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Waiting for the Fall? Joe Biden and the 2022 US Midterm Elections

Ahead of November midterm elections in the US, [John E. Owens](#) examines the political context in Washington and beyond – and finds few reasons to be cheerful for sitting President Joe Biden.

Joe Biden faces a major challenge in November's midterm elections. Not only are the Democrats behind in the polls, but history is against the sitting US president: of the 14 post-World War II midterms held two years after a president was first elected, the president's party has lost seats in the House of Representatives on all

but one occasion and on all but five occasions in the Senate. In six of these midterms, the president's party lost at least 43 House seats (1946, 1958, 1966, 1974, 1994, and 2010) and on four occasions lost more than six Senate seats.

Extrapolating to 2022, Biden should find himself with a Republican House in November

– possibly one with a large majority. Not only does the current House Democratic majority have just four seats, since Democrats only won the national popular vote by 3 per cent (51–48 per cent) two years ago, all other things being equal, we should expect House Republicans to receive 4.4 per cent more votes than they did in 2020, which should give them a strong chamber majority.

Given this arithmetic logic, the Republicans' surprisingly strong vote gains in last November's odd-year gubernatorial contests in New Jersey and Virginia, together with current

polls repeatedly showing large majorities of voters viewing the US as heading in the wrong direction, it is hardly surprising that the National Republican Congressional Committee boosted its targeted seats to 70 – landslide territory. The writing appears to be on the wall for Biden’s party – at least for the House.

In the current Senate, Biden’s party does not even have a nominal majority without Vice President Kamala Harris’ casting vote. The pattern for the president’s party in first midterm Senate elections is much more complex. Only one third of Senate seats are up for election every two years. Necessarily, then, the nationwide electorate for each Senate class is different every two years in terms of size, demographics, partisan-ideological composition, and the number of senators seeking re-election. In each two-year electoral cycle therefore, and at different times, different combinations of factors embodied in each Senate class interact differently with the current national midterm political context and the current president.

Senate elections attract much more national media attention and money than those for the House. Firstly, because there are fewer senators and second, they often have higher profiles; as more than House members they are expected to respond to national and international issues. Still, the scope for local factors, including candidate characteristics, to impact Senate races remains considerable, especially when a race is competitive and attracts unusually large amounts of money.

The consequence of greater complexity in Senate elections is that the president’s party has tended to lose seats in midterm elections at a much lower rate than in the House, particularly in the last three decades: 64 per cent of the time in all first midterms since 1946 but 50 per cent since 1994. On these data, Biden’s party may have a better chance of retaining Senate control in November than in the House.

The 2022 House elections

With a chamber majority of just four seats and historical patterns showing Biden’s party typically losing seats in the first midterm, House Democrats’ prospects do not look good. When voters used to split their votes between the parties in voting for president and Congress in earlier decades, a significant number of seats won by the House majority

had been won two years earlier by the presidential candidate of the opposing party – and therefore became primary targets for the out party in the midterms. As the two parties have become much more ideologically cohesive, more ideologically differentiated, and more nationalised since the 1970s, party support in House elections increasingly mirrored patterns in presidential elections. Whereas in 2000, the correlation between Biden’s presidential vote margin and House Democrats’ in each district was only about 30 per cent; by 2020 it had increased to 85 per cent as just 16 districts supported one party in the presidential contest and the other party in the House race, the smallest share in 70 years (4 per cent).

Ostensibly, electoral nationalisation might mean that the presidential party’s exposure to seat loss in a subsequent midterm election is small because the out party has already won most seats also won by its presidential candidate two years previously. However, it also means that those districts won by the president’s party in the House elections but won by the out party’s candidate in the presidential contest, are vulnerable to take over two years later. In 2020, House Democrats won four districts by margins of less than two per cent. Biden lost all four districts as well as another three won by Trump, giving a total of seven ‘crossover’ districts won by a House Democrat but won by Trump in the 2020 presidential contest.

