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Elections

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# Midterms are more than a year away, but Trump is already challenging them | Opinion

*Trump's DOJ and Republicans are building the machine now to meddle in the 2026 midterm elections 15 months from now.*



**Chris Brennan**

USA TODAY

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## Key Points AI-assisted summary

The Department of Justice, under Trump appointees, has shifted its focus from protecting voting rights to supporting Trump's election claims.

Trump's administration, including Attorney General Pam Bondi and FBI Director Kash Patel, are actively working to challenge election results.

State election administrators are facing demands for voter data and records from the DOJ, fueled by Trump's unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud.

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The 60th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act came and went on Aug. 6 amid a massive mission shift within the U.S. Department of Justice.

That agency spent six decades using the Civil Rights Movement law to protect the ability of all Americans to cast ballots in elections. Now, the people President Donald Trump put in charge at the DOJ have shifted that mission entirely to protecting him from election results he dislikes.

The DOJ is out of the civil rights business. Now its officials making demands, with not-so-veiled threats, for data from state election administrators while regurgitating

Trump's oldest lie about elections – that hoards of noncitizens cast ballots, changing who wins and loses.

They're building the machine now to meddle in the 2026 midterm elections 15 months from now.

And those machinations are built on two lessons learned from 2020: Attack the election with everything you have before it happens, and stock the Trump administration only with officials who will do exactly what he says on elections, no matter what the law says.

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## **Election denial and mistrust are baked into the Trump administration**

Trump's team of election deniers, including Attorney General Pam Bondi and FBI Director Kash Patel, represent both of these lessons.

The first they learned in 2020, when they failed while trying to help Trump overturn a free and fair election. It was all so careless and chaotic back then, a dizzying series of unsubstantiated claims and discombobulated news conferences punctuated by judge after judge tossing out Trump's challenges as meritless.

**Opinion:** Trump, when in trouble, throws tantrums. The economy is his latest conniption.

I was reminded recently of a news conference I attended at Philadelphia's airport on the day after the 2020 election. Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, then working as Trump's lawyer doing work that eventually got him disbarred, was the ringmaster for the election deniers that day. And Bondi was right by his side.

I watched on Nov. 4, 2020, as Bondi started and ended her remarks by insisting twice that Trump had already won Pennsylvania ... while everyone knew that the state's election officials were still counting the votes. Trump lost Pennsylvania in 2020 when the race there was called three days later.

The Trump team's takeaway from all that: Set up the infrastructure to destabilize the administration of elections at the state level *well before* Election Day, not *just after* the polls close.

The second lesson was to purge the team of lawyers and officials who will follow the law, even if that means an election result that infuriates Trump. He had top aides who held the line during his first term, acknowledging his loss in 2020. They're all gone now, leaving only Trump's unquestioning sycophants in the second term.

And that's exactly who has been bombarding state election administrators with letters for months, demanding copies of the voter rolls for those states, along with records from previous elections when Trump was on the ballot. This is the plodding setup that will eventually lead to Trump and his team making new – and still unsubstantiated – claims that they're trying to protect the 2026 midterm elections from looming fraud.

**Opinion:** More than 1 million PA voters aren't allowed to vote in primaries. I'm one of them.

## **Expect Trump to bully Republicans into interfering with elections**

Trump has already made clear he'll use any political power he has to influence who wins control of Congress in 2026, even if that means taking actions he has no legal authority to take as president.

Wendy Weiser, vice president for democracy at The Brennan Center for Justice, told me that Trump and his team appear to be building a "pretext" on the false claim of rampant election fraud as justification for their potential meddling in the elections. They're systematically removing "the brakes" that protect democracy during the voting process, she said.

"They're taking aim at all of the brakes that applied before. And they're starting earlier," Weiser said. "That just shows you he's laser-focused on interfering in elections here by any means necessary. Bend the rules. Throw out the playbook."

David Becker, a former Department of Justice lawyer who founded The Center for Election Innovation and Research, has been hosting monthly webinar meetings with hundreds of state election officials since March. Those officials – Republicans and Democrats – have plenty of questions and concerns about the "unprecedented level of federal interference in state election processes," he told me.

"They're not sure where all this is leading," Becker said. "They hear the rhetoric coming out of the White House. They hear the continued false statements about past elections and election security in the United States."

It's worth noting here, as Weiser told me, that presidents have no role in running or overseeing elections in America, except for enforcing voting laws passed by Congress. And Becker noted that Congress, now controlled by Trump's Republican allies, has not authorized the DOJ intrusions into state election systems.

"This is not so much about election policy as it is about a completely radical rebalancing of the balance of power between the White House and the states," Becker said. "And the Constitution has said, with regards to elections in particular, that the balance of power is tilted toward the states."

**Opinion:** Alina Habba politicized her job as US attorney. Team Trump politicizes her exit.

As with so many Trump scams in his second term, Democrats in the minority in Congress will howl but have no real power now to stop him. And Republicans in Congress have surrendered any real authority as a coequal branch of government. They just do what Trump tells them now.

So it falls to election officials in the states, appointed or elected, Republican or Democrat, to engage with Trump's DOJ election deniers while insisting that everyone follows the law. These officials have faced an extraordinary increase of repulsive abuse from Trump's supporters that he egged on.

That was Trump's objective, then and now, to intimidate them into submission. We can only hope they hold the line, like the Trump officials in his first term who refused

to endorse his lies about the election.

*Follow USA TODAY columnist Chris Brennan on X, formerly known as Twitter: @ByChrisBrennan. Sign up for his weekly newsletter, Translating Politics, [here](#).*