Tech and Toxicity: U.S. Midterm Elections in a Digital Swamp
By Anthony Silberfeld

“When someone attacks me, I always attack back…except 100x more. This has nothing to do with a tirade but rather, a way of life!”

-Donald J. Trump, President of the United States via Twitter, November 11, 2012

Introduction
Politics in the United States has always been a full-contact sport. Over the past half century, from Nixon’s dirty tricks to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, from the “swift-boating” of John Kerry to “birtherism,” examples of politicians bloodying their opponents for electoral gain abound. Nevertheless, after previous hard-fought campaigns, there had always been an effort to repair any damage to the national fabric that had been done. Sadly, those days are over. Trump’s America has come to be defined by an “us versus them” mentality that allows no room for compromise or middle ground. This is true in the relationship between Republicans and Democrats, but it also currently applies to those within the Republican Party, also known as the Grand Old Party (GOP). Loyalty to President Trump is prized above all else. Policy differences with the president can be forgiven; anything less than total fealty cannot.

In an analog era, what happened in Washington often stayed in Washington. Only the most significant stories made their way into national news, delivered to voters via television, radio, and print publications. In today’s digital era, every utterance, slight (perceived or actual), and movement is disseminated to tens of millions of users in an instant through a wide range of social media and other online portals. On the positive side of the ledger, the new digital normal means greater transparency, accountability, and scrutiny for government officials. On the negative side, it means there is no single arbiter of facts or truth. There is also no minimum standard of behavior. Taken together, these conditions have created a toxic ecosystem for American democracy, and it was against this volatile backdrop that the 2018 midterm elections would be fought.

The 2016 general election delivered all levers of power to the Republican Party. Donald Trump won the Electoral College
and the White House, despite losing the popular vote by more than 3 million votes. Speaker Paul Ryan maintained a solid majority with 241 seats out of 435 in the House of Representatives, and Senate leader Mitch McConnell clung to power in Congress’s upper chamber.

Going into Election Day on November 6, 2018, the prospects for Republicans were mixed. The economy in the U.S. was thriving. GDP had reached a four-year high of 4.1 percent in the second quarter of 2018,¹ and the unemployment rate had fallen to 3.7 percent.² Under normal circumstances, this would have been great news for the incumbent party, but there was nothing normal about these circumstances. President Trump had an approval rating of 43.6 percent,³ though that figure reached up to 90 percent among Republican voters. In a highly polarized country, proximity to the president would be a tremendous asset in conservative Republican districts, and a liability in liberal Democratic and centrist swing districts. Following the midterm election, the president himself labeled this phenomenon “the embrace.” Those who accepted the embrace, in his view, succeeded, and those who didn’t failed. But Donald Trump was only part of the story.

The Senate map was extremely favorable to the Republican Party, as Democrats were forced to defend 10 seats in states where Trump had been victorious in 2016. But the Democrats still had reason to be hopeful. The president’s first two years in office had provided sufficient motivation for Democrats to turn out in high numbers. From Trump’s judicial nominations and policy choices to what his critics consider an erosion of democratic norms, Democrats had an opportunity to finally enforce a check on this president, something the Republican Congressional majority had been unwilling to do. Suffice it to say, the stakes were high. Though there were 468 seats (all 435 House seats, plus 33 in the Senate) up for grabs in the 116th Congress, this chapter will highlight three of the most contentious and competitive Senate races – Arizona, Missouri, and Florida – which serve as cautionary tales in American politics going forward. Through the lens of each of these races we will explore the issues that mattered most to voters, the distractions that attempted to poison the environment, and the impact of technology on America’s latest democratic experiment.

Keeping It Real

Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill famously coined the phrase “all politics is local.” For many who live and work in the Washington bubble, it is easy to lose sight of this truism in American politics. Members of Congress who forget this lesson quickly find themselves out of a job. The task of keeping an eye on the things that constituents actually care about has become more difficult in recent years. During the Trump administration, the scattershot approach to governing alongside the president’s “Twitter diplomacy” could sidetrack even the most disciplined public servants. In 2018, those who focused on the issues that truly matter to voters understood that they had to address the three main priorities that were on voters’ minds in this election: health care, taxes, and jobs. Everything else was just noise, but sometimes noise can be an effective electoral tool.

Health Care

In 2010, Congress passed the Affordable Care Act (commonly known as Obamacare), which overhauled the health care system in the United States, providing coverage to millions of Americans who had been previously uninsured. Obamacare also prevented insurance companies from excluding patients for having pre-existing conditions, expanded

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Medicaid, and allowed young adults to stay on their parents’ plan until the age of 26. Republicans argued that the new law would increase the cost of health care while reducing the quality of patient services. Furthermore, the GOP objected to the price tag, alleging $570 billion in tax increases and an additional $500 billion in national debt.\(^4\) When it came time to vote on final passage of this legislation, not a single Republican supported the measure. In the aftermath, Republicans would spend much of the subsequent eight years trying to dismantle Obamacare, without a suitable replacement to fill the void.

Although Republicans were unsuccessful in fully repealing the Affordable Care Act, they did manage to enact a law that would eliminate one of the more contentious elements of Obamacare: the individual mandate. This was a provision that required all Americans to purchase a minimum level of insurance coverage or risk paying a penalty. Since the elimination of this requirement, an estimated two million people might now opt for no coverage, which would result in detrimental changes to the insurance cost structure for those who remain.\(^5\)

If Republicans are ultimately able to completely dismantle Obamacare, there will be fewer healthy Americans paying into the insurance pool that subsidizes the sick, leaving many of the most vulnerable exposed.

The fate of Obamacare was only part of the health care equation concerning voters in this election. For years both parties have argued about the need to reform entitlement programs like Medicare and Medicaid, but they vehemently disagree on how to do it. Democrats have looked at solutions such as raising taxes and the
retirement age, while Republicans have sought market-oriented remedies to ensure the programs’ solvency. Neither has been able to cobble together enough support to move forward in either direction.

Though the two parties disagree on many issues in the health care debate, they may be able to find common ground on addressing the opioid epidemic and on reducing the price of prescription drugs. There are places in the country that are struggling to cope with the former, and constituents in every congressional district in the country care about the latter. Even if the political will exists, whether anything gets done on either issue may come down to the brutally practical question of where the money comes from.

