

Beneath All That Bluster, Trump Is Sweating

di Frank Bruni

Ever the performer, President Trump has lately been putting on a show of indifference.

The congressional elections on Tuesday, Nov. 3? Farthest thing from his mind. “I don’t care about the midterms,” he [said](#) during a cabinet meeting last week. Democrats exulted. Members of the commentariat gasped, as if watching political seppuku.

Stratospheric gas prices? “This is peanuts,” he [said](#) about two weeks ago, minimizing the pain felt by less affluent Americans as he bragged about the extravagance of the new ballroom he’s trying to build. It’s a shame he didn’t live two and a half centuries ago, in France. He and Marie Antoinette would have gotten on like a palace on fire.

Trump’s imperial airs, blasé banter and self-indulgent decisions — such as his endorsement of Ken Paxton, who is now the Republicans’ hugely vulnerable nominee in the crucial U.S. Senate race in Texas — create the impression of a president unshakably confident and blissfully unconcerned about voters’ looming judgment.

Don’t be fooled. He may be too arrogant and insulated to fret as much as he should, but there are reasons for his public nonchalance. There are also plenty of exceptions to it.

The most obvious evidence of his intense interest in the midterms is how hard he has tried to stack the deck in Republicans’ favor. The [rash](#) of Republican gerrymandering over recent months — with redrawn congressional districts in Texas, North Carolina, Florida and more — didn’t just happen organically, with state-level Republicans beseeching him to support the effort. He [ordered](#) them to undertake it. Bullied them, in fact. And he brutally [punished](#) any insubordination, as the Indiana Republicans who recently lost their primaries to Trump-endorsed challengers can attest.

The success of this campaign of intimidation has no bearing on the presidential contest in 2028 or on Senate races this year. It's all about the House, which just so happens to be the chamber most often affected by midterm pendulum swings and the one where Democrats are probably best poised to reclaim a majority. If that didn't trouble — even terrify — Trump, why all the thundering and threats?

And why insist so furiously on new voting rules nationwide? That's also not about 2028, when his inability (we pray!) to run for the White House again diminishes his investment in such restrictions. It's about the midterms. He has been haranguing congressional Republicans to pass legislation that would, among other measures, limit mail-in voting and require people who want to register to vote to provide proof of citizenship. He and his allies clearly believe those changes would more likely depress Democratic votes than Republican ones.

Trump [must know](#) that the Senate is highly unlikely to pass that legislation, which the House narrowly approved. But his overwrought assertions of the need for it serve his favorite fiction: Democrats steal elections, so Republicans must go to great lengths to defend themselves and the country against that. The unflagging energy he devotes to this nonsense reflects the undeniable angst he feels about the midterms. He's prophylactically delegitimizing and challenging any results that repudiate him.

Some political observers have cited the unpopularity of the Iran war — and Trump's failure to build public support for it before the first strikes — as proof that he's inadequately attuned to the midterms. But there's a ready argument against that: His quickie conquest in Venezuela so amped him up and puffed him up that he didn't sense any need to sweat extensive planning and prepping for his next heady triumph. American pilots would swoop in, speed out and sprint home in time for the victory parades. By all signs, Trump didn't decide to risk the closing of the Strait of Hormuz and a subsequent spike in what Americans would pay at the pump. He just didn't envision those possibilities.

And when he talks now about his willingness to suffer whatever political price he must to eliminate Iran as a nuclear threat, that's not high-minded, farsighted, selfless leadership. (Have you met Trump?) It's damage control. "I don't care about the

midterms” is what you say when you may have botched them and are trying to alchemize incompetence into valor.

Besides, Trump and his attendants don't fully accept polls, which have underestimated him before. He knows better than the experts and the critics. Many of them said he couldn't win in 2016, but he did. Many said he couldn't come back in 2024, then he showed them. If they're saying now that Iran is his albatross, then maybe it's his ascot.

And his supporters stick. That's the lesson he learned from [a criminal conviction](#) that didn't slow him down one bit and from fans' interpretations of his crudeness as authenticity, his cruelty as boldness, his thievery as entrepreneurial genius. On the one hand, it would be prudent to wait until after the midterms to insist that he be protected from any tax audits and that the Justice Department put \$1.776 billion of taxpayers' money into a fund with which he can reward his loyalists. On the other, his longstanding mockery of ethics has barely nicked him, so why shouldn't he do as he wishes when he pleases?

Which is his preference anyway. What's the point of all his power if he hesitates to flex it? Propelling Paxton into the winner's circle did that in a way that backing Paxton's rival in the primary, Senator John Cornyn, wouldn't have. It drew more notice, caused more upset and had everyone buzzing about Trump's potency with his base. He wasn't deaf to the voices that recommended Cornyn as the safer strategy. But his desire to shatter expectations and his impulse for mischief spoke more loudly. He chose the naughty, self-inflating course. He usually does.

At a Republican retreat at the start of the year, Trump acknowledged to his party's lawmakers that often “when you win the presidency, you lose the midterm.” That's what happened to him halfway through his first term. He [told](#) them: “You got to win the midterms because if we don't win the midterms, it's just going to be — I mean, they'll find a reason to impeach me. I'll get impeached.”

That doesn't sound like denial. It sounds like distress. And while the five months since then may have blurred Trump's focus and left him even more estranged from reality

than he typically is, they haven't knocked him unconscious. Beneath all that bluster and makeup, he's sweating.