THE CONFERENCE BOARD

Biannual Policy Summit:

Insight Summary

Fall 2026



Dear Member,

On November 12, 2026, The CEO Center had the privilege of hosting our annual Fall Policy Summit, held in-person for the first time in New York City. The afternoon was a powerful reminder of the important role business leaders can play in advancing practical solutions to the nation's most pressing challenges.

As we look toward the new Congress and the issues we will address in the year ahead, business has a vital role to play in building coalitions around durable solutions. The best answers rarely emerge from a single point of view. They take shape when people with different experiences sit around the same table, challenge one another's assumptions, and find common ground.

This report captures the major insights from the Summit and provides a flavor of the discussion, held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open discussion among both speakers and Members.

While this document captures key insight from the entire Summit, I want to leave you with six key insights:

1. The midterms revealed that affordability and pricing have become questions of fairness as much as economics. As businesses prepare for congressional scrutiny, they must make a compelling case for how they serve consumers and communities—and back that story with tangible facts.

2. Employment, capital investment, and accessible financing have supported US growth, but labor market disparities, infrastructure constraints, and uncertainty over policy and AI returns cloud the outlook. High equity valuations and concentrated technology exposure call for investment discipline.

3. Financial markets remain resilient despite mounting federal debt, but persistent inflation, limited political appetite for deficit reduction, and less predictable Treasury debt management could raise borrowing costs, volatility, and risks to financial stability.

4. The foundations of innovation remain strong, but collaboration across research universities, government, capital markets, and private enterprise needs to improve. Organizations that want to leverage AI need to redesign their workflows rather than layering AI on top of existing processes.

5. The outcome of the midterms opens a window for federal and state policymakers, providers, and employers to align incentives around better health outcomes and expand access to value-based care for more Americans.

6 Character is the defining quality of leadership—in public office or the boardroom. It requires the judgment to recognize what is right and the courage to act on it, putting the long-term interests of the people you serve ahead of personal reputation, political advantage, or short-term praise.

Our Summit also reinforced how much this work depends on the experience, judgment, and engagement each of you brings to it. I am deeply grateful for your continued contributions, the perspectives you share, and the leadership you provide in driving our impact campaigns forward. A special thanks to our sponsors: AlixPartners, Ellig Group, Growth Protocol, and RW2 Enterprises.

Sincerely,

David K. Young
President, The CEO Center
The Conference Board

Biannual Policy Summit:

Insight Summary

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

The Future of Capital Markets

- Strong employment, substantial capital investment, and accessible financing have supported US recent economic growth.
- Nevertheless, uneven labor-market outcomes, infrastructure constraints, and uncertainty about policy continuity and returns on AI investment remain risks to the economic outlook.
- High valuations of equities, concentrated technology exposure in the stock market, and technological disruption favor a more cautious investment approach emphasizing quality, diversification, and lower leverage.

Powering American Innovation: AI, Education, and the Workforce

- Placeholder, US leadership has historically depended not only on generating new ideas but also on its ability to develop, commercialize, and deploy innovations at scale.
- More strategic collaboration is needed across government, industry, and academia to develop and commercialize new technologies. This should include partnerships that connect basic research with applied research and commercial development.
- Universities –including large public research universities – remain critical components of the US innovation ecosystem, serving as centers of research, talent development, entrepreneurship, and collaboration.
- Many companies recognize that they need workers with AI-related skills but struggle to define precisely what those skills are or how to develop them. Panelists suggested that technical proficiency will be increasingly valuable when combined with critical thinking, judgment, adaptability, and the ability to learn independently.

Modernizing Health Care Delivery: Aligning Incentives to Promote Value and Innovation

- A shared organizational culture helps health systems sustain their mission through leadership transitions and continuous change. Employee identification with mission, vision, and values provides a foundation for decisions and adaptation.
- Improving value requires aligning incentives across providers, payers, and other stakeholders. Payment models that reward better outcomes and responsible spending offer a means of strengthening accountability.
- Prevention and earlier detection can support better health outcomes and more appropriate utilization over time but may increase demand for care in the near term. Employers, payers, and policymakers need to consider the timing of both investments and potential returns.
- Scaling AI and other emerging technologies requires disciplined governance and engagement across the organization. Their use in clinical applications warrants particular scrutiny because inaccurate outputs can affect patient care.

