

MNI POLITICAL RISK ANALYSIS - US Daily Brief 16-Dec 25

by Tom Lake

MNI (London)

The White House (times subject to change)

14:00 ET 19:00 GMT	President Trump participates in an Ambassador Credentialing Ceremony Oval Office
20:15 ET 01:15 GMT	President Trump participates in a Hanukkah Reception

Key Dates:

- ❖ Jan. 30: Government funding expires
- ❖ Jan 31: Texas' 18th congressional district special election (runoff)
- ❖ Feb 14: Latest date for Georgia's 14th congressional district special election
- ❖ April 16: New Jersey's 11th congressional district special election

Washington

- Vice President JD Vance delivers remarks in Alburty, PA, at 10:00 ET 15:00 GMT on the topic of 'making America affordable again'.
- Weekly conference meetings for House Republicans and Democrats get underway at 09:00 ET 14:00 GMT. These will be followed by the weekly presser for House Republican leadership at 10:00 ET 15:00 GMT, and Democratic leadership at 10:45 ET 15:45 GMT.
- In the Senate, weekly conference lunches for Democrats and Republicans will take place, followed by news conferences from each party's leadership at ~14:00 ET 19:00 GMT.
- Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Defense/War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine deliver classified briefings to the Senate and House on the ongoing military strikes in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. Senate briefing at 10:00 ET 15:00 GMT, House briefing at 11:15 ET 16:15 GMT. For more info see Venezuela section below.
- US District Judge Richard Leon holds a hearing at 15:30 ET 20:30 GMT as part of a lawsuit filed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation against President Trump's plans for a USD300mn ballroom to be constructed at the White House. The group seeks a temporary restraining order on the development that has already seen the demolition of the East Wing.

'Affordability'

Vice President Vance's speech this morning on the topic of 'making America affordable again' comes just a week after President Trump delivered an address on the same topic, in

the same battleground state. While Trump's freewheeling address garnered significant headlines, Vance is viewed as able to deliver a more focused pitch to voters in the Keystone State ahead of the midterms.

- The speech is set to impress the message that thanks to the administration's efforts, affordability issues will become less pressing in the months ahead. A spokesperson from the Vance team told Politico *"From the historic working families tax cuts to over \$18 trillion worth of investment in America, the benefits of the Trump economic agenda have only begun to kick in and there is more work to be done in the new year. Expect Vice President Vance to emphasize the fact that making America affordable again is the number one priority of the Trump administration."*
- One of the administration's other most effective communicators, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, has also been pushing the narrative that the economic situation for many Americans will improve in the new year. In an interview last [week](#), Bessent claimed that thanks to the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, *"[working Americans are] going to be getting very large refunds in the first quarter. I think we're going to see \$100 [billion]-\$150 billion of refunds, which could be between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per household."*

Congressional Business

The House is IN

The Senate is IN

Committee Schedule –

- ❖ 10:00 ET 15:00 GMT: HOUSE: Judiciary; Administrative State, Regulatory Reform, and Antitrust Subcommittee: "Anti-American Antitrust: How Foreign Governments Target U.S. Businesses"
- ❖ 10:00 ET 15:00 GMT: HOUSE: Foreign Affairs; Europe Subcommittee: Hybrid Warfare in Europe Against U.S. Interests: Moscow and Beijing's Playbook
- ❖ 14:00 ET 19:00 GMT: HOUSE: Rules: Committee takes up H.R. 498 – Do No Harm in Medicaid Act; H.R. 3492 – Protect Children's Innocence Act; and H.R. 6703 – Lower Health Care Premiums for All Americans Act

The **House** will hold votes at 13:30 ET 18:30 GMT, and 16:00 ET 21:00 GMT, including on a rule for a bill that intends to accelerate the federal permitting process for fossil fuel energy projects.

The **Senate** is set to continue its assessment of the National Defense Authorization Act from 11:00 ET 16:00 GMT. It is seen as likely that votes will take place, potentially setting the stage for the Senate to leave for its Christmas break as soon as Wednesday, 17 December.

Republican Battles Over Healthcare

Efforts to extend tax credits under the Affordable Care Act continue in both the House and the Senate apace, even though, given the short deadlines, these subsidies will expire at year's end before any deal will be in place.

- The House Rules Committee meets this afternoon, with moderate Republicans seeking to push their amendment that sees a two-year extension of Obamacare subsidies with reforms entailed. It is likely, given Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA)'s

control of the panel, that this will be rejected. The underlying GOP bill is still expected to receive the votes of moderates, who are not yet at the stage of pursuing the 'nuclear option'.