With an increasingly nationalised electoral system, as party loyalty and straight ticket voting have increased so that voting behaviour in House and presidential elections mirror one another, Jacobson (2015) has shown that House incumbents have found it more difficult than previously to retain districts leaning towards the opposite party – and increasingly so when the political winds are blowing in the opposite direction, as they appear to be currently. In the November 2020 national exit poll, only 52 per cent of voters had a favourable opinion of Biden. By late July 2022, however, the President’s approval rating was just 33 per cent (-17.3 net disapproval), the worst rating of any elected president since 1946, including his four most recent predecessors; just 70 per cent approval among Democrats.

The primary reasons for Biden’s low approval rating are rising inflation (9.1 per cent at the

time of writing, the highest since the 1982 midterm elections) borne of inadequate supply, supply chain disruptions, the prospect of recession, and volatile markets, which have dampened further his hitherto mediocre popularity rating. Given the usual importance of voters’ evaluations on the economy and congressional Republicans hammering the issue, these low approval ratings have potentially serious implications for his party’s prospects in November, as Trump’s experience in the 2018 midterms shows, when his ratings were slightly higher (38.6 per cent) and his party lost 40 seats in the House.

Current analyses suggest Democrats may be more vulnerable to even higher losses as no less than 50 seats currently held by House Democrats are regarded as competitive compared with just over 20 defended by Republicans. There are additional reasons to fear for House Democratic prospects. Historically, Republicans are generally more enthusiastic than Democrats about turning out to vote, especially in midterm elections and when they do not control the presidency. In November, Republicans will likely be greatly enthused to come out and vote to stymie any further Biden initiatives in Washington. Additionally, although redistricting arising from the reapportionment of House seats required by the 2020 Census is far from complete, current projections suggest that Republicans will gain a few more House seats than in recent electoral cycles, since the party completely controls the process in three states that acquired more districts (notably, Florida and Texas). So, even if Republicans were to lose the national House popular vote in November (as in 2012), a marginal gain from redistricting alone could still give them a small chamber majority, partly because redistricting has reduced the number of crossover districts won by Trump in 2020 and may result in all of them being eliminated in 2022.

Some Democratic hope?

Presidential approval is one measure of his party’s prospects at midterm. However, it is not necessarily the best predictor of a president’s party performance in House elections at midterm because it is a surrogate for voters’ behaviour in congressional elections. A more appropriate measure is the generic congressional ballot, which (without providing names of individual candidates) asks voters

which party they would support to represent them in Congress if an election was held today. Moscowitz (2021) has shown that a party that performs better on the generic congressional ballot will generally win more national popular votes in a cycle of House elections, especially midterm elections.

As of July, *538.com* showed congressional Republicans ahead by a mean of just 1.0 per cent on the generic congressional ballot and with Democratic support having recently increased by 3 per cent, apparently associated with stronger enthusiasm among Democrats to turn out to vote. Recent individual polls show Democrats ahead. The Siena College/*New York Times* poll taken in mid-July showed that even as Biden's approval languished at 33 per cent, congressional Democrats had moved into a small lead among registered voters and trailed by just 1 per cent among likely voters.

Inasmuch as the Democratic increase is sustained until November, it may have to do with Biden's poor ratings having been 'baked in' to voters' responses to a direct question on the congressional elections, as they distinguish between their view of Biden and which party they want to control the Congress. So, while voters disapprove of the Democratic president they do not necessarily want Republicans to take over the Congress. In this regard, increased Democratic support might be related to widespread negative reaction to mass shootings, Republican congressional candidates perpetuating the 'Big Lie' that Trump won the 2020 presidential election, as well as opposition (especially among female Republicans in the suburbs) to the party's extreme right wing partisan positions, including its support for the tumultuous Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* abortion decision overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, and Republican state legislatures in 30 states enacting bans or restrictions on access to abortions. Trump's prospective announcement in September of his candidacy for the presidency in 2024 may also have the effect of enthusing Democratic voters.

If these factors continue to sustain the apparent increase in congressional Democratic support on the generic ballot to November, they may mitigate voters' negative responses on the economy, which are currently benefiting Republicans. However, this surrogate for the House national popular



vote polls registered voters and translates into a four-point Republican majority among likely voters, because Republicans have a stronger propensity to turn out than Democrats. Of course, the net effects of individual campaigns, individual candidates' personal characteristics, money, and new redistricting outcomes, may ultimately affect overall House results at the margin. Still, as Abramowitz (2022) has observed, even if Democrats maintain a modest lead on the generic ballot all the way to November, they would still be likely to lose their chamber majority. House Democrats might win all the 18 or so districts currently rated as toss-ups on most election sites and retain the seats in which they are favoured, but still come up short of a chamber majority. Unsurprisingly, then, in late July, most projections continued to show Republicans overwhelmingly favoured to take control of the House.