America at the Ballot Box: What Businesses Should Know After the Midterms

- Changes in both turnout and voter preferences drove the Democratic gains. Young voters and Latino voters moved sharply toward Democrats, while a significant number of voters who supported the President in 2024 stayed home. The breadth of the results, including in Southern, Midwest, and Plains states, underscored the depth of dissatisfaction with the country's direction.
- Businesses should prepare for congressional scrutiny and greater pressure to demonstrate their value to consumers and communities. Companies' agreements with the Administration, pricing practices, and local impacts could attract attention. Legal preparation should be accompanied by a clear, credible account of how businesses are delivering for the communities they serve.
- Voters' expectations for relief could quickly collide with the realities of divided government. A congressional agenda dominated by investigations and partisan confrontation risks deepening public frustration. Business leaders have an opportunity to encourage compromise and press policymakers to address the economic concerns that drove the election.

Fiscal Policy, Financial Markets & the Economic Outlook

- Financial markets remain resilient despite mounting Federal debt.
- However, persistent inflation, limited political appetite for deficit reduction, and less predictable Treasury debt management could raise borrowing costs, volatility, and risks to financial stability.
- Consumers are also facing worsening affordability and longer unemployment spells in the "low-hire, low-fire" labor market.
- AI could compound labor-market challenges absent productivity-driven income growth that sustainably raises wages.

Power, Policy, and the Future of Business

- The elections were about the public's perception of the President; voters sent an unmistakable message: "enough."
- Whether there is an opportunity for more bipartisanship or whether the Administration will leverage its power depends on how Congress treats the President. There may be some opportunities to promote issues that could form part of a legacy, such as on immigration.
- The CEO community has an opportunity to promote policy consistency and predictability that would benefit business and the economy.
- The 2028 Presidential election will be the most open, in both parties, in recent history.
- Whether in public office or the boardroom, the only thing that matters is character.

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The Future of Capital Markets

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- Strong employment, substantial capital investment, and accessible financing have supported US recent economic growth.
- Nevertheless, uneven labor-market outcomes, infrastructure constraints, and uncertainty about policy continuity and returns on AI investment remain risks to the economic outlook.
- High valuations of equities, concentrated technology exposure in the stock market, and technological disruption favor a more cautious investment approach emphasizing quality, diversification, and lower leverage.

The US economy remains strong, supported by robust employment, substantial capital investment, and accessible financing. Nevertheless, the benefits are uneven: construction and skills trades are thriving even as entry-level white-collar jobs face pressure. AI and infrastructure investment will continue to support further growth, but shortages of energy and advanced chips add to cost pressures on businesses and uncertainty about the returns on investment. Sustaining high levels of investment will require greater policy consistency across Administrations, regulatory action, and local reforms that facilitate housing, energy, and infrastructure development.

High valuations, elevated risk, and high concentration of the equity market in a handful of AI and technology companies warrant greater investment discipline. Strategies to consider include reducing leverage, favoring secured and investment-grade investments, and focusing on durable macroeconomic trends while assessing public and private investments individually. AI's disruption of software businesses illustrates how quickly long-standing investment assumptions can change. One caution is that high starting valuations could depress long-term returns, which poses challenges for those saving for retirement who depend heavily on public markets and have limited flexibility near retirement.

Powering American Innovation: AI, Education, and the Workforce

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- US leadership has historically depended not only on generating new ideas but also on its ability to develop, commercialize, and deploy innovations at scale.
- More strategic collaboration is needed across government, industry, and academia to develop and commercialize new technologies. This should include partnerships that connect basic research with applied research and commercial development.
- Universities –including large public research universities – remain critical components of the US innovation ecosystem, serving as centers of research, talent development, entrepreneurship, and collaboration.
- Many companies recognize that they need workers with AI-related skills but struggle to define precisely what those skills are or how to develop them. Panelists suggested that technical proficiency will be increasingly valuable when combined with critical thinking, judgment, adaptability, and the ability to learn independently.