Taxes
One way to pay for government-funded programs is to raise taxes. In every election, taxes play a central role on the campaign trail, and the rhetoric from both sides is predictable. Democrats accuse Republican of offering tax giveaways to corporations and the rich at the expense of the poor and middle class. Republicans, for their part, allege that “tax and spend” Democrats will cripple the middle class under the weight of high taxes to fund their “socialist” programs. Regardless of the merits of these characterizations, for many this issue defines what it is to be a Republican or a Democrat. In December 2017, President Trump signed the most significant tax reform bill since 1986, when President Reagan overhauled the tax system. Trump’s trillion dollar tax reform package not only provided a huge reduction in the corporate tax rate – from 35 percent to 21 percent, but it also lowered and reduced multiple income tax brackets for individuals. Republicans have
touted the tax cuts as a boon for middle class families to the tune of $44,697 in savings per family. According to Politifact, however, the actual number is $780. Democrats took to the hustings to make the case that the Trump tax cut was nothing more than a gift to corporate interests, and that message resonated with voters. Instead of creating new jobs or increasing wages, corporate tax savings were spent primarily on share buybacks, which benefited none of the people Republicans purported to help. Recognizing the Republicans’ vulnerabilities on this issue, President Trump proposed a last-ditch effort at damage control just days before the election, proposing an additional 10 percent tax cut for middle class families. Setting aside the fact that Congress was out of session and couldn’t pass such a proposal even if it wanted to, this was a rare acknowledgment by the president that failing to address the bread and butter concerns of voters could be pivotal in this election.

Jobs
Ten years after the Great Recession of 2008, the U.S. economy has roared back to life. The fact that Presidents Obama and Trump are vying for credit tells you there is universal agreement that the economy is on the right track. Building on the momentum created by Obama-era economic policies, Trump’s combination of tax cuts and deregulation has given investors and corporations a positive outlook, which is spurring job creation and robust GDP growth. Other indicators such as capital investment and research and development increased in 2018 by 19 percent and 14 percent, respectively.

But not all is rosy. Despite low unemployment numbers, there remains a mismatch between job vacancies and the skills required to fill those jobs. According to the Labor Department, there are 6.9 million job openings and 6.2 million people out of work. Looking at states like Missouri, where workers are struggling with the transition from a contracting agriculture sector to service industry jobs, the challenge goes beyond numbers. Where are the opportunities? And how will workers be prepared to seize them? Another potential source of friction with voters is a direct consequence of the president’s trade war with competitors, like China, and allies like Canada, Mexico, and the European Union. Between agricultural exports and deeply interconnected supply chains, there are many industries and workers in the United States already adversely affected by Trump’s intransigence on trade.

These are the real issues that matter to voters. Republicans and Democrats had the opportunity to engage in substantive debates on these issues and persuade voters on the merits of their arguments. Unfortunately, that is not how this campaign played out. While most Democrats attempted to stay on message, touting their plans for health care, taxes, and jobs, the president had another agenda in mind.

Digital Distractions
As candidates traveled throughout their districts to make their case to voters in the real world, there was a parallel campaign unfolding in the virtual world. This campaign surfaced humanity’s worst instincts. Racism, sexism, and conspiracy theories were predominant online and seemed to have two objectives: to distract voters and to elicit fear. Had this activity been confined to fringe lunatics occupying the darkest corners of the internet, we might be able to ignore it, but these tactics were, in many cases, amplified by mainstream politicians who benefit from dividing the electorate for political gain.
Let’s begin with the case of “jobs, not mobs.” In October 2018, r/the_donald, a Reddit group popular among neo-Nazis and white supremacists with over 600,000 members, began promoting the slogan “jobs, not mobs” in response to recent incidents of progressive activists confronting Trump administration officials in public. Democrats were portrayed online as anarchists threatening the social fabric of the country and posing a threat to the Republic. This slogan quickly became a meme that fairly prominent conservative social media commentators began to share via Twitter. From there, “jobs, not mobs” picked up steam and found its way into the talking points on conservative mainstream media networks, who made stories about left-wing mob violence a mainstay on their evening programming. Given the number of hours President Trump reportedly spends each day watching cable news, it was only a matter of time before he grabbed the baton and ran with it. Sure enough, later that month, President Trump tweeted a video appeal to voters defining the stakes in the midterm elections beneath the #jobsnotmobs. At that moment, a message originally created by right-wing fanatics less than a month prior reached the president’s 55 million Twitter followers; it was then immediately amplified on virtually every major American media outlet who covered the president’s every move. It was clear that Trump was doubling down on the demonization of his political opponents ahead of the election.

During the 2016 presidential election, then-candidate Trump had discovered that a focus on immigration gained significant traction with the Republican
base, and even some independents. He often boasts that his hardline stance on immigration and border security won him the election. With that in mind, the president went back to the well for the 2018 midterms. This time, he painted a vivid picture of thousands of immigrants in a caravan marching north from Central America preparing to “invade” the United States. The alleged composition of this caravan varied in the president’s tweets, alternating between people of Middle Eastern descent to MS-13 gang members. This false narrative – in reality the New York Times embedded reporters with the caravan to debunk myths circulating on social media—gave Trump the opportunity to stoke fear amongst the electorate, take a strong position on border security (by ordering 15,000 active duty soldiers be sent to the U.S.-Mexico border), and characterize the Democrats as weak on immigration and supporters of open borders. While it is difficult to measure whether and to what extent this message swayed voters, the metrics show that it quickly entered the electoral bloodstream. During the week of October 21, Google searches for “migrant caravan” spiked, and other digital platforms took it from there.9 Right-wing outlets such as Circa, YourNews, and Right Now USA bought ad space on Facebook and filled it with messaging and imagery that built on the narrative driven by the President of the United States. Some took the liberty of embellishing on this fiction by claiming that George Soros and other “globalists” were responsible for financing the caravan. This avenue is cheap, effective, and very dangerous. The Right Now USA ad, for example, earned more than 10,000 Facebook impressions for less than $500.10 According to the USA Today, this conspiracy theory ultimately reached over 850 million people. The month of October 2018 closed with a grief-stricken country

reeling from the very real consequence of poison spread in the virtual realm, when a gunman, who had spent time lurking in the darkest depths of the internet and blamed Jewish Americans for bringing in “invaders,” walked into a Pittsburgh synagogue and murdered 11 Jews.

Incitement online also became real for the people routinely targeted by the president on Twitter and in his many public rallies that are beamed around the country on TV and digital platforms. The same week as the Pittsburgh massacre, the Clintons, the Obamas, and CNN, among others, received pipe bombs in the mail in a coordinated attack by an individual whose own social media profile trafficked in Trump’s Make America Great Again ideology. Not only did the campaigns need to maintain focus, but so did voters with so much activity, real and imagined, swirling around these elections.

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In the final days of the campaign, voters faced a litany of issues meant to distract them ahead of an election that was projected to be favorable for the Democrats. From a manufactured scandal,
orchestrated by a right-wing troll, accusing Russia investigation Special Counsel Robert Mueller of sexual misconduct to the president’s baseless declaration that he would end the so-called birthright citizenship – which under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution allows anyone born in the United States to automatically become a citizen – this election season closed with lots of consternation among politicians and the voting public. Tech companies, for their part, were not oblivious to the unintended consequences of the platforms they built;
they were poised to figure out how best to mitigate the damage done and to help repair American's faith in democracy and public discourse.

