

US midterm elections 2026

White House chaos overshadows

Donald Trump's midterms push

Sacking of Katie Zacharia is latest in a week of embarrassing administration mis-steps



Joe Miller in Washington

Published OCTOBER 17 2026 | Updated 15:50

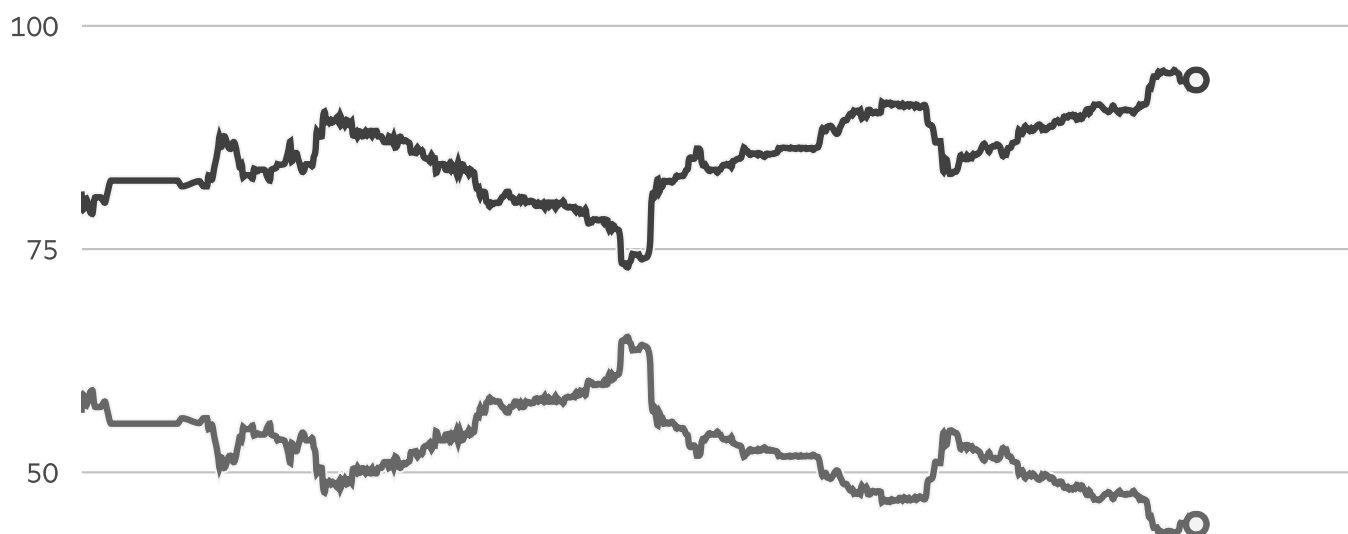
Katie Zacharia took just three questions from the media in her five-day stint as Donald Trump's press secretary. But her abrupt defenestration on Friday provided one final service to the president and his administration: temporarily deflecting attention from a string of other White House mis-steps.

In the past few days — time which was meant to be devoted to shoring up struggling Republicans on the midterms campaign trail — the US president has been forced to fire his envoy to Greece amid allegations of graft, stop his defence secretary from livestreaming an execution by firing squad and rubbish claims that chief of staff Susie Wiles, whose daughter the FT revealed worked for lobbyists engaged by a pro-Russian Balkan entity, would be next to depart.

Beyond Washington, Trump's party has been forced to funnel funds to candidates in traditional strongholds such as Florida and Nebraska, as polls continue to predict Republicans will be wiped out in the House and possibly lose their majority in the Senate next month.

Democrats' chances of controlling the House have been consistently high on the Kalshi prediction market

Implied chances of House of Representatives control after the midterm elections (%)



In Kansas, where Democrats have not won a Senate race since 1932, Republicans increased ad spending from \$5mn to \$21mn to help an incumbent retain his seat while reducing spending in the swing state of North Carolina.