The 2022 Senate elections

As in House elections, before the 1970s Senate elections were also often susceptible to the vagaries of ticket splitting conditioned by state political conditions and incumbency. As the party system increasingly nationalised party loyalty and straight ticket voting

structured voting choices to a much greater degree, a state's presidential partisanship became the most significant predictor of Senate elections, and local factors became less significant (Abramowitz and Webster 2015). In the contemporary electoral environment, the way a state votes in Senate elections usually follows how it voted in the previous presidential election.

While most Senate seats are safe for one of the parties as in the House, the chamber also currently exhibits a significant built-in Republican bias. Senate Republicans hold 21 of the 35 seats up for election in November, which means that the party has greater seat exposure than Democrats, notwithstanding the political winds favouring Republicans. Still, only three Republican seats (Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Ohio) are open and ostensibly vulnerable. Biden won Pennsylvania in 2020 by 2.1 per cent, but lost Ohio and North Carolina by 0.8 and 1.3 per cent. While Republicans would be expected to win all three states, in Pennsylvania the party's inexperienced, Trump-endorsed nominee only narrowly won a highly divisive primary, has questionable residency in the state, holds Turkish citizenship, and is regarded as a weak candidate. In late July, all



polls in the state favoured the Democratic candidate despite him not campaigning owing to serious health problems while in Ohio the Trump-endorsed Republican candidate is only slightly ahead in what should be a strong Republican state.

Three of the 14 Democratic seats (Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada) are also regarded as vulnerable even though Biden won all three in 2020, albeit in the first two cases by very narrow margins (0.3 and 0.2 per cent). As of late July, according to *538.com*, the Democratic incumbent is only favoured in Arizona (although Republicans have not yet chosen a candidate) whereas the Nevada race is seen as a toss-up but with the prospect that the Dobbs decision may advantage the female incumbent significantly against the Trump-endorsed Republican. In Georgia, surprisingly won by Democrats in 2020, the Democrat incumbent is currently slightly favoured over the Trump-endorsed Republican challenger who is very inexperienced, subject to frequent gaffes, erratic, and the subject of considerable personal scandal. At one point, the Democratic incumbent in New Hampshire, which Biden won by over 7 per cent in 2020, was also thought vulnerable but following

the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* she has pulled ahead and now looks safe.

Altogether, winning Pennsylvania and holding Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada would realise Democrats a net gain of one seat and win Senate control without the necessity of Vice President Kamala Harris' casting vote. With the generic congressional ballot polls showing increasing support for Democratic congressional candidates – apparently fired by the Dobbs decision, mass shootings, and Republican manipulation of state election rules offsetting the Republicans' current advantage on the economy – it might not be unrealistic for Democrats to retain chamber control once the vulnerability of a number of Republican candidates are also factored in, and even though they may lose the national popular vote.

As of late July, most forecasts slightly favour a Republican Senate making it likely that the separated system will revert to split party government, its more common configuration since 1994, either with Republicans controlling one chamber or both.

Midterm tumult

The fluidity of midterm dynamics cannot be overemphasised, especially more than

ten weeks before the outcome is known. Notwithstanding the surprising increase in Democratic support in the generic ballot, Biden's party needs at least a six-point advantage – and probably more – to retain House control. Much can happen before election day that may affect the outcome – as 9/11 did when George W. Bush's party unexpectedly picked up eight seats in the House and two in the Senate. Numerous factors could yet change the 2022 outcomes: a sharp drop in inflation; increased Democratic enthusiasm stimulated by abortion and gun ownership politics; Trump's criminal attempts to overturn the 2020 election; Biden not seeking re-election; and Trump seeking the Republican nomination. Within this uncertainty and regardless of the eventual outcome, however, the 2022 midterms will surely reconfirm the depth of partisan polarisation and the potency of party competition in US politics, and provide a foretaste of the 2024 presidential contest.

Selected further reading:

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