**The Road to Redemption?**

Tech companies, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have taken a beating in recent years for failing to foresee, and react to, the potential nefarious uses of their platform. This was, of course, most pronounced in the 2016 general election when Russian trolls and bots wreaked havoc on the U.S. political system. Since then, there has been justified criticism that the industry still has not done enough, but it is worth noting some of the initiatives that social media platforms and others have taken to reverse the negative trend of disinformation running rampant online.

With its reach of 2.23 billion users, Facebook has an open window into influencing voters, thereby impacting elections around the world, and in the U.S. it is no exception. The social network, whose motto was “move fast and break things,” has tried to quickly implement some important fixes. Between August and October 2018, Facebook purged hundreds of accounts and pages that broke its rules pertaining to spamming and “coordinated inauthentic” behavior. It also removed accounts that were linked to malevolent actors in Russia and Iran. Facebook doubled its army of safety and security monitors to 20,000 people who would be responsible for identifying disinformation campaigns to backstop the latest effort to weed out malicious activity on the site. An added

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**Facebook Ads on the Migrant Caravan**

Right-wing news outlets sponsored ads about the migrant caravan echoing President Trump’s views.

feature to Facebook’s toolkit has been the introduction of new labeling for political ads, providing increased transparency about funding sources. The jury is still out, however, on whether Facebook has done enough in light of the significant threats, which are constantly changing, in this space.

In an effort to curtail the scourge of bots on the site, Twitter eliminated a total of 70 million accounts in one fell swoop.

The other heavyweight in the social media space, Twitter, has also taken steps to clean up its act in advance of the midterm election. In the first quarter of 2018, Twitter claimed to have more than 336 million monthly active users, 21 percent of whom were based in the United States. In an effort to curtail the scourge of bots on the site, Twitter eliminated a total of 70 million accounts in one fell swoop. President Trump and right-wing pundits reacted harshly to this move, accusing Twitter of censoring conservative voices. This outrage, of course, has created space for other micro-blogging platforms to grow, such as Gab, which boasts of being the site where free speech thrives. In truth, it is the site where alt-right rhetoric thrives.

Beyond the social media space, other online applications have entered the political fray to address some of the most persistent threats to the integrity of the U.S. midterm elections. In the aftermath of the Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee servers during the 2016 campaign, messaging apps such as Wickr and Signal have partnered with Democratic political operatives to provide secure, encrypted communications for their campaigns. As some states take steps to curb voter participation, ride-sharing apps like Lyft and Uber have offered discounted and even free transportation to get voters to the polls on Election Day. Bike- and scooter-sharing outfits Lime and Skip have also aimed to facilitate greater turnout in the midterm elections, which typically drops below 40 percent.

In spite of the modest strides that tech companies have made, there remain vulnerabilities in the election security system that the Federal government needs to address. According to the Department of Homeland Security, Russians have been joined by other state and non-state actors to influence the midterm election. From the hacking of a local county website in Tennessee to spear phishing attempts against the offices of three U.S. Senators running for re-election, the range of potential attacks is broad. It is true that it is too easy for mischief-makers to hack electronic voting machines in person, but the decentralized nature of American elections help minimize the impact of isolated breaches. Nevertheless, the government needs to be more efficient about spending the resources it has already dedicated to prevent further disruptions.

Following the 2016 election, Congress approved $380 million in funding for election security, but allocating these funds to states and municipalities moved at a glacial pace. Case in point, in May 2018, the Illinois state election board was approved for a $13 million grant to improve its cybersecurity capacity. By September of that year, none of the promised Federal assistance had been disbursed. According to officials at the Department of Homeland Security, the problem was no
longer money, it was a problem of time.\textsuperscript{14} With elections fast-approaching, however, time was something nobody had.

**Searching for the Center**

The hyper-partisan climate in the United States has had a deleterious effect on many fronts, particularly the vanishing of the political center. Moderates in both parties are endangered species, and the act of crossing party lines for the sake of compromise is sometimes considered a betrayal. In this election cycle there were three Senate races featuring characters who, in different ways, attempted to buck the prevailing trends and win as a centrist in 2018. Each of these races was distinct due to the local flavor of politics practiced in each state, but all were buffeted by the push and pull of pressure on the ground and pressure online. In the pages ahead, we’ll hone in on the races in Arizona, Missouri, and Florida which encapsulate the good, the bad, and the ugly of the 2018 election.

**Arizona: The New Mavericks**

Arizona has a history of sending independent-oriented and colorful characters to represent the state in the

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**Martha McSally Attacks Kyrsten Sinema in Campaign Ad**

![Martha McSally Attacks Kyrsten Sinema in Campaign Ad](https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/23/martha-mcsally-kyrsten-sinema-attack-ad-794337)

**McSally 'pink tutu' ad hammers Sinema**

By ALEX ISENSTADT | 08/23/2018 11:58 AM EDT | Updated 08/23/2018 12:18 PM EDT

Arizona Senate hopeful Martha McSally hasn’t locked up the GOP nomination just yet — but she’s turning to the general election with a searing new TV ad hammering Democratic candidate Kyrsten Sinema for “protesting us in a pink tutu” rather than serving in the military after 9/11.

Senate. From Barry Goldwater to John McCain, Arizonans have a proud tradition of rejecting convention. The race for the vacant Senate seat left by the retiring incumbent, Jeff Flake, an outspoken critic of Trump who felt his reelection was doomed, was no exception. This campaign pitted Republican Martha McSally against Democrat Kyrsten Sinema, marking the first time the Grand Canyon State would be represented by a woman in the Senate.

Martha McSally, the first female to command an Air Force fighter squadron in U.S. history, retired from the military after 26 years of service. Harvard-educated and politically moderate, she began her campaign for the Senate as a candidate in the mold of John McCain: someone who could bridge the partisan divide and strike the delicate balance between conservatism and centrism that is the hallmark of Arizona politics. During the 2016 presidential campaign, McSally did not endorse then-candidate Trump. Instead, she was critical, saying “that’s just not how leaders carry themselves.”

A victim of sexual abuse as a teenager, and harassment during her career in the military, she expressed particular disgust during the revelations of alleged sexual misconduct and misogynistic behavior by candidate Trump. But in a state where the president won 49 percent (versus Hillary Clinton’s 46 percent) in the general election, disavowing the president seemed a losing proposition. With that in mind, the evolution of Martha McSally began. By mid-summer, President Trump tweeted his endorsement of McSally, calling her “an extraordinary woman.” For her part, McSally began to adopt some of the more unsavory features of the Trump campaign playbook. Calling her opponent juvenile nicknames like “Hollywood Sinema” and accusing Sinema of being a lefty, anti-war socialist were just some of the tactics McSally used. One particularly impactful online attack was the side-by-side image of the two rivals: McSally in her military uniform and Sinema in a pink tutu at an anti-war rally. McSally leveraged her online presence of 80,000 likes on Facebook and 44,000 Twitter followers to amplify her message and positions on key issues. Her campaign also created a digital platform called therealsinema.com, which offered voters McSally’s interpretation of her opponent’s record.

