

US midterm elections 2026**Republicans turn on Donald Trump's tariffs in battle for 'political survival'**

US president's trade war has become an albatross for his party in crucial midterm election races



Senate candidate Mike Rogers calls for an end to the 'tariff war' in a new campaign ad but the Republican had praised Donald Trump's levies in 2025 © Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Aime Williams in Washington

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Republicans in tight US midterm races have found a culprit for the affordability crisis imperilling their election chances: Donald Trump's trade wars.

The president has boasted of his [tariffs](#) on the campaign trail and even launched a new broadside on Canada this week at a Republican rally in Alaska — a US Senate race Democrats are targeting in their quest to win Congress.

America's second-biggest trading partner had "ripped us off for years", claimed Trump.

But [Republicans](#) on the ground in battleground states from New Hampshire to Texas have a different message.

“Here in Michigan, we know that Canada is not our enemy,” says Mike Rogers, the state’s Republican US Senate candidate, in a recent campaign ad. “We need to end this tariff war — now.”

The ad does not mention Trump, who recently escalated his tariffs on Canada and has threatened to hit its auto sector with a 50 per cent levy next year, punishing an economy tightly integrated with Michigan’s. Rogers in 2025 praised Trump’s tariffs, saying they would “put Americans in the driver’s seat”.

Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic candidate who most polls put slightly ahead of Rogers in the race, pounced, accusing his opponent of “flip-flopping”.



‘There’s no one who has been more vocal than I have against Canadian tariffs,’ says Senator Susan Collins of Maine © Graeme Sloan/Bloomberg

But Rogers’ implicit criticism of the president’s signature trade policy is just the latest effort by Republicans to distance themselves from an unpopular leader and quell voter anger about his handling of the economy.

“Republican candidates are much more likely to break from the White House now than they were a year ago,” said Kevin Madden, a Republican strategist and senior partner at Penta Group in Washington. “The reason is pure political survival.”

Polling shows voters are deeply anxious about inflation and an affordability crisis — dubbed a “hoax” by Trump — and disapprove of the president’s tariffs, which economists say have pushed up prices.

US inflation in September rose to 3.7 per cent — well above its level when Trump entered office in 2025 — dealing another blow to a Republican Party now [eight points behind](#) in generic polls of the midterms.

Voters disapprove of Trump most on economic issues

To what extent do you approve or disapprove of how Donald Trump is doing as president on the following issues? (%)

Total



Source: FT/Focaldata • An FT/Focaldata poll of 2,275 registered voters was conducted Oct 3-6 2026. Results are statistically significant within ± 2.5 percentage points. "Unsure/neither approve nor disapprove" not shown.

FINANCIAL TIME

Rogers is not the only Republican assailing Trump's policies. In New Hampshire, US Senate candidate John Sununu has repeatedly criticised the president's trade wars and said Congress should "take back some power" and "clarify the powers of any president moving forward on tariffs".

In a debate between the two candidates in New Hampshire earlier this week, Sununu said the tariffs should be struck down to help affordability and the cost of living.

"Get rid of the tariffs," said Sununu. "Building is too expensive, so get rid of the tariffs on building materials once and for all."

His Democratic opponent Chris Pappas hit back, saying Sununu had previously hailed Trump's "important" tariffs.

In Maine, Republican Senator Susan Collins — who hopes to keep her seat in a state that voted for Joe Biden in 2020 and Kamala Harris in 2024 — has also stressed her opposition to Trump's trade policy.

"There's no one who has been more vocal than I have against Canadian tariffs," Collins told reporters recently. "Our economy is so intertwined with Canada that I am very worried about what the impact will be."

Even some Republicans far from the Canadian border object to the tariffs.

Ted Cruz is another Republican senator who has come out against Trump's tariffs © Antranik Tavitian/Getty Images

Ted Cruz, a Republican senator for Texas, who is not up for re-election until 2030, has warned that the levies are a tax on American consumers. Senator Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican who is also not up for re-election, likens the duties to “taxes on imports that are paid for by Americans”.

“They are paid by parents trying to provide for their families. They are paid by students saving up to buy their first car. They are paid by anyone who seeks to spend money on any conceivable product,” Paul said in August.

Despite these Republican criticisms of the president's flagship economic policy, the White House insisted that “heartland states” such as Michigan and Iowa “have been some of the worst hit by unfair foreign trade practices”.

Those states were “resoundingly won by President Trump because of his pledge to put American workers, farmers and businesses first”, said White House spokesperson Matthew Middleton.

Jeff Hurd, a Congress member running for re-election in Colorado, is one of a handful of Republican lawmakers who voted against Trump's tariffs on Canada earlier this year, triggering a personal attack from the president and the temporary withdrawal of his support.

“I will tell you that the one thing I knew, that I was going to be voting against the tariffs when I heard from a potato farmer in the San Luis Valley that these tariffs were hurting farmers and ranchers in that part of the district,” Hurd told a Colorado media outlet this month.

“When I heard that,” he added, “I thought — these are the people that sent me here.”

Data visualisation by Ian Hodgson

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