- GOP lawmakers are concerned that an abrupt expiration of the subsidies and subsequent increase in premiums could damage their constituents, as well as Republican prospects in the midterms. While unlikely, the Republican leadership's intransigence it could push this cohort towards the Democrats.
- House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries' (D-NY) discharge petition, which would circumvent Speaker Johnson into allowing a three-year extension for Obamacare subsidies, sits at 214 votes. While one moderate, Rep. Jen Kiggans (R-VA) is [believed](#) to have ruled out voting for the Jeffries petition, just four signatures would get it across the line. This would give the Democrats a notable 'win', even if it does not eventually become law.
- In the Senate, a bipartisan meeting of senators took place on 15 December, with efforts to reach an agreement on a proposal from Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Bernie Moreno (R-OH) that would extend ACA tax credits for two years with reforms and income caps attached. This is similar to the moderate GOP proposal in the House.
- While reporting suggests a positive response from many senators, progress appears unlikely in the short term. The Hyde Amendment, adding new abortion funding restrictions to Obamacare subsidies, will almost inevitably end any prospect of support from blue states, meaning it will fail to get the required 60 votes.
- Politico: *"But this much is clear: The Dec. 31 deadline for the subsidies is certain to come and go. "The calendar precludes getting something done this week," Sen. Bill Cassidy told reporters. "But, still, a commitment to work together is a lot of progress."*
- [Semafor notes](#) *"Instead, the real deadline is shifting toward when open enrollment for the Obamacare marketplaces ends on Jan. 15 — and when a swath of government funding expires on Jan. 30."*

AI 'Tech Force'

The White House announced on Monday, 15 December the creation of a 'Tech Force' focusing on AI, with the intention of drawing talent from the US' largest firms in the AI and tech space to bolster the federal government's abilities in the area. There is speculation that the Tech Force is intended to try and recover from the impact that Elon Musk's Department for Government Efficiency (DOGE) widespread firings had on the federal government's technological capabilities.

- As Axios [notes](#), *"Big tech firms will be able to lend their workers to do two-year stints to help modernize the federal government — and retain any equity or stock options — and then return to their employer,"* according to Office of Personnel Management Director Scott Kuper.
- [CNN](#): *"Members of the Tech Force are expected to work on projects such as incorporating advanced AI into drones and other weapons at the Department of Defense, building out the Trump Accounts platform at the Internal Revenue Service, and using AI to improve intelligence at the State Department, among other initiatives,"*

- The federal government has historically struggled to hire in these areas, given the much higher salaries offered in Silicon Valley and on Wall Street. However, Kupor noted the pay of USD130k-195k would act as a notable incentive, as would the idea that individuals (up to 1,000 in the first run of the programme) would be seconded from their first for a couple of years rather than embarking on a multi-decade career in the federal government.

Venezuela

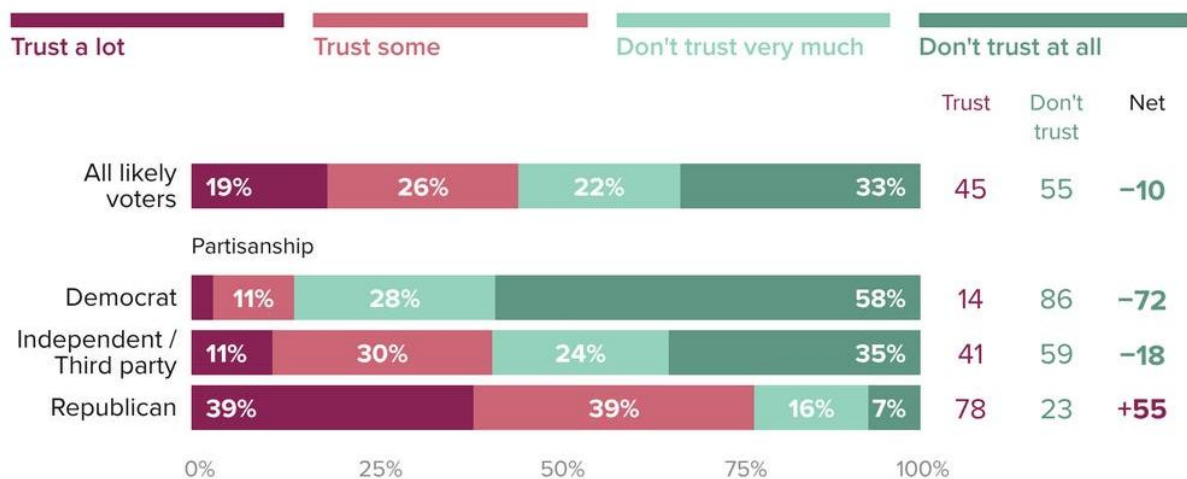
Secretary of War/Defense Pete Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine are due to deliver classified briefings to the Senate and the House regarding the ongoing military actions in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific. Punchbowl News [reported](#) on 15 December that House members would be briefed on “*military strikes and other Western Hemisphere updates*”, according to a notice shared with Democratic lawmakers.