The discussion explored the health of the US innovation ecosystem, particularly the country's ability to translate scientific discoveries and emerging technologies into widespread commercial applications. Panelists emphasized that US leadership has historically depended not only on generating new ideas but also on its ability to develop, commercialize, and deploy innovations at scale. While the United States retains significant advantages, including world-class research universities, deep capital markets, a strong entrepreneurial culture, and a robust private sector, increasing global competition and challenges scaling innovation are putting pressure on that leadership.

A major theme was the changing relationship between government, industry, and universities in supporting innovation. Historically, the federal government played a dominant role in funding research and development, particularly in the decades following World War II. Today, private industry accounts for the majority of R&D investment. Panelists suggested that the federal government should continue to play an important role but that more strategic collaboration is needed across government, industry, and academia to develop and commercialize new technologies. This should include partnerships that connect basic research with applied research and commercial development.

Universities –including large public research universities – remain critical components of the US innovation ecosystem, serving as centers of research, talent development, entrepreneurship, and collaboration. Indiana University, for example, has increased its annual research expenditures from approximately $700 million to $1 billion over five years and has developed new structures to support the commercialization of research. Universities also serve as trusted conveners that can bring together industry, government, and researchers.

The discussion also focused on the challenges businesses face in adopting AI and other emerging technologies effectively. Panelists noted that organizations achieving the greatest benefits from AI are generally those that have redesigned their workflows, organizational structures, and employee roles around the technology. Simply inserting AI into existing processes often produces limited efficiency gains.

These changes have significant implications for workforce development and the skills employers need. Many companies recognize that they need workers with AI-related skills but struggle to define precisely what those skills are or how to develop them. Panelists suggested that technical proficiency will be increasingly valuable when combined with critical thinking, judgment, adaptability, and the ability to learn

independently. AI could also change traditional career pathways by allowing more junior employees to take on increasingly complex responsibilities. Companies that fail to adapt their organizational structures and make effective use of emerging talent may risk losing skilled employees to more innovative competitors or new entrepreneurial ventures.

Upskilling and reskilling will be essential, but some panelists suggested that traditional approaches to workforce training may be insufficient. Rather than relying primarily on formal classroom instruction or employees returning to school, much of the necessary training may occur on the job as workers learn to incorporate AI into their daily responsibilities. Employers will need to develop new approaches to training workers, redesigning roles, and supporting continuous learning as technologies and required skills evolve.

Higher education institutions are also reconsidering how to prepare students for an AI-enabled economy. Indiana University, for example, is examining AI across three dimensions: teaching and learning, research and discovery, and internal university operations. Its approach emphasizes the combination of human capabilities and AI, with technology used to amplify human creativity, productivity, and judgment rather than simply replace human effort. AI fluency, multidisciplinary expertise, ethical reasoning, and the ability to evaluate when and how to use AI are becoming important educational priorities. These changes extend across academic disciplines, rather than being confined to computer science or technical fields, as universities reconsider both what students need to learn and how they learn.

Modernizing Health Care Delivery: Aligning Incentives to Promote Value and Innovation

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- A shared organizational culture helps health systems sustain their mission through leadership transitions and continuous change. Employee identification with mission, vision, and values provides a foundation for decisions and adaptation.
- Improving value requires aligning incentives across providers, payers, and other stakeholders. Payment models that reward better outcomes and responsible spending offer a means of strengthening accountability.
- Prevention and earlier detection can support better health outcomes and more appropriate utilization over time but may increase demand for care in the near term. Employers, payers, and policymakers need to consider the timing of both investments and potential returns.
- Scaling AI and other emerging technologies requires disciplined governance and engagement across the organization. Their use in clinical applications warrants particular scrutiny because inaccurate outputs can affect patient care.

Successful modern health care delivery requires organizations and policymakers to align decisions around improving value. This means connecting the work of building a durable organizational culture with broader changes in payment incentives, investment in prevention, and the adoption of new technologies.

Culture is central to a discussion of leadership continuity. Organizations that depend heavily on a particular leader can become vulnerable during transitions. A widely shared understanding of mission, vision, and values helps employees navigate change and provides a consistent basis for decisions. Reinforcing that understanding is an ongoing leadership responsibility, including for a chief executive. Engaging closely with employees can help leaders assess whether those principles resonate across the workforce.

