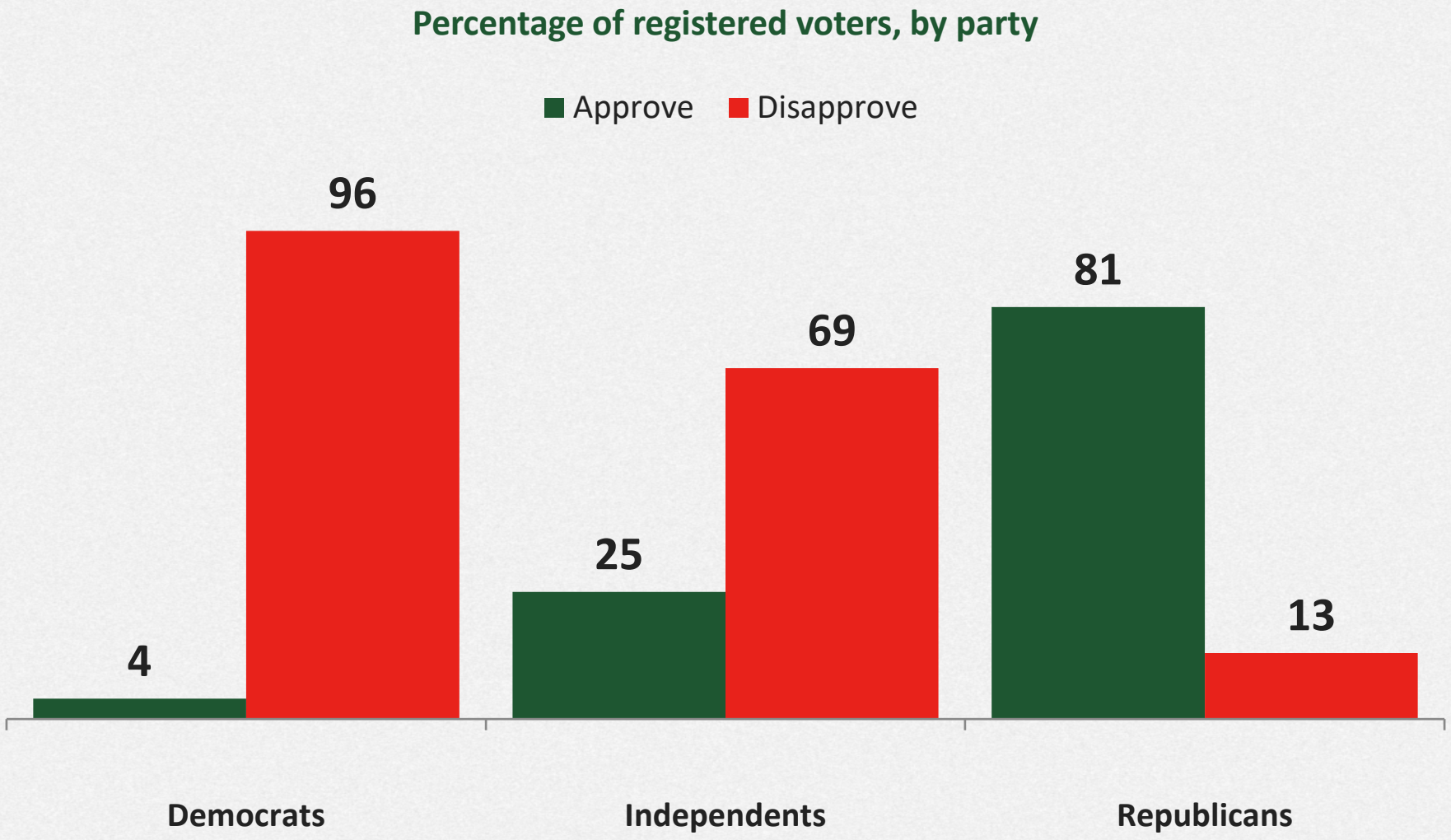


Change in Presidential Approval from First Year to Second Year

Percentage-point change in presidential approval, year one to year two



Trump's Approval Rating Problem



Source: Quinnipiac University national poll, Sept. 24–27, 2026 (overall: 34% approve, 61% disapprove)

