



## Midterms 2022: What Else Do They Tell Us?

The 2022 U.S. midterm elections resulted in divided government, divided political parties and a divided electorate. This is not what Republicans expected, but it does mean that some pressure will be applied to brake the Democrat agenda to transform our nation through open borders, the “Green New Deal,” runaway spending, an aggressive cultural war, and an expansive regulatory and welfare state.

With the benefit of more distance from the November headlines, it is a good time to take stock of the election’s lessons for the future.

If you are a Republican, don’t expect too much in a divided Congress. Republicans took control of the House, barely, and after some turbulence, Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) was elected Speaker. In order to secure the necessary votes, he agreed to some important changes to House rules that confirm the Republican caucus’s commitment to reform. This might pay off in the long run in portraying the GOP as a party of reform.

Still, the Senate remains in Democratic control. The Republican Senate caucus gave President Biden a good start for 2023 with the passage of a bloated \$1.7 trillion omnibus bill, signed into law on New Year’s Day by Biden while vacationing in the Caribbean. The bill is full of pork for favored members of Congress and pet projects for LGBT+ activists and the culturally woke. The United States now has a \$31 trillion national debt, and this omnibus act will add to it, despite claims that the federal government will make up revenue for it in the future by taxing the rich.

With Republicans having gained control of the House in January, the Biden administration should not expect such victories in the future, at least not on this scale. Winning control of the House was important for conservatives who have been prompted after witnessing history in the last two years to yell, “Stop. I want to get off.” Republicans are not

going to stop history under the Biden administration from advancing, but they can make the road bumpy.

The midterm gains for Republicans were slight. Securing a larger majority in the House and retaking the Senate would have changed the entire political environment in Washington and the nation. Democrats exaggerated their success in the midterms, but not without cause. Biden now has a pathway to run for a second term. Moreover, the high expectations that Republicans carried into the midterms, which were dashed by the results, have deepened divisions within the Republican party on the national and state levels.

Fingers have been pointing in all directions as to the failure: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) did not spend money in support of MAGA candidates; National Republican Party Chair Ronna McDaniel is accused of being a RINO working on behalf of the establishment; critics blame former President Donald Trump for pushing poor candidates and creating a toxic political climate with his claims of a stolen election and his role in the January 6, 2021 protests.

So what did happen in 2022? Why didn’t Republicans do better? And what does it all mean in the long run?

### What Happened?

*There was no one deciding factor in the failure of Republicans to make more gains in 2022. Many factors combined to help Democrats thwart the expected Republican tide. Republicans did gain control of the House and received more than 3 million more votes than Democrats. These votes came in largely red states, but even in solidly Democratic states such as New York and California, Republicans made gains on the congressional level.*

Let’s look at some of the specific explanations cited for Republican shortfalls:

## *Youth Vote?*

Democrats turned out their voters in blue states and many swing states. Important in this regard was the turnout of voters aged 18 to 29. This vote was the *second highest youth turnout in nearly 30 years*. Over a quarter of eligible voters in this age range turned out in 2022. In competitive states this turnout was even higher, and it went heavily to Democrats. In all other age groups, the vote was closely divided between Republicans and Democrats. Not so for 18- to 29-year-olds, who voted Democrat 63 to 25 percent in House races, according to an Edison Research exit poll.

Reaction to the *Dobbs* decision on abortion by the U.S. Supreme Court was important to mobilizing this age group. Democratic candidates hammered on the point that “reproductive freedom” was under attack. Many Republican candidates in competitive races failed to place their opponents on the defensive by talking about late-term abortion—which the vast majority of American voters oppose. (See *Mindszenty Report*, Jan. 2023.)

At the same time, many of these *young voters appear to have been brought into the Democratic camp by Biden’s unilateral student-debt forgiveness initiative*. Biden said as much in his reaction to the 2022 midterm results: “I especially want to thank the young people of this nation, who I’m told—I have not seen the numbers—voted in historic numbers again” to “continue addressing the climate crisis, gun violence, their personal rights and freedoms and student-debt relief.”<sup>1</sup>

Pollsters tend to look at specific issues that drive blocs of voters. Yet most voters are not driven to the polls by a single issue. Instead, political campaigns and the political environment set a general outlook in the minds of the voters. In today’s polarized political environment, many voters will look at one party as good, even righteous, while the other party as bad, even evil.

