

▶ they will not run for re-election in November. That is more than twice as many departures as the Democrats have suffered. It is far easier to pick off an open seat than it is to oust a sitting member of Congress. Furthermore, in February the Pennsylvania Supreme Court redrew the state's congressional districts. The old map greatly favoured Republicans; the new one is expected not to.

Our model's best guess is that the Democrats will win 222 seats, 27 more than they won at the most recent elections. That would give them a nine-seat majority. They obtain control of the House in 65% of simulations. This probability is slightly more auspicious for the Democrats than prevailing opinion suggests. Punters on PredictIt, a political betting market, put the Democrats' odds at 59%. We will produce a forecast for the Senate races later this year.

When applied to past elections, the model's predictions in late May have missed the final totals by an average of just seven seats. There is, of course, no guarantee that it will perform as well in 2018. A two-in-three chance measured almost six months before the election is hardly secure enough for the Democrats to rest easy. Because this year's race is so close, it would take only a shift of 0.6 percentage points towards the Republicans in the model's expectations of the national popular vote for it to anoint Mr Trump's party as the favourite to retain control.

Such movement is possible. Mr Trump's approval rating has already defied the historical pattern of declining sharply in the first half of a mid-term year. His party could have bottomed out unusually early in polls of party voting-intention as well, which would make it unlikely to lose additional ground as the model expects. The Democrats could nominate ideologically extreme or poorly qualified candidates, or be shut out altogether in some California districts because of that state's odd primary rules. A dramatic event could occur. That is why we give the Republicans a one-in-three chance of hanging on. ■

## Investigating the investigators

# The least-worst option

WASHINGTON, DC

The president strong-arms the Justice Department

EVEN from a man as indifferent to political norms as President Donald Trump, the tweet on the afternoon of May 20th was alarming. At the end of a string of messages complaining about a “witch hunt” against him, Mr Trump demanded: “that the Department of Justice look into whether or not the FBI/DOJ infiltrated or surveilled” his campaign at the behest of the previous administration.

It was no mere taunt. Mr Trump was referring to an investigation that eventually turned into a wide-ranging inquiry by Robert Mueller into Russian meddling in the 2016 election and possible links between Russia and the Trump campaign. In effect, the president was using the power of his office to demand that those investigating him and his associates be investigated. He did not so much broach as blow up a long-standing norm that presidents do not direct or involve themselves in specific criminal investigations.

Although an American intelligence source met three of Mr Trump's advisers, there is no evidence that the FBI or the Department of Justice planted a permanent source inside his campaign team. Indeed, in July 2016, shortly after Mr Trump became the Republican nominee, senior FBI officials warned him that foreign adversaries including Russia would try to infiltrate, or at least spy on, his campaign. By that time Russians had already made contact with several members of the campaign.

Mr Trump's Twitter threat quickly produced a result. Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney-general—who is overseeing Mr Mueller's investigation because his boss recused himself—asked the Department of Justice's inspector-general to look into Mr Trump's accusation. He and Christopher Wray, the FBI director, met Mr Trump at the White House and agreed to convene two meetings on May 24th: one for two Republican congressmen friendly to the president, another for congressional leaders from both parties. They will review “highly classified” information about the FBI's source and methods.

Mr Rosenstein's decision to indulge the president is no less unfortunate for being understandable. He was in a difficult position. Refusing Mr Trump's demand, or resigning on principle, could well have let the president install a more pliant overseer of Mr Mueller's investigation. He has not agreed to surrender any documents—as Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Intel-



ligence Committee and Mr Trump's chief congressional henchman, has long demanded. Perhaps the appearance of capitulation will satisfy Mr Trump. The president has previously threatened crises, then stopped just short of provoking them.

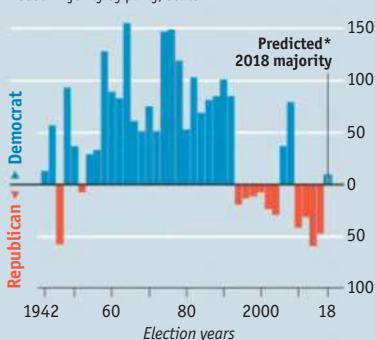
Ideally, Congress would constrain a president bent on exercising his powers to protect himself. That is what equal branches of government are supposed to do. But most congressional Republicans are frightened of Mr Trump's supporters and keen to hold the line against the Democrats, who are gunning for their jobs in the mid-term elections in November.

A recent poll showed that Americans are deeply divided on the question of whether Mr Mueller's investigation is a “witch hunt”. Republican voters think it is; Democrats think it isn't; independents are split. But almost all Americans believe that Mr Mueller should be allowed to finish the job. Firing him would be hugely risky. So Mr Trump, in Steve Bannon's pungent phrase, “floods the zone with shit” by throwing out so many theories, lies and half-truths that Americans hardly know what to believe. Some will be persuaded that Mr Mueller's investigation is not an attempt to find out how American democracy was assailed but part of a sprawling “deep state” conspiracy.

All this damages America's institutions and its intelligence capacity. Perhaps the most worrying development is that an informant's identity has been revealed—not directly by the White House or the House Intelligence Committee, but partly thanks to their fulminations and demands. In future, a person is likely to think twice before playing that dangerous but necessary role. As Mr Wray told a Senate committee, “The day that we can't protect human sources is the day the American people start becoming less safe.” ■

## Back in familiar hands

United States, mid-term elections  
House majority by party, seats



Sources: CQ Press; The Economist

\*At May 23rd 2018

## Gun control

## Do massacres change minds?

## Yes, but perhaps only locally

ONE of the awful things about America's latest mass killing, in Santa Fe High School near Houston on May 18th, is how quickly people slipped into familiar roles. Pupils and teachers cowered. Reporters and photographers tried to portray survivors' grief and explain the shooter's motives. Some politicians and officials lamented the toll of gun violence, while others blamed everything except guns (violent video games, abortion and too many doors in the high school were all bewailed). "A familiar tragedy sparks a familiar debate", sighed the *Texas Tribune*.