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On the substance, McSally supported the president’s agenda of tax cuts and job growth, emphasizing employment for veterans. McSally also echoed Trump’s rhetoric on Obamacare and immigration. In one debate, she declared that she preferred not to talk about health care, but focus on other issues, like the caravan. This was a difficult sell in a state where the most pressing issues on voters’ minds were the protection of coverage for pre-existing conditions and the future of Medicare and Medicaid.

Like McSally, Congresswomen Kyrsten Sinema had to undergo her own
ideological transformation in order to be palatable to Arizona voters statewide. On the stump, Sinema tells a compelling story about growing up in poverty and even being homeless during her formative years. She points to this experience, and her time as a social worker, as shaping her liberal political philosophy; she was once even a member of the Green Party. In 2012, after eight years in the Arizona state legislature, Sinema ran for a seat in the 9th Congressional District as a Democrat and comfortably won the seat. While in Congress, she continued to move toward the middle, joining the Blue Dog Democrats, home to the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. For Democrats looking for ideological purity, they would be disappointed by Sinema who announced that she would work with Trump if it was good for the state. She caused further dismay among the Democratic base during a radio interview in which she responded, when she was asked if she was a proud Democrat: “Gosh, it’s hard to say proud. I don’t know that – I’m not sure that people are even proud of parties anymore, because I feel like the parties are not doing a good job. So I would say that I’m a proud Arizonan.”

Refusing to be diverted from her core messages, Sinema put health care at the forefront of her campaign. At every campaign stop, she emphasized the need to ensure coverage for the 2.8 million Arizonians with pre-existing conditions. Her health care agenda also paid particular attention to quality and affordability in the health care market, and she vowed to protect Obamacare. Sinema’s plan on jobs and economic growth focuses on gender equity; it incentivizes startups and small businesses, and seeks to ensure that the United States has the infrastructure to compete in the 21st century. In a nod toward bipartisanship, Sinema supported Trump’s tax-cut extension and was one of only three House Democrats to do so. She pointed to the benefits for small businesses and middle-class families as her rationale for supporting the measure.

A highly contentious campaign between the two women turned into an even more controversial election after the polls closed. When the votes were counted on election night, partisans in Arizona and around the country waited until the sun came up on November 7, and still no winner had emerged. At the time of this writing, Kyrsten Sinema had overtaken Martha McSally by 1.4 percent, or approximately 30,000 votes out of more than two million cast. With hundreds of thousands of absentee ballots still left to count, it may be some time before this race is decided. But that didn’t stop President Trump from making his own determination via Twitter:

Despite the president’s assertion, there has been no evidence of fraud. There is, however, a process, and election officials in Arizona are adhering to its guidelines until an outcome can be determined. Regardless of the final result, the Arizona Senate race made it difficult to discern what kind of Senator McSally or Sinema would be.* Their political fluidity throughout their careers gives pause to true believers on both sides of the

* On November 12, 2018, Kyrsten Sinema became Senator-elect of Arizona.
ailse. Will they be loyal to their party or loyal to their constituents? In the current environment the two can be mutually exclusive. But in the end, they may have to choose to continue the balancing act that got each to this point. Perhaps the best advice for the next Senator from Arizona, whoever she may be, comes from the late-Arizona Senator John McCain: “I hope we can again rely on humility, on our need to cooperate, on our dependence on each other to learn how to trust each other again and by so doing better serve the people who elected us. Stop listening to the bombastic loudmouths on the radio and television and the internet. To hell with them. They don’t want anything done for the public good. Our incapacity is their livelihood.”

Missouri: Showdown in the Show Me State

Since 1904, the winner of the presidential election in Missouri went on to win the White House all but three times (in 1956, 2008, and 2012). Known as the bellwether state for its accuracy in predicting the overall preference of the nation writ large, Missouri is of great interest to political observers. In 2016, Missourians overwhelmingly delivered the state to Donald Trump by a margin of 57 percent to 38 percent over Hillary Clinton, while incumbent Senator Roy Blunt eked out a narrow victory over his Democratic opponent Jason Kander by less than three points. According to a 2017 Gallup survey, 38 percent of Missourians identify themselves as Democrats and 45 percent self-identify as Republicans, leaving a sizable 17 percent of the electorate as independent or undecided. This mixed political landscape made the Senate race between Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill and Republican challenger Josh Hawley a toss-up. Would it be possible for a sitting Democratic Senator to find the precise location equidistant from both her party and a popular president, and convince voters that she still represents their interests in Washington?

Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill has served the state of Missouri in the U.S. Senate since 2006, when she defeated the Republican incumbent Jim Talent. Since then, the former prosecutor has navigated in the hazy purple area of American politics, neither too red to be painted as a Republican, nor too blue to be called a liberal. This served McCaskill well in the Senate and during her re-election in 2012, when she thumped a fatally flawed Republican to win her second term. On the campaign trail in 2018, McCaskill walked a tightrope daily, vacillating between hardline conservative positions on border security and more progressive stances on health care. One particularly fraught example of political triangulation for her came during the confirmation process for Supreme Court-nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Following allegations of sexual assault against Kavanaugh, Republican and Democratic moderates, particularly female moderates, were under pressure to reject his nomination. Those who did pointed to the allegations as the reason for opposing the nomination, but not Claire McCaskill. Though she claimed to be troubled by the sexual misconduct accusation, she voted “no” on Kavanaugh because of his positions on campaign finance regulations. Her reasoning allowed McCaskill to give her Democratic base the “no” vote they demanded, while keeping moderate Republicans on her side by finding an alternate explanation for her decision. Her record lends an additional degree of credibility for independent and Republican cross-over voters, as McCaskill has voted for two-thirds of Trump’s judicial nominees.

On the three main issues voters prioritized in this election (health care, taxes, and
McCaskill found a predictable mix of something for everyone. She is staunchly in favor of protecting the aspects of Obamacare that preserve coverage for those with pre-existing conditions. The Senator has opposed the president’s imposition of tariffs (essentially a tax on consumers) due to the damaging effect they have on Missouri’s farmers. And she maintains a pragmatic mix of policies to spur job and economic growth, including raising the minimum wage, providing tax credits for small businesses, and enacting bipartisan tax reform that actually benefits the middle class in a meaningful way. Even President Trump acknowledged the moderate path McCaskill has taken, but Trump’s acknowledgement didn’t spare her from his ridicule. In the final days of the campaign, the president parachuted into Missouri to deal McCaskill a devastating blow. He said, “The people of Missouri are going to retire far-left Democrat Claire McCaskill, who’s been saying such nice things about me. But you know what? She’ll never vote with me, that’s the problem.”