The overwhelming Democrat tilt of the youth vote—however small within the general electorate—should be a wake-up call for Republicans. After years of left-wing propaganda on social media and in K-12 schools and colleges, many young Americans, especially those going to college, have been persuaded that progressives are good and conservatives are bad. Republican candidates in the future need to respond with a better proposals and better messaging, but ultimately the fight remains a cultural one. *Conservatives need to retake our schools and our colleges. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Arkansas Governor*

*Sarah Huckabee Sanders are taking excellent first steps in this direction.*

The failure of some Republican senatorial candidates led to accusations of unprepared candidates. Much of this criticism was aimed at Trump, who endorsed these candidates in their primaries.<sup>2</sup> In the aggregate, Trump-backed senatorial candidates fared poorly.

These failed candidates included Herschel Walker—defeated in Georgia by Sen. Raphael Warnock; Kelly Tshibaka—defeated in Alaska by Sen. Lisa Murkowski; Blake Masters—defeated in Arizona by Sen. Mark Kelly; Adam Laxalt—defeated in Nevada by Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto; Mehmet Oz—defeated in Pennsylvania by John Fetterman; Don Bolduc—defeated in New Hampshire by Sen. Maggie Hassan; Leora Levy—defeated in Connecticut by Sen. Richard Blumenthal; and Gerald Malloy—defeated in Vermont by Peter Welch.

In fairness to Trump, many of these races were uphill battles for any Republican candidate. It should be noted, however, that Trump-backed Senate candidate J. D. Vance did win, beating a well-established Democrat, Tim Ryan. Moreover, more than 200 Trump-endorsed candidates won their races. Many of these were incumbents who were expected to win, but the Trump endorsement was not poison for them.

## *Unqualified Candidates?*

Nonetheless, *many of Trump’s candidates running for the Senate were woefully unprepared to play in the big leagues of politics*. Most won their primaries by attacking their Republican opponents as RINOs and “establishment” candidates. Trump-backed candidates ginned up their Republican base of Trump supporters by throwing them red meat during the primary campaign.

For example, in purple Arizona, Trump-backed Blake Masters, when asked in a podcast his views on abortion, replied that he supported an outright ban on all abortions, then added, “Yeah—it’s a religious sacrifice to these people, I think it’s demonic.”<sup>3</sup> He tried to walk back his statement, but by then it was too late. Incumbent Senator Mark Kelly, whom many thought vulnerable to losing his seat, went after Masters on this statement.

The abortion issue was not the only thing Kelly tarred Masters with during the campaign. Kelly poured millions of dollars into a media campaign painting Masters as an extremist. A clip of Masters suggesting it was time to

reconsider privatizing Social Security was played over and over on television and social media. By the time Kelly was through with his opponent, Masters looked like a wild-eyed nut case, instead of a successful Stanford University graduate, a native of Arizona, and a family-oriented man with two kids. Masters waited too long to project a positive narrative in his television spots, and he lacked the money to really counter Kelly's well-financed campaign.

Masters understood that he needed to win independent registered voters in order to win the election. It did not help that on the Trump-backed Arizona Republican slate, some candidates ran their campaigns on the 2020 "stolen" election. This played into the hands of the Democrats, who painted the entire Republican slate as extremists who in effect supported the so-called "insurrection" on January 6, 2021.

*The key take-away in these lost senatorial and other races is that the Trump endorsement was not enough to carry the Republicans to victory. Indeed, Trump's endorsement worked against them in the end.*

### ***Time to Move On?***

Georgia Lt. Governor Geoff Duncan told CNN the day after the election that it was time to move past Trump. He told CNN that "I think a lot of Republicans like me are waking up this morning asking 'what could have been?'" without Trump. "What could have been if we had picked a better candidate that could have won with a margin like Brian Kemp?" (Kemp won the Georgia governorship handily.) Duncan continued, "I think it sends a message to the country, along with other states, that this is really a pivot point for the Republican Party. . . . It's time to move on with candidate quality."<sup>4</sup>

His sentiments were echoed by Governor Chris Sununu, who won his reelection to governor in New Hampshire. "I don't think the former president" did the party "any favors," he observed. The conservative journalist John Fund, writing in the *New York Post* in mid-November, quoted former Republican campaign strategist Ken Spain, who concluded from exit polls that "The candidates who underperformed in battleground states and districts had one thing in common: Trump's endorsement." Fund warned that "Americans love a winner, and Republicans are clearly shifting their 2024 presidential preferences based on the drag Trump was in the midterms."<sup>5</sup>

James Carville, a longtime Democratic consultant and political commentator, told MSNBC that the only reason

Democrats did not lose 57 seats in the House was Donald Trump: "He brought people out to vote" against him. The Trump effect in Carville's eyes was simply, "He had a suppressive effect. He out-trumped inflation and crime. He out-trumped the normal cycle of the first off-year election with an incumbent president."<sup>6</sup>

Trump's critics correctly see the former president as a double-edged sword. Trump is despised by Democrats and equally loved by his supporters. Still, should Trump be blamed for having cost Republicans the Senate and other state races because of his endorsement? Was 2022 really a referendum on Trump, and not Biden?