The Quintuple Aim provided a framework for considering the relationships among patient outcomes and experience, population health, workforce well-being, health equity, and cost stewardship. Trust among patients and employees supports changes in behavior and care delivery needed to improve value. Addressing health disparities is also as an opportunity to improve health and reduce avoidable spending. For a successful health system, these objectives are mutually reinforcing elements of how that system operates.

Prevention and earlier detection highlight the relationship between better care and spending. Expanded screening can identify needs that would otherwise go untreated, increasing utilization and costs in the short term. Earlier intervention, wellness programs, and care navigation all have the clear potential to make utilization more appropriate over time. Environmental conditions and individual behavior also influence health, alongside genetic predispositions. Realizing the benefits of prevention requires a willingness to invest over a longer horizon, including through reimbursement policies and employer and payer support. Whether additional detection ultimately reduces total spending remains an important question for both health systems and policymakers,

Current policy priorities in health care include both immediate financial pressures on providers and the need for broader alignment across the health care system. Medicaid expansion can stabilize providers' finances and lead to longer-term improvements in heath outcomes. More broadly, incentives and accountability mechanisms should encourage providers, private payers, pharmaceutical companies, and other stakeholders to work toward better outcomes and lower costs. However, the complexity of the US

health system makes coordination across these stakeholders a continuing challenge. The Medicare Shared Savings Program is an example of an approach that seeks to align financial incentives with value.

Technology adoption is an essential part of the work of a learning organization. Executive leadership can identify strategic priorities, while frontline teams help surface problems that innovation should address. Connecting these perspectives supports the selection and scaling of useful solutions. The use of AI in clinical decisions requires particular care, but adoption of AI can build on established approaches to governance, rather than requiring a new framework. Inaccurate or fabricated outputs from AI systems present risks that health systems must address as they develop clinical applications and the data resources supporting them. Collaboration with technology vendors and information sharing among health systems can support that work, even among organizations that are otherwise competitors.

America at the Ballot Box: What Businesses Should Know After the Midterms

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- Changes in both turnout and voter preferences drove the Democratic gains. Young voters and Latino voters moved sharply toward Democrats, while a significant number of voters who supported the President in 2024 stayed home. The breadth of the results, including in Southern, Midwest, and Plains states, underscored the depth of dissatisfaction with the country's direction.
- Businesses should prepare for congressional scrutiny and greater pressure to demonstrate their value to consumers and communities. Companies' agreements with the Administration, pricing practices, and local impacts could attract attention. Legal preparation should be accompanied by a clear, credible account of how businesses are delivering for the communities they serve.
- Voters' expectations for relief could quickly collide with the realities of divided government. A congressional agenda dominated by investigations and partisan confrontation risks deepening public frustration. Business leaders have an opportunity to encourage compromise and press policymakers to address the economic concerns that drove the election.

The midterm elections revealed an electorate increasingly focused on whether government and business are delivering a fair deal. Voters are frustrated, with many feeling that they cannot get ahead despite positive headlines about financial markets and employment. Current consumer sentiment is comparable to the lows of the 2008 financial crisis.

Turnout and shifting voter preferences both contributed to the results. Young voters favored Democrats by roughly 35 percentage points with Latino voters also moving substantially toward the Party. At the same time, approximately eight million more Trump voters than Harris voters from the 2024 electorate stayed home. Together, these shifts produced a surprisingly broad Democratic wave, particularly in states such as Texas, Mississippi, and Kansas. Independents also moved towards the Democrats, reflecting deep dissatisfaction with the country's direction and demand for change.

Affordability was central to that result, along with voters' concerns about broader questions of fairness. Opposition to AI data centers has become a kitchen table concern, with 41 ballot initiatives across 10 states underscoring the intensity of public engagement. Immigration enforcement also contributed to dissatisfaction, with polling showing that a majority of Americans believed the Administration's tactics have gone too far, even as support for immigration reform remained.

A Member raised the prominence of corruption in the exit polls, noting that it had not appeared to be a leading issue earlier in the campaign. A participant cautioned that the wording of polling questions matters: corruption ranked as the top concern for only about 5% of respondents when they were asked an open-ended question, while far more identified it as important when asked directly. Another participant argued that the concern becomes particularly powerful when voters believe officials' conduct is causing them personal economic harm.