In the final days of the campaign, McCaskill attempted to distance herself farther from her party. In a radio ad, she sought to put conservative voters’ doubts to rest by declaring she is “not one of those crazy Democrats.” The Democratic Party faithful reacted badly, so the fatal wound to Claire McCaskill may have been self-inflicted.

McCaskill’s challenger, Josh Hawley, is the 38-year old Attorney General of Missouri, who was successfully elected to that position in 2017. At the time, he railed against “ladder-climbing politicians” and vowed to stay in the position for which he campaigned. But a year is an eternity in politics. Sensing vulnerabilities in the McCaskill operation, the Republicans picked Hawley, a candidate that would represent the next generation of conservatism in Missouri. Portraying McCaskill as an old, out-of-touch creature of Washington, Hawley claimed to be a breath of fresh air. Like many candidates in swing states, Hawley distanced himself from President Trump early on, but as the race tightened, he realized that he needed a boost to carry him across the finish line. On September 21, Trump rallied for Hawley in Missouri, touting the young Attorney General as a star, and hanging the Trump brand around Hawley’s neck. The question would be whether it would prove to be an albatross or a badge of honor.

The post-mortem on this election continues, but it raises some serious questions for Democrats running in red states.

On the issues that voters claim mattered most, Hawley was fairly vague in his proposals. The one exception was his position on health care, which was crystal clear: Hawley favored the repeal of Obamacare and is party to a lawsuit that aims to do so. This became a point of friction between the two candidates since abolishing Obamacare would also eliminate coverage for pre-existing conditions, a feature that was resoundingly popular in Missouri. To defend himself, Hawley claimed that the lawsuit targeted the individual mandate but would have no impact on those with pre-existing conditions. Rather than battling with McCaskill on shaky ground,
Hawley skillfully pivoted to wedge issues—like immigration, social flashpoints, and gun control—which allowed him to define his opponent as more liberal than Nancy Pelosi.

When the votes were counted on election night, Hawley had comfortably defeated McCaskill by a six point margin. Even though McCaskill had outperformed Hillary Clinton's showing in the state two years earlier, in 2018, she could not hang onto her seat. The post-mortem on this election continues, but it raises some serious questions for Democrats running in red states. Is a strategy that hedges ideologically in order to keep more voters in play more effective than running on traditional Democratic principles, owning them, and letting the voters decide?

At the end of the day, this is the central philosophical battle within the Democratic Party. It was ignited by Trump, but losses like the one in Missouri demonstrate the pressing need for Democrats to rethink their campaign playbook.

Fidelity, Firearms, and Fraud in Florida

Like a mirror image, Florida governor Rick Scott has had to pull a “reverse-McCaskill” in his race against incumbent Senator Bill Nelson. A close ally of Trump for many years, Scott has had to plot out a strategy that will allow him to win a race in a state Trump barely carried in 2016 (winning by 1.2 percent), and in which the president's popularity eroded by 17 percentage points in the first half of 2018. This scenario put Governor Scott in the dangerous position of having to disavow Trump in order to avoid alienating potential swing voters. Yet, Scott managed to thread the needle. Tragic events such as the Parkland school shooting and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico provided Scott with an opportunity to both show independence from the White House and do what was right. In the case of Parkland, Scott advanced a measure in the State House in Tallahassee that raised the age of buying firearms from 18 to 21. While this may seem like a token gesture, it represents a historic achievement in gun control in the state of
Florida. As for Hurricane Maria, this case might be more cynical. In the aftermath of the catastrophic storm that decimated Puerto Rico in 2017, Governor Scott watched President Trump mishandle the federal government’s reaction to fellow Americans affected by the storm. The president’s negligent response created a flash point for Florida’s Puerto Rican community, and the estimated 50,000 to 75,000 Puerto Ricans who would resettle in Florida and be eligible to vote in the state’s 2018 elections would remember Trump’s slight as well. Scott successfully distanced himself from the White House on both gun control and disaster relief, and managed to do so without drawing the ire of the president. It is one of the rare occasions in which a perceived betrayal of Trump got a pass, demonstrating the political importance of Florida.

Given the aging demographics in Florida, Scott took a relatively progressive position on preserving Social Security and Medicare. He also pronounced that health care is a right and vowed to oppose any removal of coverage for pre-existing conditions. Like Hawley in Missouri, the Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi is party to the lawsuit seeking to dismantle Obamacare, but the governor has indicated that the AG took this action without his knowledge or input. In the 2018 race, Scott also takes an uncharacteristically moderate position on the environmental issues that impact Florida, with a specific focus on toxic algae, which featured prominently in this race. Scott’s record on environmental issues, as his opponent was quick to point out, is inconsistent with his campaign stance. As governor, he has opposed stricter water quality rules, reduced water management budgets, and repealed a septic tank inspection law – all anti-environmental positions. He was also a vocal supporter of Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord.

On television and online, Scott ran numerous ads on the issues above, but he also wasn’t shy about going negative against his rival, Bill Nelson. Scott levied charges of incompetence, corruption, and being an “empty suit” on Nelson. The governor frequently insinuated that the septuagenarian Nelson is often “confused.” Scott may have thought that challenging the mental acuity of an elderly man was a clever gambit, but in retiree-filled Florida, it seemed like a tactic that could backfire on the governor.

U.S. Senator Bill Nelson first came to Washington as an elected member of the House in 1979, and returned to the Capitol to take up a Senate seat in 2001. Like other Democrats in this cycle, Nelson sought to steer clear of the hot-button distractions being peddled by President Trump and his followers via social media and mainstream media. Nelson focused on his record defending the environment, protecting Medicare and Medicaid from cuts, advocating for lower drug prices, and ensuring that future tax reductions would benefit the middle class. President Trump challenged Nelson via Twitter on his environmental record:

For most of the campaign, polls had this race within the margin of error, and, therefore, too close to predict. When the final results came in, we learned just how
accurate the polling had been. With more than eight million votes cast, the difference between Rick Scott and Bill Nelson favored the governor by just 0.15 percent, which triggered a manual recount. The President was quick to respond:

**Florida Elections: President Trump Casts Doubt on Recount**

And right on cue, right-wing digital platforms began circulating conspiracy theories to undermine the democratic process in Florida. In the case of Breitbart News, the headline combined the rare trifecta of anti-Semitism, anti-Hillary, and dubious fraud accusations at once: “Soros-Tied Hillary Alumni Group Helping to Organize Volunteers for Florida Recount.” Not to be outdone, the Neo-Nazi online publication the Daily Stormer opted for an article featuring racist imagery and blaming the recount fiasco on “Broward Jews,” referring to the county in Florida that is home to a large Jewish community.

Perhaps most disturbing is the link the Stormer piece makes directly to the President’s tweet alleging that this race is in the process of being stolen. As this publication went to print, the recount in Florida was underway, but with multiple lawsuits pending, it could be some time before the victor in this race is known.