No doubt, Democrats used Trump's endorsement to paint a picture of their opponents as out of the mainstream. Yet, exit polls for House races showed that close to 40 percent of voters thought only Republicans were extreme, while nearly the same number of voters thought only the Democrats were extreme. A little over 10 percent of voters thought both parties extreme.<sup>7</sup>

These views translated into votes for both Republicans and Democrats. *About a third of voters said that they cast their House votes to oppose President Biden, while 28 percent said they cast their House vote to oppose former President Trump.* In effect, for every eight votes cast against Biden, all but one was negated by a vote against Trump. In no other midterm election—other than perhaps 1934—did voters consider a former president important in how they cast their vote.

Trump mattered in 2022, but to blame him alone for the Republican underperformance places far too much weight on one man.

### **Republican Inadequacies**

Republicans sought to make this election about President Biden by connecting his administration and the Democratic Party with a border crisis, inflation, rising crime rates, educational failure, and a foreign policy in disarray. This was a sensible approach given the polling. Americans identified anxieties about the economy, borders and failing schools as their major concerns.

Anxiety in itself does not always translate into "throwing the bums out." Indeed, anxiety might have just the opposite effect if the alternative appears uncertain or worse. Some voters actually might not vote for change. In the 1978 midterms, despite a fairly weak economy, high inflation and

low incumbent presidential approval ratings, Democrats lost just 11 House seats.<sup>8</sup> Why? In large part, Republican candidates tried to make the election just about President Carter, but did not project a strong message as to how they would address the problems.

*In 1978, Americans were anxious. This was reflected in Republican gains, but these gains did not produce a political earthquake.* Americans could not then foresee the transformational shift that would occur when Ronald Reagan defeated Carter in 1980 and Republicans flipped 12 Senate seats and took control of Congress. By 1980, American anxiety had become acute as inflation continued to soar, Carter appeared increasingly incompetent in domestic and foreign policy, and Democrats did not offer any new agenda. In 1980, Americans decided that they would chance a conservative Republican in the White House. During the campaign, Reagan assured voters he was not a crazy extremist who would take America into a nuclear war or a civil war. His message was positive and reassuring.

In 2022, Republicans sought to make the election just about Biden. Clearly, Biden had low popular ratings. He appeared to be an easy target along with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Unfortunately, many Republican leaders including Mitch McConnell had equally unfavorable ratings.

The more serious problem was that *many Republican candidates did not project a positive agenda.* For example, why didn't Blake Masters promote his strength as a high-tech guy who pledged to make Arizona a high-tech state and promote educational reform to achieve this goal? Congressional Republicans tried to promote a positive agenda with their "Commitment to America," but it did not resonate like Newt Gingrich's Contract with America in 1994.

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## Probe, but Project Optimism

**H**aving a positive message (and good candidates) will be critical to Republicans in 2024. Positivity needs to begin in the Republican-controlled House in 2023. Serious investigations are necessary concerning FBI/CIA/CDC collusion with Big Tech and the suppression of free speech, and FBI/CIA interference in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The Biden family corruption must be revealed for the sake of national security. Other important matters urgently need congressional investigation, including the crisis at the southern border and the weaponization of the Justice Department against conservatives. At the same time, Republicans need to show that they have a positive agenda to address serious issues. They must project optimism about the future of our exceptional nation.

Conservatives are unlikely to find in their lifetime another Ronald Reagan to lead their party to the promised land. Nevertheless, they can learn from the lessons Ronald Reagan imparted. Be pointed; follow Reagan's 11th Commandment and don't vilify Republicans; and most of all, remain principled and pragmatic.

<sup>1</sup> <https://nypost.com/2022/11/10/bidens-illegal-student-loan-bailout-bought-off-gen-z-and-staved-off-red-wave/>;

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/11/16/students-helped-drive-high-youth-turnout-midterms>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-endorsed-candidates-lost-senate-midterms-1765252>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nevalleynews.org/16756/news/blake-masters-abortion-laws-demonic/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2022/11/09/georgia-lt-gov-duncan-time-for-republicans-to-put-trump-in-the-rearview-mirror/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://nypost.com/2022/11/17/midterm-exit-polls-show-how-far-voters-have-turned-from-trump/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2022/11/09/carville-dems-should-have-lost-57-seats-trump-is-reason-we-didnt/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.therightreasons.net/topic/103432-the-election-by-the-numbers/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://talkelections.org/FORUM/index.php?topic=156941.0>.

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