- The briefings come as Senate Democratic leadership demands that the Pentagon release video of US military strikes on boats claimed to be smuggling drugs out of Venezuela. Speaking on the Senate floor on 15 December, minority leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said he expected both men “*to come tomorrow prepared to answer tough questions from senators about what exactly is going on with our forces in the territory surrounding Venezuela.*”
- Schumer in particular raises the issue of the 2 September strikes, in which shipwrecked survivors were then hit with a second strike, potentially in breach of the Law of Armed Combat prohibition on attacking those who are hors de combat. The minority leader is demanding that all senators are “*entitled to see the full, unedited video of what happened*”. Hegseth has denied that he explicitly ordered the second ‘double-tap’ strike.
- The Pentagon confirmed this morning that all members of the House and Senate Armed Services committees would be allowed to see the unedited videos of the strikes. To date, only the ‘Gang of Eight’ (Senate majority leader John Thune (R-SD), Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA), House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), Chair of the Senate Committee on Intelligence Tom Cotton (R-AR), Senate Intel. Committee ranking member Mark Warner (D-VI), Chair of the House Committee on Intelligence Rick Crawford (R-AR) and House Inte. Committee ranking member Jim Himes (D-CT)), and senior members of the Armed Services and Defense Appropriations committees have been allowed to view the footage.
- It remains to be seen whether this will be enough to satisfy Democrat demands for greater transparency over the actions of the military and the orders they are receiving in the region.
- The briefings come in the wake of at least three more strikes in the eastern Pacific Ocean that killed eight alleged ‘narco-terrorists’. The US Southern Command claimed that the locations of the strikes were along “known narco-trafficking routes”.
- They are also due to take place as the Senate looks to progress the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the ~USD900bln bill that keeps the US military funded for another 12 months. The House has already passed the legislation, which

includes a 25% reduction in Secretary Hegseth's annual travel budget until he releases all of the unedited videos related to the strikes to lawmakers.

- There remains significant uncertainty within Congress, the US, and the region as to the full intentions of the Trump administration. The size of the military buildup could easily suggest eventual plans for a land invasion of Venezuela to remove President Nicolas Maduro by force, although the strikes, support for the opposition, and threats of land action have been viewed as attempts by the Trump administration to force Maduro's resignation without the need for boots on the ground. Liberal pollster Data For Progress notes a net -10 of respondents trusting vs not trusting the administration on its military actions in and around Venezuela.

Figure 1. Opinion Poll, 'To what extent do you trust the current administration to make decisions about the use of military force against Venezuela, if at all?', %



Source: Data For Progress. Fieldwork 5-9 Dec. 1,165 likely voters

Ukraine

Two days of talks in Berlin between Ukrainian officials and a US delegation led by presidential envoy Steve Witkoff and President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner concluded on 15 December, with the delegation and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy then meeting with heads of government and state from Ukraine's allies across Europe.

- Post-meeting comments from European, US and Ukrainian politicians and officials, at least at first glance, appeared positive towards progress on a peace deal framework.
- Zelenskyy had already indicated Ukraine could give up its NATO membership ambitions in exchange for comprehensive security guarantees. In the aftermath of the talks, a senior US official [said](#), "The basis of that agreement is basically to have really, really strong guarantees, Article 5-like... Those guarantees will not be on the table forever. Those guarantees are on the table right now if there's a conclusion that's reached in a good way."
- However, [supposed US demands](#) that Ukraine withdraw its forces from the eastern Donetsk oblast remain a major impediment. Zelenskyy said the prospect of territorial concessions was "painful", and that "Frankly speaking, we still have different positions." On the territorial concessions, Zelenskyy said he does not view the US as

the issue, saying *"I see us as strategic partners, so I would say that we have heard about the issue of territories in relation to Russia's vision or Russia's demands from the (U.S.) We see this as demands from the Russian Federation."*