In a bid to bolster their prospects, Republican candidates have been openly breaking with the president on issues such as tariffs.

“What are you supposed to do?” one Republican pollster said. “You’ve got a president that has 38 per cent approval ratings. People, when you ask them why they disapprove of the president, they say tariffs, the Iran war, gas prices and corruption . . . I don’t know [that] people feel that this economy is working for them.”

Meanwhile, the architects of Trump's midterms strategy, Chris LaCivita and James Blair, temporarily left the US to advise the pro-Russian Republika Srpska government in the Balkans, with the US president threatening to "terminate" them if he uncovers conflicts of interest.

Maga Inc, the group with which LaCivita and Blair now work, did not respond to a request for comment on their roles.

While the US president was dismissing Zacharia on Friday following her shaky appearances on Fox News, the price of oil touched \$110 a barrel for the first time since May on worries about a further flare-up in the Middle East.



White House chief of staff Susie Wiles, centre, with former White House press secretary Katie Zacharia at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland on Tuesday © Alex Wong/Getty Images

European leaders also expressed frustration with Trump for cutting a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin on diesel reserves and for failing to stop the temporary slowdown of Starlink satellite connections in Ukraine.

Two people close to the administration said the White House was even more brittle than it appeared from the outside and predicted a wave of further employee departures following the midterms.

Trump denied Wiles, who has just recovered from cancer, would be one of them, saying on Friday that there was “zero chance” of her leaving the administration.

But opponents of Wiles are already talking up Trump’s deputy chief of staff and immigration hawk Stephen Miller as a potential replacement, as well as Bill Pulte, the director of the Federal Housing Finance Agency, who has used his position to accuse many Trump enemies of mortgage fraud. Pulte denied on Saturday that he was seeking Wiles’s job.

“Trump won because of immigration . . . Miller’s the guy who actually figured out how to implement it,” Greg Bovino, Trump’s former border patrol tsar, said on X.

“If that’s the issue that got the votes, it makes sense to put the person who built the plan in charge of running the building,” he added. “If someone’s not going to help get mass deportations moving, they probably shouldn’t be in the way.”

In a statement, the White House said “no one is distracted by FAKE NEWS”.

“This team is strong, united, and focused on . . . winning the midterms. The anonymous ‘sources’ peddling this nonsense are self-serving opportunists focused on themselves. We’re focused on the President and the American people,” a spokesperson added.

The Republican National Committee said: “Unlike the Democrats who are in a full-blown civil war with extremists, Republicans remain united behind the President’s agenda of cutting taxes, lowering drug costs and securing our communities.”

“We are laser-focused on winning and our candidates will run the races necessary to best represent their districts and prevent Democrats from taking control,” added RNC spokesperson Natalie Baldassarre.

Other Trump allies were more sweeping in their criticism. Conservative commentator Todd Starnes rebuked White House staff on Friday, alleging many were focused on self-promotion and not on protecting the president.

“If you are not up for the job, resign. If you are using the White House as a stepping stone to Fox News, resign. If you are using the White House to pay off credit card debt, resign. If you are using the White House to grift for your non-profit ministry, resign,” he wrote in a post on X.

Matt Walsh, a rightwing podcast host, reserved his ire for the administration’s handling of the planned execution of Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan.

“This kind of sloppiness is inexcusable,” he wrote. “You need to go into something like this very thoughtfully . . . instead we get a casual announcement of a public execution and then a casual retraction on social media.”

Late on Friday evening, in an appearance at a Republican fundraiser, Trump predicted that his tax cuts and military interventions in Venezuela and Iran would ultimately help his party over the line on November 3.

“Presidents rarely, Democrat or Republican, rarely, rarely win the midterms,” he told assembled donors at his Mar-a-Lago home. But, he added: “The administration’s been amazing. We’ve saved our country.”

Data visualisation by Martin Stabe

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

US politics & policy

US midterm elections 2026

Republican Party US

US Government

Donald Trump