The Virginia Landscape

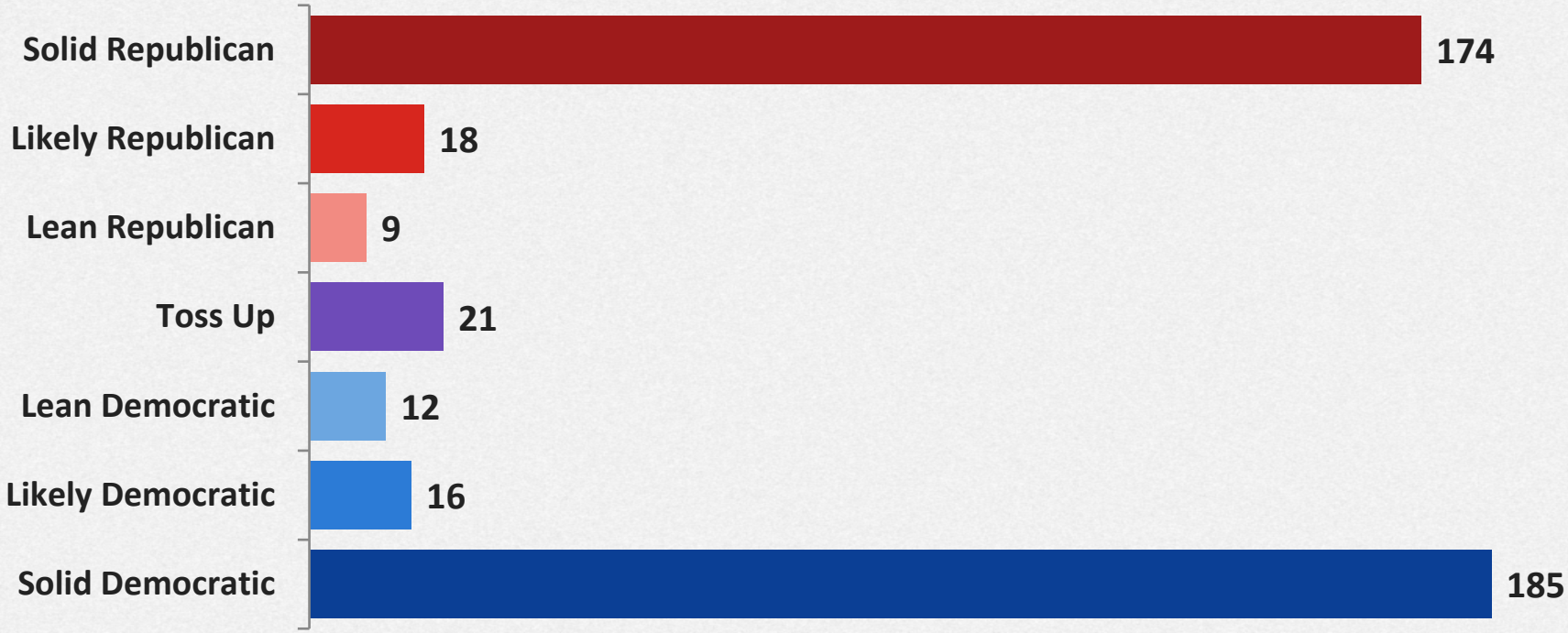
- We purposefully picked two GOP-lean districts, and not the usually competitive 2nd district (now a “toss-up” race), to examine how the midterm landscape is affecting what normally would be safe GOP districts.
- 1st: Taylor with a narrow 50-46% lead over incumbent Wittman.
- 5th: Incumbent McGuire with a slightly larger 51-45% lead over former member Perriello.
- Notable in our poll is that the national context issues, especially cost of living and disapproval of Trump, are driving voter behavior, whereas issues that normally would help a GOP incumbent such as immigration and taxes rank comparatively very low.

More Polling Details

- 1st District: Cost of Living (42%), Immigration (15%), Taxes (9%).
- 5th District: Cost of Living (49%), Immigration (11%), Taxes 7%).
- Trump: 1st District, 59% disapprove with 52% “strongly”. More notable is that 46% say “expressing opposition to Trump” is the primary factor driving their support to Taylor. In the 5th District: 53% disapprove with “strongly” at 45%, and 40% say the main factor in their support for Perriello is opposing the president.
- Wittman and McGuire are outperforming Trump in public approval by merely 5% and 4% respectively.