For business, the results underscore both potential political exposure and a need to communicate more effectively. Businesses, universities, and law firms that have reached agreements with the Administration on pricing, tariffs, or other policies should prepare for potential congressional hearings. Working with public affairs teams and general counsel, they should be ready to explain those arrangements and demonstrate the tangible benefits they provide to consumers, their institutions, and communities in an environment increasingly focused on fairness. Pricing practices, including surveillance pricing, may also rise as a significant issue for business.

The discussion distinguished companies' exposure to investigations from that of the Executive Branch. One participant anticipated subpoenas and resistance to congressional inquiries involving the President's family, while warning that private organizations will be unable to resist investigations on the same basis. Businesses were encouraged to obtain appropriate legal counsel and prepare for potential investigations.

A participant raised concern about the declining influence of fiscal hawks. In response, a participant emphasized that positive headlines about the stock market and low unemployment offer little reassurance to Americans experiencing financial strain. Voters who treated the election as a mandate for economic relief would likely be profoundly frustrated if the new Congress – instead of tackling issues of affordability – produces a steady stream of hearings and potential impeachment proceedings. The public's immediate priorities, one participant argued, are relief from high prices and an end to the war in Iran, rather than the 2028 presidential campaign.

The incoming Congress will also bring a substantial change in membership. More than 100 new Members, including individuals from the private and nonprofit sectors, will enter a Congress whose incoming class is roughly a decade younger on average than the current membership. Many will arrive with a sense of urgency shaped by an impatient electorate. Whether that urgency produces compromise remains uncertain. Participants encouraged business leaders to engage their Representatives and Senators on practical solutions, emphasizing that persistent economic frustration carries consequences for consumer confidence and public trust.

Fiscal Policy, Financial Markets & the Economic Outlook

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- Financial markets remain resilient despite mounting Federal debt.
- However, persistent inflation, limited political appetite for deficit reduction, and less predictable Treasury debt management could raise borrowing costs, volatility, and risks to financial stability.
- Consumers are also facing worsening affordability and longer unemployment spells in the "low-hire, low-fire" labor market.
- AI could compound labor-market challenges absent productivity-driven income growth that sustainably raises wages.

Financial markets have remained relatively resilient despite rising Federal debt and interest costs, with inflation, AI investment, and expectations for monetary policy driving higher Treasury yields. However, participants warned that persistent deficits, greater reliance on short-term borrowing, and more price-sensitive investors increase refinancing risks and market vulnerability. They emphasized that departures from regular, predictable Treasury debt management could erode investor trust. Persistent inflation from tariffs, energy costs, and broader price pressures could also require more restrictive monetary policy, weakening economic growth and increasing financial volatility.

Participants expressed little confidence that policymakers would meaningfully reduce deficits in the next two years, citing limited political appetite for fiscal restraint and pressures to increase spending or reverse revenue measures. A financial crisis might ultimately be needed to change political incentives. On affordability, participants favored productivity-driven income growth while questioning proposals centered on subsidies and price controls, noting the political difficulty of lowering housing prices for existing homeowners. They also flagged rising unemployment duration in a labor market characterized by limited hiring and layoffs, with AI adding uncertainty about future employment prospects.

Power, Policy, and the Future of Business

Trusted Insights for What's Ahead ®

- The elections were about the public's perception of the President; voters sent an unmistakable message: "enough."
- Whether there is an opportunity for more bipartisanship or whether the Administration will leverage its power depends on how Congress treats the President. There may be some opportunities to promote issues that could form part of a legacy, such as on immigration.
- The CEO community has an opportunity to promote policy consistency and predictability that would benefit business and the economy.
- The 2028 Presidential election will be the most open, in both parties, in recent history.
- Whether in public office or the boardroom, the only thing that matters is character.
- In American politics, there is often a disconnect between what people in Washington think voters care about and what actually worries voters. For instance, while policymakers may focus on big picture issues such as artificial intelligence, most Americans are more concerned with daily challenges such as the cost of gasoline, health care, and housing.

