The ghost of Theodore White: Reading the crises of a volatile America



America's political volatility after the 2026 midterms poses new challenges for India-US relations **Photograph: (AFP)**

Story highlights

America's political volatility after the 2026 midterms poses new challenges for India-US relations, strategic cooperation and global stability

In 1961, the American journalist Theodore H. White published The Making of the President 1960, a landmark account of John F. Kennedy's journey to the White House. White did something unusual for his time. Rather than simply record campaign speeches, polling figures and political manoeuvres, he captured an election as a larger national drama: an occasion when a country confronted its aspirations, anxieties and sense of identity.

If White were to survey American politics today, he would encounter a landscape far removed from the one he chronicled. The United States has entered an era of extraordinary political volatility, in which electoral mandates appear increasingly provisional and the pendulum of public opinion swings with remarkable speed. Donald Trump's historic return to the White House in 2024 was driven by a populist revolt against inflation, immigration and a political establishment widely perceived as disconnected from ordinary Americans.

Yet the midterm elections of November 2026 have produced another dramatic reversal. Democrats have captured control of both chambers of Congress, delivering a sweeping rebuke to the President and his administration. The significance of this reversal extends beyond the fortunes of either political party. It points to an electorate increasingly inclined to use elections as instruments of correction and punishment. Economic anxieties, the rising cost of living, the war with Iran and concerns about governance have contributed to this shift. Voters who embraced Trump's promise of change have now demonstrated their willingness to restrain his administration.

This is not necessarily a rejection of American democracy. Indeed, the midterms demonstrate the continuing capacity of its electoral institutions to impose political checks and balances. But the country is becoming more difficult to govern. Traditional assumptions of political stability and broad national consensus have given way to deep polarisation, institutional confrontation and increasingly unpredictable electoral outcomes. For India, this is far more than an American domestic political development. Washington's internal dynamics have direct consequences for New Delhi's strategic and economic calculations.

The Indo-Pacific partnership between India and the United States has acquired considerable strategic importance. Cooperation through the Quad, defence partnerships and the TRUST initiative on critical and emerging technologies reflects a relationship built over successive administrations. Yet the durability of these arrangements will increasingly be tested by the domestic political environment in Washington. The expanding architecture of cooperation illustrates the breadth of this relationship. India's entry into Pax Silica in February 2026 adds a significant technological dimension, bringing together trusted partners around critical minerals, semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

Earlier initiatives such as I2U2, linking India, Israel, the UAE and the United States, and the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) reflect an ambition to connect economic, technological and strategic interests across regions. While these initiatives are at different stages of development, they demonstrate that the India-US relationship extends well beyond traditional defence and diplomatic cooperation. Their ultimate success will depend on sustained political commitment, financing and regional stability.

With Democrats taking control of Congress when the new legislature convenes in January 2027, Trump will face a period of divided government. Congressional investigations, legislative obstruction and battles over government spending could consume considerable political attention. Although the President retains substantial authority over foreign policy, sustaining a consistent international agenda becomes more difficult when domestic political conflict dominates Washington.

India should therefore prepare for an America whose strategic commitments may remain substantial but whose ability to pursue them consistently could be constrained. The economic implications are equally important. The protectionist sentiment that helped propel Trump to victory in 2024 has not disappeared. Indeed, the retreat from traditional free-trade orthodoxy is now a feature of American politics extending beyond party lines. A Democratic-controlled Congress may scrutinise the administration's tariff policies more closely, but it would be unwise to assume that the broader political appetite for economic nationalism will quickly diminish.

For India's information technology, pharmaceutical and manufacturing industries, the challenge is to navigate an American market in which trade policy is increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations. Economic relationships can no longer be insulated from the political calculations of Washington. Yet it would be a mistake for New Delhi to interpret American volatility as evidence of American decline or strategic withdrawal. The United States retains formidable economic, technological and military capabilities. Its institutions, notwithstanding their present strains, continue to provide mechanisms for electoral accountability and the redistribution of political power.

This distinction is becoming increasingly important: American power remains formidable, but the predictability of American commitments can no longer be taken for granted. A country can retain its military superiority, technological leadership and economic influence while becoming less consistent in the exercise of its international responsibilities. For countries such as India, this gap between power and predictability may become one of the defining features of the emerging global order.

India, for its part, is not entering this period of uncertainty without experience. Its diplomatic establishment has accumulated considerable institutional memory through successive Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington. It has learnt to navigate differences while preserving areas of strategic convergence. This experience is valuable, although it cannot entirely offset the unpredictability of an American political system in which foreign policy is increasingly influenced by domestic electoral considerations and presidential preferences.

For Indian policymakers, the lesson is to institutionalise the bilateral relationship beyond individual personalities and presidential cycles. Engagement must extend across party lines in Congress, state governments, universities, industry and strategic communities. Cooperation in defence, technology, education and commerce should be anchored in constituencies that transcend electoral cycles. India must also continue diversifying its partnerships while retaining the United States as an indispensable strategic partner.

Theodore White understood that an election was more than a contest for office: it was a moment when a nation revealed something about itself. The American elections of 2024 and 2026, taken together, reveal a country struggling to reconcile its economic anxieties, political divisions and global ambitions. For India, the task is neither to celebrate nor lament these political oscillations. It is to understand them and prepare accordingly. The American relationship will remain indispensable, but it must be managed with a greater degree of strategic realism.

The ghost of Theodore White might still recognise the democratic drama unfolding in America. What he might find harder to recognise is the stability of the national consensus that once gave that drama its reassuring sense of direction.

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