Both a Wave, and a Tsunami

In the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections, the conventional wisdom in Washington was that this campaign would end with a blue wave of Democrats sweeping House Republicans out of power. With gains of approximately 35 seats in Congress’s lower chamber, the dynamics in the U.S. Capitol are about to change. New leadership will replace the committee chairmen and rank-and-file Republicans who refused to act as a check on some of the White House’s most controversial policy choices including the Muslim travel ban and family separation of immigrants at the border.

With a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and Republicans no longer controlling all levers of power, there is an opportunity to restore credibility to an important pillar of American democracy. Divided government is a good thing; it allows for the checks and balances envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Shared control over institutions gives both parties a stake in the success of the outcomes. From tax reform in 1986 to the welfare overhaul ten years later, Presidents Reagan and Clinton, respectively, presided over divided governments that yielded meaningful results. Whether that is possible, given the current toxicity in the political domain, is an open question.

While the blue wave received the lion’s share of attention this campaign season, the information tsunami that defined the 2018 election was largely overlooked. The contours of the national dialogue were initiated online and were amplified through the infinite number of digital channels disseminating information to Americans at a breakneck pace. Conspiracy theories, disinformation, and outright lies share the same space with credible journalists, honest politicians, and noble advocates,

**On November 18, 2018, Rick Scott was declared the winner of the Senate race in Florida.**
but all compete for eyeballs in the virtual arena. The most sophisticated online surfers can easily get lost in the undertow, disoriented by the volume and pace of information at hand. We saw in the 2016 general election, and again in the 2018 midterms, how well-meaning candidates can quickly lose control of their own campaigns due to the shocks and stresses online influences create.

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Technology’s Impact on the U.S. Midterms
By David Becker and Jennifer Lovell

The 2018 midterm elections were like none other in U.S. history. After the documented effort by Russia to influence the 2016 elections, both through disinformation efforts and attacks on American election infrastructure, election administrators and federal officials began working more closely than ever before to secure systems in expectation of further efforts to destabilize elections. Perhaps just as importantly, the media was attuned to this issue as never before, often inflaming concerns of foreign “hacking” while failing to outline the significant cybersecurity efforts at the federal, state, and local levels.

The result was that, as some predicted, the 2018 elections were the most secure in American history. Despite hysteria from the media and others, often claiming the elections had “already been hacked,” or vastly overstating election system vulnerabilities, election officials in the U.S. did their jobs to protect the systems. Turnout was also historically high. It’s estimated that almost half of all eligible voters turned out – the highest turnout for a midterm general election in 100 years. But efforts to use technology to delegitimize democracy and elections in the U.S. will continue, and it’s unclear what the long-term effects of those efforts will be.

There is also a consensus that the goal of these attacks was not to change actual vote totals, but to erode American voters’ trust in their electoral system.

In this chapter, we will explore the very real threat of interference in our election systems and the significant steps that
have already been made to fortify election infrastructure. We will also investigate the role of technology in aiding election efficiency and accuracy, as well as the way in which technology is being used to undermine the legitimacy of elections and democracy.

The Threat is Real
The threat of interference in U.S. elections is real. The Intelligence Community agrees that Russia attempted to interfere in the 2016 presidential election through cybersecurity attacks and disinformation campaigns. There is also a consensus that the goal of these attacks was not to change actual vote totals, but to erode American voters’ trust in their electoral system. In order to combat future interference campaigns and regain the trust of the American people, we must be aware of past and present threats as well as vulnerabilities in the system, address these vulnerabilities in order to prevent and disable and future attacks, and effectively communicate to the public the security of U.S. elections.

A 2017 Intelligence Community assessment found with “high confidence” that “Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the [U.S.] presidential election” and that Russia’s first goal was “to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process.” Malicious Russian cyber actors scanned several states’ websites and voter registration databases (VRDBs) for vulnerabilities and in some instances were able to gain access to thousands of voters’ information including names, dates of birth, addresses, driver’s license numbers, and partial Social Security numbers.

“Russian actors scanned databases for vulnerabilities, attempted intrusions, and in a small number of cases successfully penetrated a voter registration database. This activity was part of a larger campaign to prepare to undermine confidence in the voting process. The Committee has not seen any evidence that vote tallies were manipulated or that voter registration information was deleted or modified.”

- U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure During the 2016 Election
There was an extensive investigation of votes in 2016 – perhaps the most extensive ever – and no evidence was found to suggest any vote totals or voter information were removed or changed. However, we must remain vigilant against future interference, as it is likely to occur.

More than ever before, states today are well-informed of the threat and are tirelessly working to fortify their election systems against it.

U.S. Elections Are Safer Than Ever Before

Despite some narratives to the contrary, officials have made significant progress in responding to this threat. In fact, the 2018 midterms were more secure than any elections ever before. Following the 2016 presidential election, cybersecurity and election infrastructure came to the forefront amid reports of Russian hacking efforts. The news of this Russian interference triggered an unprecedented response from election officials at the federal, state, and local levels. More than ever before, states today are well-informed of the threat and are tirelessly working to fortify their election systems against it. Furthermore, they are collaborating and forming partnerships which allow them to work together quickly and effectively.

One of the strengths of the United States’ electoral infrastructure is its technical diversity and administrative decentralization. Since elections are run at the state and local levels, rather than the federal level, there isn’t one single election at any given time – in fact, there are more like 10,000 local elections all being held on Election Day. This can actually strengthen the U.S.’s electoral resistance to threats, since it would be difficult for a malicious actor to attack all these diverse systems simultaneously.
After the 2016 election, election infrastructure in the U.S. was designated “critical infrastructure,” and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was tasked with coordinating the response to the threat of foreign interference in American elections. When DHS first reached out to strengthen their relationship with election officials, many were hesitant to work closely with the federal government, since election administration has traditionally been a task left to the states. Understandably, many state election officials were skeptical of federal involvement in election administration. However, as DHS expanded their partnership with the states, they proved themselves to be respectful and helpful partners. Through this partnership, DHS helps manage risk to election systems, advise on cybersecurity best practices, and facilitate information sharing among the states.

During the 2018 midterms, over 90% of American voters lived in an area whose election infrastructure was monitored by DHS Albert sensors, a significant increase over 2016. DHS provides advice and assistance to the states and localities in designing and implementing cybersecurity measures. One excellent example of this aid is their Albert sensor program. Albert sensors are a network monitoring solution that provides automated alerts on network threats, allowing organizations to respond quickly when their data may be at risk. DHS uses Albert sensors to monitor traffic to election systems and detect malicious actors and activity. During the 2018 midterms, over 90% of American voters lived in an area whose election infrastructure was monitored by DHS Albert sensors, a significant increase over 2016.