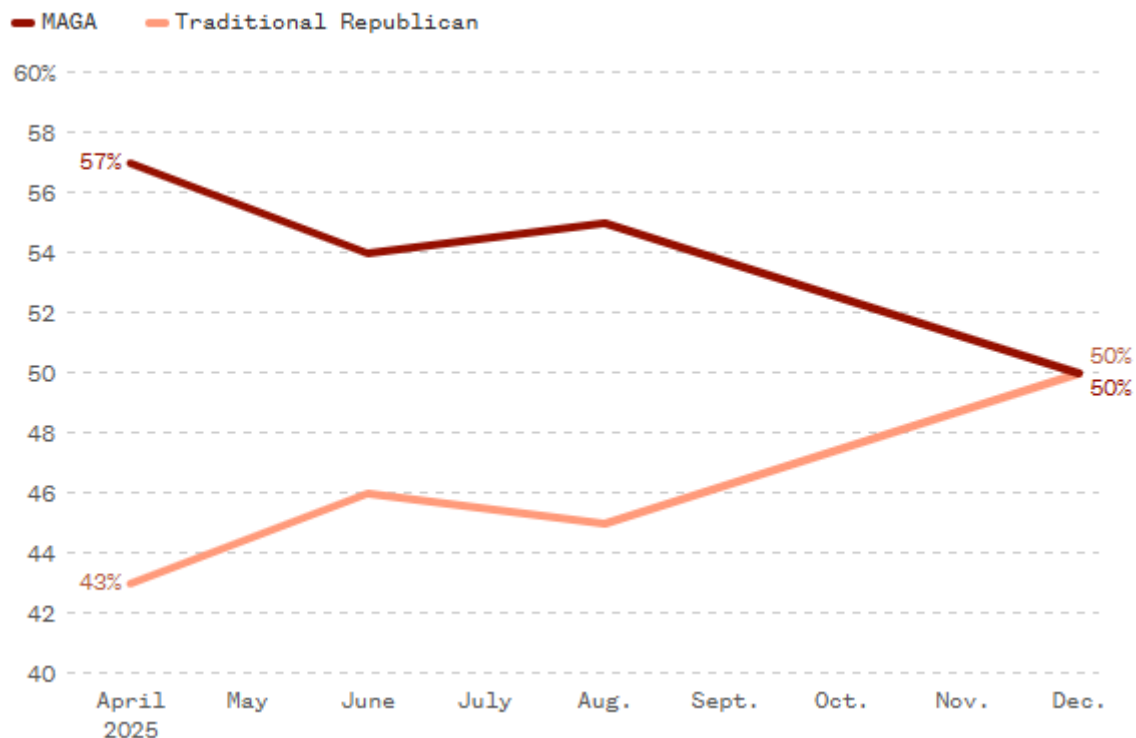
- German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said that *"This is a truly far-reaching and substantial agreement, which we have not had before, namely that both Europe and the US are jointly prepared ... to give similar security guarantees to Ukraine,"*
- Nevertheless, the Kremlin remains staunchly opposed to any NATO troops on Ukrainian soil whatsoever, with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov restating the Russian government's stance earlier today. President Vladimir Putin's annual phone-in and press conference, a marathon event due to take place early in the morning on Friday, 19 December, will be closely watched for indications of any change in this position, or general reaction to the peace plan framework.

Poll Of The Day

The base of the Republican party has seen something of a shift in how it perceives itself according to the latest polling from NBC News Decision Desk. Of those respondents self-identifying as Republicans, 50% viewed themselves as 'traditional Republicans', and 50% saw themselves as part of the Trump-aligned 'MAGA movement'. This is down from a 57%-43% split in favour of the 'MAGA movement' in April 2025.

- As NBC News [notes](#), *"Although small, these shifts are notable because Trump has enjoyed tremendous sway over his party in no small part because of his ability to command a core base of support."*
- A fracturing of the MAGA base has been seen in recent months, most notably with one of Trump's most loyal backers, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), completing a full 180-degree turn into a vocal critic of the president in relation to the Epstein files situation.
- Then, in November, a series of electoral victories for Democrats, built on the back of 'affordability' issues exemplified a blind spot for Trump. While the president has dismissed concerns about the issue as a Democrat 'hoax', a shift in GOP support towards 'traditional Republicans' may in turn reflect a desire among voters to see the party focus on its historical areas of perceived strength: economic rigour and lowering taxes, rather than the 'culture wars' focus of the MAGA movement.

Figure 2. Opinion Poll, 'Do you consider yourself more a part of the MAGA movement or more a supporter of the Republican Party? Asked among self-identified Republicans'



Source: NBC News Decision Desk Poll. N.b. The poll was conducted Nov. 20-Dec. 8 and surveyed 20,252 adults nationwide online. The margin of error is plus or minus 1.9 percentage points

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