



Analysis: 5 keys to watch in midterm elections

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York Daily Record

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2026

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PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

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Nicotine is the primary driver of tobacco addiction in the form of cigarettes, vapes and most other forms of commercial tobacco. The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances. PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

Movement touts addictive drug as beneficial, but dangers persist

Hasmeena Kathuria
University of Wisconsin-Madison
THE CONVERSATION

An ironic development emerging alongside the “Make America Healthy Again” movement is the portrayal of nicotine as a wellness and performance-enhancing product. Across social media, podcasts, wellness communities and tech startups, prominent wellness personalities and other influencers are portraying nicotine as a misunderstood compound whose potential benefits have been overshadowed by its negative association with cigarette smoking.

As a result, nicotine is being repositioned from an addictive substance linked to tobacco use to a natural product that can be used for everything from improving focus to protecting against cognitive decline. This trend includes use of nicotine alone in noncombustible products such as nicotine pouches, or in combination with caffeine and nootropics, which are substances marketed to enhance cognition.

As a pulmonary physician-scientist who studies nicotine addiction and the health consequences of tobacco and nicotine products, I am concerned about claims that nicotine can enhance wellness, productivity and cognitive performance.

Distinguishing between nicotine and tobacco

Some of these claims stem from the observation that nicotine is a naturally occurring plant compound found primarily in tobacco and in nightshade vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes and eggplant in trace amounts. Proponents of nicotine use also draw on studies suggesting that nicotine can affect certain aspects of cognition and brain function.

However, extending these findings to broad claims about productivity, brain health, longevity or wellness goes well beyond what has been shown in human studies.

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The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances, including carcinogens, carbon monoxide and fine particulate matter. Repeated exposure to these combustion products can cause cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and numerous other smoking-related illnesses.

While many smoking-related diseases result from exposure to combustion products, nicotine itself has well-known negative effects on the brain and body. Nicotine activates the sympathetic nervous system – the body’s “fight or flight” response – which increases heart rate and blood pressure and disrupts sleep. Repeated stimulation of this system can place additional strain on the heart.

Nicotine exposure is of particular concern during critical phases of development. Prenatal exposure to nicotine has been associated with adverse effects on fetal growth and development.

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Anthropic AI model sends false homicide tip to police

Costas Pitas
REUTERS

An Anthropic artificial intelligence model submitted a false homicide tip to a Philadelphia police website, among a string of incidents the AI company disclosed on Oct. 9 detailing Claude models’ unsanctioned manipulation of some government websites.

It is the first known instance in which a rogue AI appears to have tried to communicate a bogus tip to authorities, despite instructions not to create accounts or submit anything destructive, while not explicitly barred from submitting forms.

The cases are the latest examples of rogue or undesired behavior by the AI models of tech companies such as Anthropic and OpenAI.

They add fuel to national concerns about the fast-advancing technology amid reports of corporate network hacks by AI agents, and researchers’ warnings of an eventual existential threat to humanity.

Many of the cases Anthropic revealed involved websites run by federal, state and local agencies. Anthropic said it briefed the White House and notified all the agencies involved but did not disclose who those parties were.

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Poll: Trump backers not enthusiastic about voting

Nathan Layne and Jason Lange
REUTERS

Voters who backed Democratic former Vice President Kamala Harris in 2024 are far more enthusiastic about casting ballots this November than those who supported President Donald Trump, a Reuters/Ipsos poll found, in a potential warning sign for Republicans heading into the midterm elections.

The six-day poll, completed Oct. 5, also found that men were more enthusiastic about voting and more certain to cast ballots than women, and that male voters showed signs of shifting toward Democrats. That could signal erosion in Republican support among a demographic that was a pillar of Trump’s 2024 victory.

Some 48% of 2024 Harris voters said they were “very enthusiastic” about voting in the Nov. 3 midterm elections, when control of both chambers of Congress is at stake. By comparison, just 30% of Trump voters said the same in the poll.

The findings add to evidence of an

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Volume 230, issue 199
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