2026 House Races - Cook Political Report Assessment

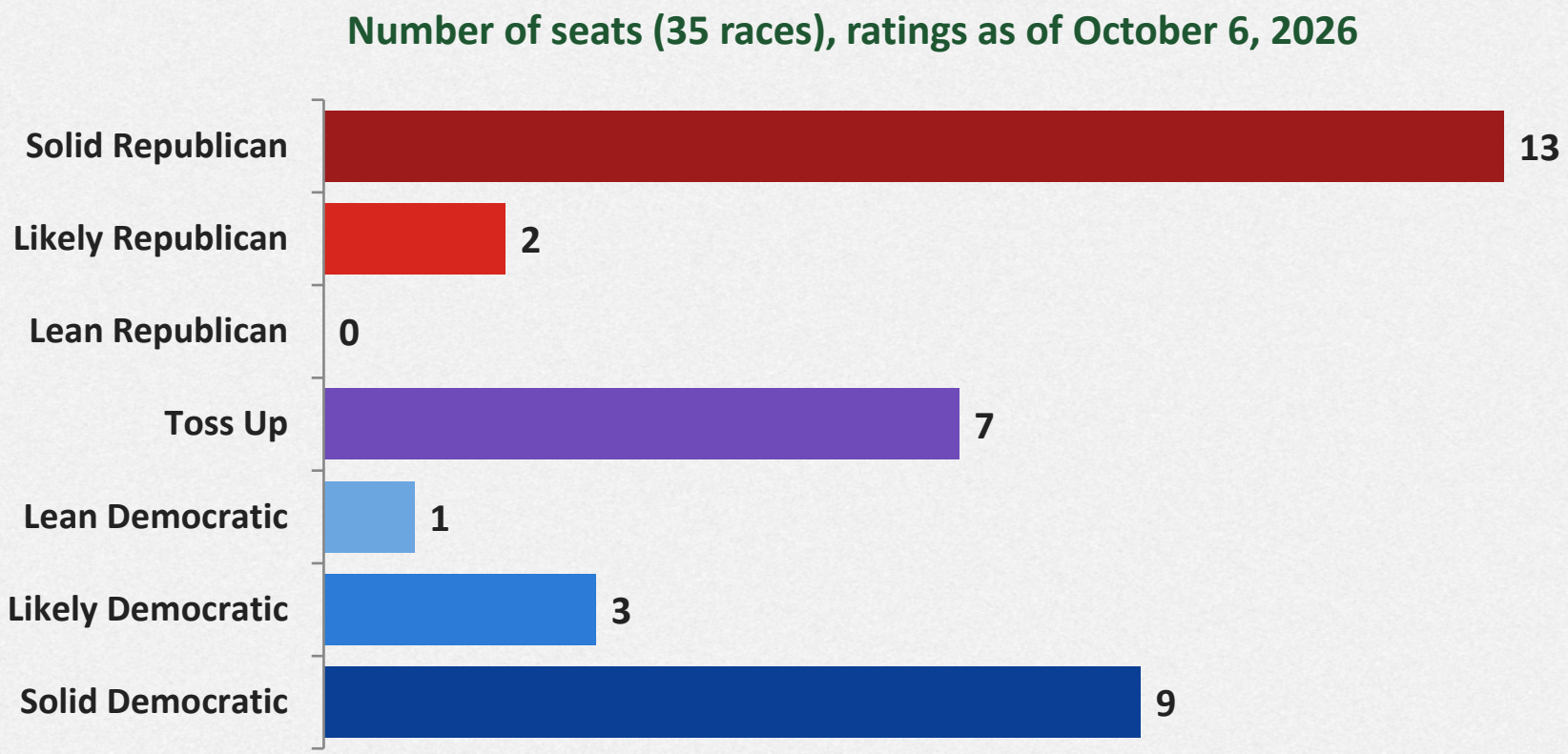
Number of seats (all 435 races), ratings as of October 9, 2026



A House majority takes 218 seats. Races rated Solid, Likely, or Lean Democratic add up to 213 and Republican-rated races to 201. If each party wins every race leaning its way, Democrats need only 5 of the 21 toss-ups, 15 of which are now held by Republicans.