But DHS isn’t just providing cybersecurity solutions, they’re also taking steps to share information directly with individual states and fostering communication channels among the states. In February 2018, the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) was founded to act as a hub of information to be shared among DHS, election officials, and stakeholders throughout the nation. Through the EI-ISAC, election officials can share knowledge of active threats so that fellow states and localities can coordinate and develop a response to the threat in a timely and effective manner. Additionally, states and localities may share innovations and insights regarding cybersecurity and best practices in election infrastructure and administration. Today, less than a year since it was created, the EI-ISAC boasts membership of all fifty U.S. states and over 1,000 local jurisdictions. Through this new communication channel, election stakeholders are able to better identify, protect, and defend against gaps, vulnerabilities, and potential threats to election systems.

Outside of the EI-ISAC, there are several other ways states have improved collaboration in election security. After DHS designated election infrastructure as critical infrastructure in 2017, the
Election Infrastructure Subsector Government Coordinating Council (EIS GCC) was established. The EIS GCC coordinates members across all levels of government and among other election stakeholders. Their purpose is to coordinate implementation of the National Infrastructure Protection Plan (NIPP) to bolster election infrastructure and further facilitate communication among election stakeholders.

States have also collaborated at various conferences and training events. In March 2018, thirty-eight states participated in the Harvard Belfer Center’s training event, designed to simulate worst-case scenarios like cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns. Later, in August 2018, DHS held their own cyber-security training event. “Tabletop the Vote 2018: DHS’ National Election Cyber Exercise” was a three-day event with forty-four states, the District of Columbia, Election Assistance Commission, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Institute of Standards and Technology, National Security Agency, U.S. Cyber Command, and several private vendors. The event featured simulations of attacks on election systems, attacks on voting machines, spear phishing attacks, and disinformation campaigns. Participants trained to minimize the risk, protect against potential attacks, identify threats, notify the public, and respond in an effective, appropriate, and efficient manner. Through these and many other collaborative efforts between the federal government, the states, localities, and other election stakeholders, election officials are able to receive timely and important information about cybersecurity threats on the horizon, share best practices, and coordinate improvements to overall election infrastructure security.

The growing effort to bolster election security is also reflected in the increase of its funding. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 provided $380,000,000 for distribution as Help America Vote Act (HAVA) funds to “enhance election technology and make election security improvements,” the first major federal funding for election
technology and security in many years.\textsuperscript{18} The EAC’s instructions to states for disbursement of funds recommends that the money be distributed among the following categories: voting equipment replacement and upgrades, election audits, VRDB maintenance and security, cybersecurity, training, and communications.\textsuperscript{19}

When it comes to the votes themselves, one perceived vulnerability in past elections has been the use of paperless direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines. These devices became popular in the U.S. following the controversial 2000 presidential election. Paperless DREs were viewed as an efficient, modern solution to the problems of lever and punch-card voting systems.\textsuperscript{20} Even as early as 2004, however, computer scientists were becoming increasingly concerned about the flaws of DREs.\textsuperscript{21} For instance, these machines can be susceptible to tampering and do not produce a voter-verifiable, paper record, which can be audited to confirm accurate counting. These concerns were amplified over the years, and, through training and collaboration, states became increasingly aware of DREs’ vulnerabilities. As a result, the use of these machines has decreased dramatically.\textsuperscript{22}

In the 2018 midterms, about 80 percent of all voters were able to vote with a paper ballot, and all states are on track to offer paper ballots to all voters by 2020.

Today, only five states (Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, New Jersey, and South Carolina) still use paperless DREs as their sole method of voting.\textsuperscript{24} However, each

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{U.S._Voting_Technology_Over_Time.png}
\caption{U.S. Voting Technology Over Time}
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Source: MIT Election Lab, Voting Tech.\textsuperscript{23}
one of these states has a plan in the works to switch to a form of voting that provides a voter-verified paper audit trail. In the 2018 midterms, about 80 percent of all voters were able to vote with a paper ballot, and all states are on track to offer paper ballots to all voters by 2020.

States are also making great improvements in the use of post-election audits. Audits verify that the vote totals reported by a vote tallying system are accurate and can identify possible machine malfunctions or other errors. One type of audit that many jurisdictions employ is a traditional, fixed-percentage post-election audit. This requires election officials to take a certain percentage of districts or voting machines and compare the vote total to the paper record to ensure that they match. Currently, 30 states plus the District of Columbia require this type of post-election audit to be conducted. Additionally, some states are beginning to use a new, innovative type of post-election audit called a risk-limiting audit (RLA). RLAs employ statistical principles to reduce the number of ballots that have to be audited while still ensuring with statistical confidence that the election outcome is accurate. The percentage of ballots to be audited varies depending on how close an election is. A tighter margin will mean more ballots must be counted, while a landslide result will require fewer ballots to be audited. Though this method of post-election auditing is still relatively new to the scene, it is already being used in three states (Colorado, Rhode Island, and Virginia), and three more states (Ohio, Washington, and California) have made provisions that pave the way for RLAs in future elections.

Beyond implementation of paper ballots and post-election audits, states are taking a variety of other steps to continually improve election infrastructure security. According to Jim Condos, Vermont Secretary of State and President of the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), states are regularly conducting cyber-hygiene scans, risk and vulnerability assessments, and penetration tests. Additionally, in our 2018 VRDB Security Survey, the Center for Election Innovation & Research (CEIR) found that a large majority of respondent states were backing up their VRDBs daily and testing those backups regularly; monitoring log-in attempts and traffic; and regularly involving all VRDB users in rigorous, in-depth cyber-security training.

Several states have made specific improvements to the security of their elections. Vermont, for instance, boasts a robust election infrastructure and employs a variety of best practices in election administration. The state closely monitors its cybersecurity and conducts regular vulnerability assessments. Every locality
uses voter-marked paper ballots. Since 2006, they’ve conducted a post-election audit following every election. Their vote tabulators are completely disconnected from one another. They back up their VRDB daily. And additionally, they allow Election Day registration (EDR) so that voters can register up to and on Election Day.\(^{32}\)

Colorado is another state with exemplary election security. In May 2018, the Washington Post designated Colorado as the “safest state to cast a vote”\(^{33}\) — and they did so with good reason. In Colorado, every vote is recorded on paper. The state took the lead in implementing risk-limiting audits. Almost every locality uses up-to-date voting equipment. Our VRDB Security Report found that they back up their VRDB daily, monitor their systems with an Albert sensor, and require multi-factor authentication to access their VRDB. They conduct rigorous training at least annually on cybersecurity threats such as spear-phishing and employ tabletop exercises to ensure that all users are prepared for a worst-case scenario.\(^{34}\) By nearly every measure, Colorado is excelling in election cybersecurity.