Two things are changing, however. First, mass killings have become more common and deadlier. A database maintained by *Mother Jones*, a magazine, suggests that deaths in shootings with multiple victims has risen since 2006, albeit erratically. Last year was the worst yet. After just five months, the toll from mass shootings in 2018 is higher than in any full

year between 1982 and 1998.

The second change is in attitudes. Two pollsters, Gallup and Quinnipiac University, find that Americans have become keener on gun control. On February 20th Quinnipiac reported that 66% supported stricter controls, up from 52% in November 2015. The February poll was conducted soon after another school shooting, in Florida, and could reflect a brief reaction. It is hard to know: gun outrages have become so frequent that there are few quiet spells in which to take an opinion poll. If underlying attitudes are changing, politics could be the reason. When Democrats hold sway in Washington, perhaps some gun owners feel that their rights are threatened and dig in against any change to the law. That is not the case at the moment.

Mass killings do appear to change opinions locally. A study in the *British Journal of Political Science* by Benjamin Newman and Todd Hartman finds that Americans who live near massacres are significantly more likely to support gun restrictions (controlling for other characteristics). People who live close to two or three mass killings seem especially swayed. Importantly, the effect seems not to be partisan. This suggests that gun-control campaigners should pick their moments, and concentrate on changing city and state gun laws rather than national ones.

They have already won a tiny victory in Texas. The governor, Greg Abbott, had offered a free shotgun in a prize draw for people signing up to his re-election campaign. He is now offering a \$250 gift certificate. ■

## Telephone scams

## Robocops needed

## America is losing the battle against automated phone calls

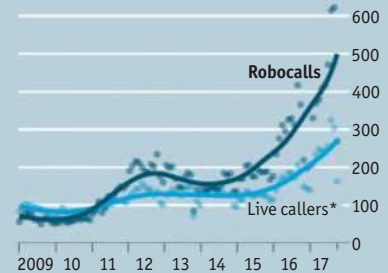
"I AM not the kingpin of robocalling that is alleged." So Adrian Abramovich, a telemarketer from Florida, assured American senators in April. Accused of making nearly 100m illegal "robocalls" in 2016 as part of a campaign to sell discounted holidays, Mr Abramovich has denied criminal wrongdoing. Nonetheless, on May 10th the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), America's telecoms regulator, fined him \$120m, the largest penalty in the agency's history.

The skirmish over Mr Abramovich is part of America's long, mostly unsuccessful war against robocalls, the pre-recorded phone messages peddling debt-reduction and timeshares that have irritated consumers for over a decade. According to YouMail, a call-blocking service, 3.4bn robocalls were blasted out in April, equivalent to nearly 1,300 every second. The Federal Trade Commission receives 500,000 complaints about such calls every month (see chart). Ajit Pai, the FCC chairman, says Americans are "mad as hell". Robocalls are consistently the agency's top consumer complaint. Can anything be done?

Most commercial robocalls have been illegal since 1991, when Congress passed the Telephone Consumer Protection Act. In 2012 the FCC banned telemarketers from making robocalls to consumers without previous written consent, and eliminated a loophole allowing companies to robocall consumers with whom they have an "established business relationship". That caused a temporary lull in complaints. Despite successful cases against legitimate firms like Bank of America and Sallie Mae, though, federal

## Press 1 to find out more

United States, national "do not call" registry complaints, monthly, '000



Source: Federal Trade Commission

\*Includes calls where call type was not reported

regulators have struggled to stop shady outfits. Auto-diallers allow fraudsters to blast out millions of calls at little cost; "spoofing" software disguises their identities. After robocaller phone numbers are identified and blacklisted, new ones pop up in their place. Many robocalling operations are based overseas and beyond the authorities' reach.

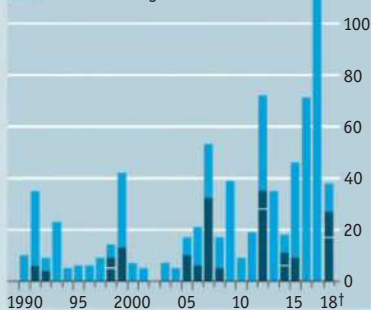
Some firms have joined the fight. In 2016 a group of over 30 carriers and technology companies including AT&T, Verizon, Apple and Alphabet formed a "strike force" to take on the robocall scourge. Dozens of mobile apps claim to block scammers. Whether the White House will join the assault remains to be seen. History suggests that Mr Trump may not be a steadfast soldier. "I did lots of robocalls" for political campaigns, Mr Trump bragged to the *Daily Mail*, a British newspaper, after elections in 2014. "Everybody I did a robocall for won."

## Every one an outrage

United States

Mass shootings\*, number of deaths

School shooting



Do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more/less strict or kept as they are now?, % replying



Sources: *Mother Jones*; Gallup; press reports  
 \*Shootings with three or more deaths excl. perpetrator(s). Before Jan 2013, with four or more deaths. Not comprehensive  
 †At 6am EST, May 23rd ‡At Mar 15th