Source: Cook Political Report, House race ratings, Oct. 9, 2026

2026 Senate Races - Cook Political Report Assessment



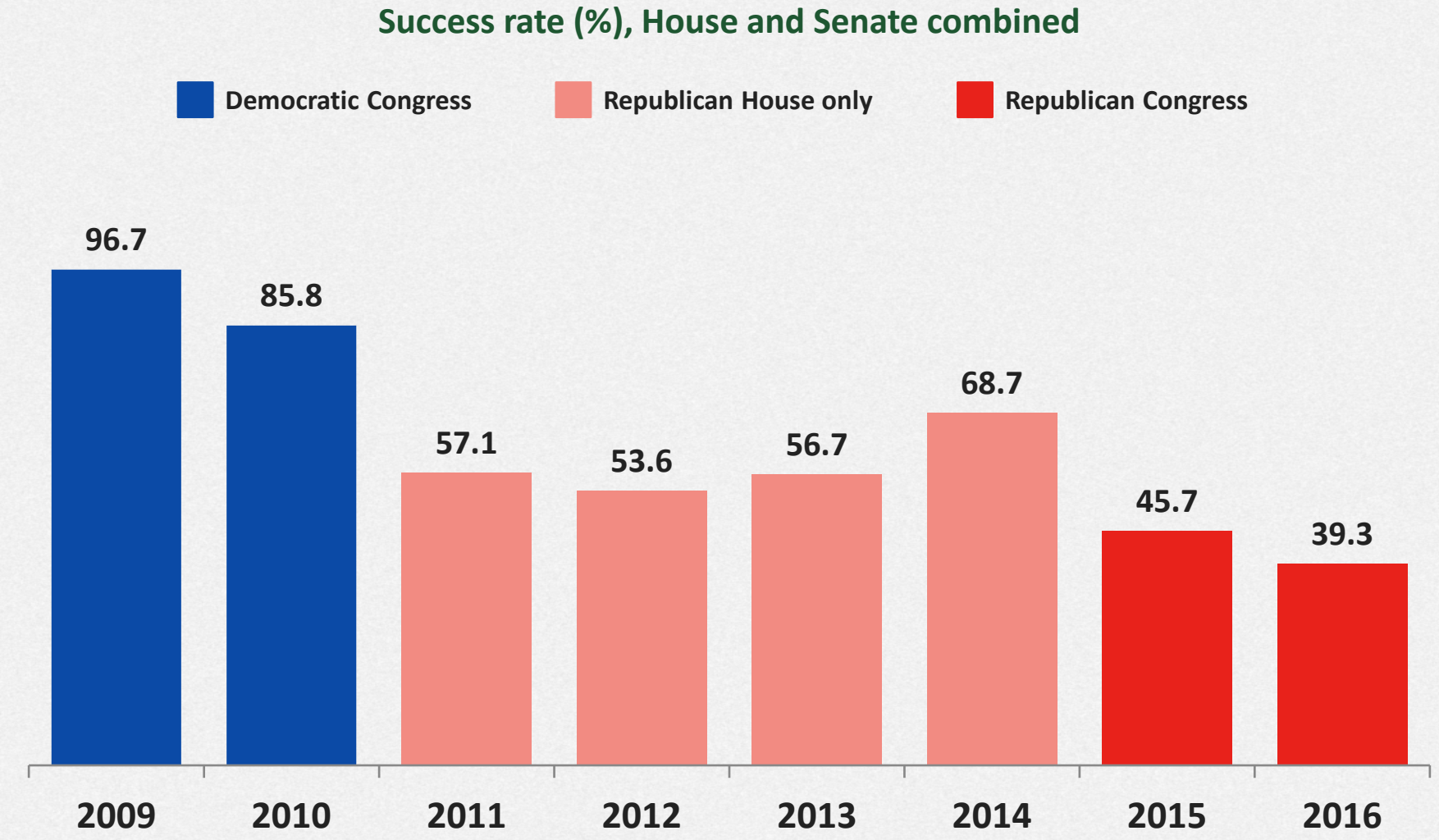
Republicans hold the Senate 53–47, so Democrats need a net gain of four seats for a majority (Vice President Vance breaks ties). If Democrats hold every race rated in their direction, including Republican-held North Carolina, they would still need to win 4 of the 7 toss-up contests.