The elections were about one factor: voters' perception of the President. Most midterm elections are a referendum on the party in power, but for a decade the President has been the dominant party in US politics. A participant was not surprised by the election results, as two data points generally predict election outcomes well. The first is the question of whether the country is on the right track or wrong track; only 29% of polling respondents believe the country is on the right track. The second is the job approval of the President; before the election, the average of polls had disapproval ratings 30 points higher than approval ratings. This led to the depth of the election, with strong results for Democrats in states such as Texas, Kansas, Mississippi, and Georgia. The voters sent an unmistakable message to the President and the Republican Party: "enough." Republican Members of Congress had a hard time explaining the One Big Beautiful Bill Act; certain policies could have been explained better to voters.

What comes next – is there an opportunity for more bipartisanship, or does the Administration go in the other direction, seeking to leverage its power? In a participant's view, it depends on how Congress treats the President, as he is concerned almost solely about how he is treated. With the Democrats holding 256 seats, incoming House Speaker Jeffries has more flexibility to ignore the far left of his caucus. A participant suggested the President should talk to Democrats on immigration as a way to build his legacy, to find some openings on specific issues. On Democratic priorities such as reversing Medicaid cuts and expanding subsidies to purchase heath insurance, the President may be willing to cut a deal if he gets something in return. In a participant's view, the President does not care about debt or debt holders.

Responding to a question on the lack of policy consistency and the need for it to drive economic growth, a participant said it is essential for CEOs and the business community to tell the truth. In the current environment, the CEO community has not been helpful to promote a policy environment that fosters that kind of consistency. Instead, it has submitted to the President in a way significantly different than in the past. Both policy consistency and policy predictability are necessary for economic growth.

In a participant's view, the Republican Party will be lost for the next two years if it looks for leadership in Congress. The 2028 election will be the most wide open Presidential race in both parties in a long time. On the Republican side, no one wants to go back to the period of the two Bush Presidents, though some polices from that period (such as trade) may be repackaged. If the Republicans nominate a Trump-adjacent candidate, they cannot win. On the Democratic side, a participant believes the more mainstream side will win out over the progressives. All seven swing states will have Democratic Governors in 2028.

The Democrats also face a challenge from the enormous anti-Jewish sentiment in the party and will need to address this, particularly with several potentially strong Jewish candidates for President.

In a participant's view, the country has taken a "character holiday," deciding that character does not matter, and the result is the situation the country is in now, with divisions at home, weakening institutions, and conflicts with Canada and NATO. In the chairs in which the participant sat, the only thing that matters is character – and it is the same in the C-Suite. Political and business leaders must believe fundamentally in what is right and do it. The country should elect a President who understands that and will act that way, in the manner of the first President Bush. One knew what he would do. Even when he changed his view, for instance, on taxes, he did so because he believed the country was more important to him than his promise, and he paid a price for that. Where is character like that these days? Character really counts, integrity really counts, in the C-Suite and the Oval Office.

List of Sessions

The Future of Capital Markets
Marc Rowan, Co-Founder, CEO, and Chair, Apollo Global Management, Inc.

Powering American Innovation: AI, Education, and the Workforce
Dr. Melissa Flagg, Executive Director, Andrew W. Marshall Foundation
Pat Tomlinson, President & CEO, Marsh People and Investments
Dr. Pamela Whitten, President, Indiana University

Modernizing Health Care Delivery: Aligning Incentives to Promote Value and Innovation
Dr. David Callender, President & CEO, Memorial Hermann Health System

America at the Ballot Box: What Businesses Should Know After the Midterms
Brian Ellner, Managing Director, APCO
Ron Klein, Former Congressman (D-FL); Partner, Holland & Knight
Dr. Don Levy, Executive Director, Siena Research Institute

Fiscal Policy, Financial Markets & the Economic Outlook
Greg Ip, Chief Economics Commentator, The Wall Street Journal
David Finkelstein, Chief Executive Officer, Co-Chief Investment Officer, Annaly

Power, Policy, and the Future of Business

Governor Chris Christie, Managing Member, Christie 55 Solutions, LLC; Former Governor of New Jersey

Related Resources

A list of **Relevant CED Readings for the sessions during the Summit may be found here**.

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