Finally, one cannot fully discuss election security improvements since 2016 without noting the progress made by Illinois. Of the states shown to have been targeted by Russian interference campaigns, Illinois was the only state in which malicious Russian actors were able to access and steal personal information of around 500,000 voters.\(^{35}\) Illinois was quick to respond. After adding a number of fortifications to their cyber defense system, Illinois now boasts one of the most secure VRDBs in the country. According to CEIR’s 2018 VRDB Security Report, Illinois reports backing up their VRDB daily and testing those backups at least weekly. They now monitor failed log-in attempts and audit traffic and API endpoints. Illinois also utilizes multiple security measures including Albert sensors and DDoS mitigation platforms. The 2016 attack on their VRDB came as a wake-up call to Illinois, and they have since taken the proper steps to bolster their systems against future attacks.

Overall, states have done a remarkable job of responding to the threat, investing resources, sharing information, and
training staff. But that's not always the story that Americans are hearing from their media.

If Russia’s goal was to delegitimize democracy worldwide, and particularly in the U.S., they had help from some in the American media.

Irresponsible Coverage of Cybersecurity Concerns
Thanks to the efforts of election officials around the country, the 2018 midterms were the most secure election we’ve ever held. Unfortunately, however, that isn’t what American voters have been hearing in recent months. Americans were fed false stories by many in the media that votes were changed in 2016 (there is no evidence of that). The media has insinuated that a child hacked a state election (he didn’t), and more than one story claimed, in the weeks before the elections, that the “midterms had already been hacked.” If Russia’s goal was to delegitimize democracy worldwide, and particularly in the U.S., they had help from some in the American media.

The problem with these claims isn’t only that they’re false. What’s particularly troubling is that in an environment where citizens are constantly fed politically-driven tales that elections are rigged or that voter fraud is rampant, these stories provide yet another reason to opt out of participating in our democracy.

Voters really should feel confident, and yet they are continually told that the states aren’t ready, the midterms might be compromised, and votes might not count due to hacking. There is certainly more that remains to be done to strengthen our election system as threats to its integrity get more sophisticated – and there’s no finish line when it comes to election security. However, the media’s inflammatory claims about the state of our election system are not only false, they’re dangerous.

Research since 2016 confirms that around half of Americans don’t trust our elections to be fully fair and accurate. The President and some other high-profile partisans are partly responsible for this, baselessly claiming elections are “rigged” and perpetuating the myth of voter fraud. In an era where at best only half of all eligible voters are voting in midterms, and 40 percent of eligible voters never vote, Americans need to be careful not to give citizens another reason not to show up at the ballot box.

On the other hand, some media groups are doing an exemplary job by engaging with election officials and presenting the public with the full picture: the vulnerabilities, the threats, and how election officials are responding. For a good example of this, we can look to the reporting around the annual DEFCON hacking conference in Las Vegas, the largest of its kind. In 2018, r00tz Asylum, the youth division of the conference, presented a challenge to attendees under 16: hack into simulations of state election websites. Leading up to the conference, their official website described the simulations as “replicas” and “exact clones.” However, this terminology was highly misleading at best. When the convention actually
arrived, children were presented with look-alike websites which were designed with vulnerabilities specifically for the competition. The kids were coached throughout to identify and target these vulnerabilities. The “replicas” did not have any of the security systems in place that their real-life counterparts do. Yet, as the challenge came to an end, officials touted the results, declaring that 35 kids were able to hack and exploit replicas of Secretary of State websites from six swing states.

Many media outlets latched on. Headlines following the event included “Kids as young as seven hack into election systems at DEFCON event,” “Hacking the U.S. mid-terms? It’s child’s play,” and “At Def Con, children show how easy it can be to hack an election.” The reality of the r00tz Asylum challenge was distorted in a number of articles. One claimed it took an 11-year-old “just 10 minutes to change election results on Florida’s website.” Another said the 11-year-old hacked “an exact replica of Florida’s state election website in just 10 minutes.” One article went so far as to say, “Some voting systems are so easy to hack a child can do it.” In a first-person account, an attendee even claimed, “It took me around 10 minutes to crash a simulation of the upcoming midterm elections.”

These claims misrepresented what had actually happened, presumably to drive hysteria in a quest for more clicks. As is typical for articles of this type, they failed to reach out to election officials and experts for comment. Some in the media, however, got it right. In response to these pieces, ProPublica published an article titled “No, a Teen Did Not Hack a State Election.” In it, author Lilia Chang describes the false claims made by various groups surrounding the conference and the reality of the simulated websites. When media and stakeholder groups responsibly report information and rely on the insights of election officials and experts, they give Americans a fuller picture and fortify voter confidence in their election systems.

More importantly, misleading claims in our own media and social media platforms are being leveraged by foreign adversaries to sow mistrust in our elections and divide us further as a nation. An example of this was reported recently by NBC News. In 2016, a voter posted a video online, purporting to show him trying to vote for Donald
Trump, but the machine wouldn’t let him, reverting his “vote” to Hillary Clinton every time. This video was a fraud, and the machine was working properly – the voter wasn’t properly following instructions to change his vote. Nevertheless, Russian agents spread this video through social media, getting it retweeted over 29,000 times, with coverage by dozens of media outlets.

Russia and perhaps others will continue this tactic – finding small fissures in our society, true or not, and then widening them into a great chasm, usually through amplification of false content created by Americans on our own social media platforms. Thus, the media has an important role here, not to sugarcoat legitimate vulnerabilities and areas for improvement, but rather to contextualize the complete story – the threat and the response – so voters know that while there are very real threats to our election system, there has been a remarkable response from officials at all levels of government and from all political parties.

What’s Next in American Elections
As unusual as 2018 was, we can expect 2020 to be an even bigger event. President Trump – already prone to delegitimizing our democracy with false claims of “voter fraud” or “rigged elections” when it suits his purpose – will be on the ballot seeking re-election. Foreign adversaries intent on ripping American society apart will likely seek to exploit these divisions as never before, aiming to further diminish American citizens’ confidence in their own democracy.

Therefore, though excellent progress has been made so far, we have to keep improving. Some vulnerabilities still exist that must be addressed – and they largely are being addressed. It’s expected that all states will offer auditable paper voting by 2020. More and more states are employing audits and improving the rigorosity of those audits. State and local election officials are hiring more skilled technical staff and training all their workers in proper cyber hygiene. Federal agencies like DHS are bringing even more tools to bear to provide resources to state and local election offices. But it is important to remember that there is no finish line in cybersecurity. The security measures that work well today will not work forever. As the threat evolves, so too must our defense systems. Going forward, media and other stakeholder groups should be encouraged to join forces with election officials, work to set the record straight, call out vulnerabilities and problems where they exist, and report successes and progress in election infrastructure security when they occur in order to boost voter confidence.

And as we move the needle forward in election security, a steady source of adequate funding must be maintained and, when possible, increased. This will require both Congress and state legislatures to provide election officials with an ongoing stream of sufficient resources to address cybersecurity needs. Just as we rose to the occasion to make the 2018 elections more secure than those in 2016, we will need to be increasingly vigilant heading into 2020 to ensure American democracy is protected from those who oppose it.

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Note: The views of the authors do not necessarily reflect those of the Bertelsmann Foundation.
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