Source: Cook Political Report, Senate race ratings, Oct. 6, 2026

The Next Two Years

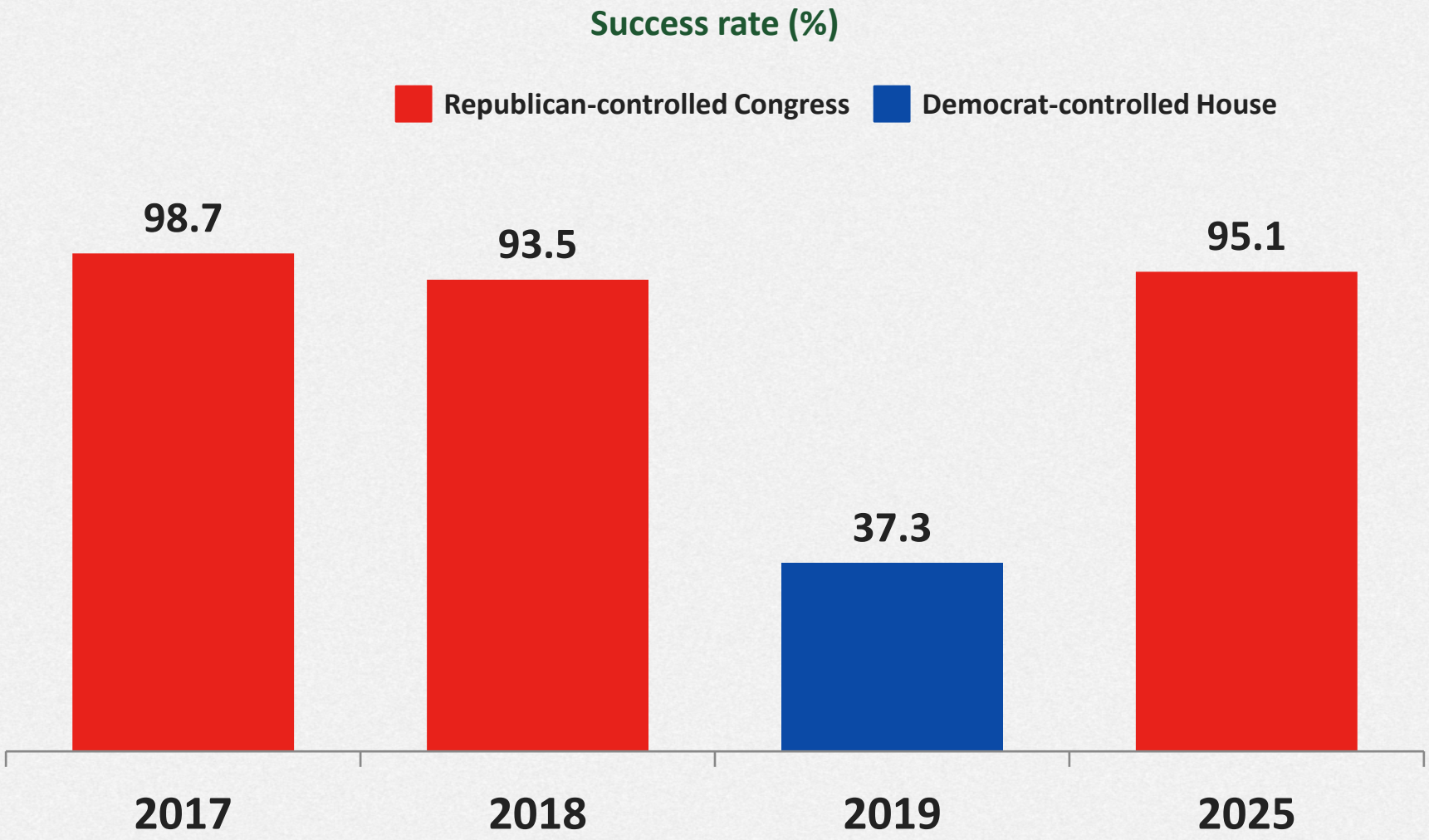
- Divided government has a significant impact on presidential policy success. In the next two years we get:
- Legislative stalemate.
- Investigations.
- Presidential claims of unilateral executive authority defying Congress, the courts, and public opinion amplified.
- The second half of second term presidencies generally have a thin record of policy success, especially during periods of divided government.

President Obama's Legislative Success Rate



Source: CQ Roll Call vote studies, via Brookings, Vital Statistics on Congress, Table 8-1 (2024)

President Trump's Legislative Success Rate



Source: CQ Vote Studies; CQ Roll Call Vote Studies 2025 (Feb. 2026)

QUESTIONS?