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Observations and Foreign Policy Implications of the 2022 American Midterm Elections

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SYNOPSIS

President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party defied strong political headwinds and expectations in the midterm elections to retain control of the Senate and lose the House of Representatives only narrowly. The results indicate that the US might be past peak Trumpism and that the bipartisan consensus on competition with China will be preserved despite divided government in the next two years.

COMMENTARY

One of the most unusual features of America's unusual political system is the midterm elections held two years into presidential terms, when one-third of the Senate and all 435 members of the House of Representatives stand for re-election. American voters have displayed a willingness to use midterms to rein in the president's agenda.

In the House of Representatives, the out-party almost always gains seats at the expense of the president's party – especially in a president's first midterm. Over the past century, only twice has the president's party not lost seats in his first midterm election: in 1934 during a worldwide economic meltdown and political realignment in the United States, and 2002 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Great (Republican) Expectations

Not infrequently, the president's co-partisans in Congress are overwhelmed by significant "waves" in which the out-party nets dozens, even scores of additional seats. Since the end of World War II, seven of the 19 midterms going into 2022 witnessed the president's party losing at least 40 seats.

Entering the 2022 election cycle, a "red wave" certainly looked possible. Facing the

highest levels of inflation in over 40 years and worried about [crime](#) and the [security](#) of the southern border, [two-thirds of voters](#) were unhappy at the direction of the country. Only 42 per cent of Americans [approved](#) of President Joe Biden's performance in office – worse numbers than Clinton's in 1994 and Obama's in 2010 when the party lost 52 and 63 seats respectively.

Democratic members of Congress (MCs) exacerbated the party's malaise by strategically retiring rather than facing an irate electorate, with 36 Democrats and only 24 Republicans choosing to voluntarily exit the chamber. This not only reversed the historical trend of Republican MCs being significantly more likely to retire but was also the largest Democrat over Republican [gap](#) since 1992.

How Democrats Defied History

As the electoral dust settles, however, what happened was certainly not the “red wave” – a 60-seat pickup in the House and as much as a five-seat gain in the Senate – that Republicans anticipated, and Democrats feared. In the clarity of hindsight, there were signs that should have muted Republican expectations.

While inflation was high, it might have peaked at 9.1 per cent in June and falling to 7.7 per cent in October. 2022 might also have been less of a referendum (comparing the administration against a generic alternative) and more of a choice (between the Biden administration and Donald Trump). While he continues to loom large, Trump is [even less popular](#) than Biden, with 41 per cent favourable and 54 per cent unfavourable ratings.

Although House retirements were unusually tilted toward Democrats, that was not true in the Senate where six Republican (GOP) incumbents opted out versus only one Democrat. Furthermore, big midterm “declines” often follow large “surges” in the preceding presidential election. But in 2020, there had been no Democratic surge; though Biden won the presidency, Democrats lost a net of 13 House seats.

Finally, on 24 June, the Supreme Court issued its ruling in [Dobbs v. Jackson](#), overturning the 1973 case of *Roe v. Wade*, which had established a constitutional right to abortion. For decades Republicans had benefited from conservative voters' anger over *Roe v. Wade*, but the culmination of the strategy of overturning the *Roe* precedent probably provided the single greatest [impetus](#) for moderate and liberal voters to rally behind a president about whom they were not terribly excited otherwise.

These forces significantly blunted Republican midterm aspirations. While they gained a majority in the House of Representatives, [it will be a slender one](#), with little margin for error or [intra-party disagreement](#). In the Senate, the GOP failed to make any net gains, and may still lose one seat, depending on the outcome of a 6 December run-off election in Georgia, which requires majority not just plurality vote winners.

Implications for US Foreign Policy

The midterm results were good for neither former-President Trump nor Trumpism, with a slew of candidates who trumpeted his “Big Lie” – denying the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election results – defeated in key battleground states. While this did not

stop Trump from [announcing](#) his 2024 White House bid, we may be past the peak of Trumpism. His first-mover action did not deter prominent Republicans from [speaking out](#) against his bid to be the first president since Grover Cleveland (1885-1889, 1893-1897) to serve two non-consecutive terms, and does not appear likely to [deter other challengers](#) from seeking the GOP presidential nomination.

The blunting of Trumpism in the midterms has also emboldened internationalist-minded Republicans to [push back](#) against the Trump-aligned neo-isolationist America Firsters in Congress who seek to stop funding for Ukraine's war effort against Russia's invasion. It will also help assuage America's allies and partners that the country is due for a return to "normalcy" in international relations and diplomacy in the next presidential election as it seeks to put the 6 January insurrection, election denialism, and Trump's assaults on democratic norms and institutions behind it.

This is of course not to say that the Biden administration can expect an easy time in the next two years. The country remains politically divided and deeply polarised. Rep. James Comer (Kentucky), the likely incoming chair of the House Oversight Committee, has vowed to conduct [a broad range of investigations](#) targeting President Biden and his family's business dealings. The House Judiciary Committee under the chairmanship of Rep. Jim Jordan (Ohio), a co-founder of the rightwing Freedom Caucus, [may move to impeach the president](#). The likely incoming Republican Speaker, Kevin McCarthy (California), has also [promised](#) to form a select committee on China, accusing the Biden administration of failing to stand up to China. While these GOP-led investigations may prove to be distracting and even embarrassing for the Biden administration, they are essentially "bread and circuses" spectacles for the Make America Great Again (MAGA) crowd.

Key House committees with jurisdiction over defence and diplomacy, however, are likely to be in the hands of internationalist Republicans, boosting the administration's goal of competing vigorously with China despite divided government. The ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), Rep. Mike Rogers (Alabama), is expected to take over the committee and push for even greater defence spending. This will result in greater funding for Indo-Pacific defence measures, particularly the Pacific Deterrence Initiative that seeks to counter China's accelerated military modernisation. A GOP-led HASC can also be expected to push for greater and accelerated military aid to Taiwan to deter a mainland invasion.

Rogers will work closely with Rep. Mike McCaul (Texas) who is in line to head House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and has stated that his top priority will be to compete with a rising China. McCaul supports the administration's policy of strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific to counter a rising China. The potential downside for the administration, however, is that Rogers and McCaul might be too hawkish on China and require reining in.

At the end of the day, both Republicans and Democrats can find in the midterm results features to be pleased with and those to be concerned about. Winston Churchill's observation about war is also true of American politics: "success is not final; failure is not fatal." The two parties will do this all again in just a couple of years.

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