

"The 2022 US Midterm Election Series①"

The US Midterm Elections: The Red Wave that Failed to Materialize

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When US hegemony was stable, changes in US domestic politics had little impact on US foreign policy. However, after the US-China strategic competition began, changes in US domestic politics began to have a critical impact on US foreign policy. President Trump's change in China policy, which was elected to the White House based on the Rust Belt's dissatisfaction, is a good example, and the economic decoupling with China that began under the Trump administration is intensifying during the Biden administration. Last month's midterm election in the United States was a very important election in relation to the future policy changes of the Biden administration and especially to the prospect of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. It is necessary to analyze the results of the midterm elections in the United States and to think about future political changes in the United States. In response, the Jeju Peace Institute planned four US presidential election series as PeaceNet. Through the PeaceNet of American political experts, we are trying to find out the political implications of the this past US midterm elections at the domestic and international level. [Project Designer: Haeyong Lim, Research Director, haeyonglim@jpi.or.kr]

* This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Jeju Peace Institute

Midterm elections don't attract the hyper-focused attention of presidential election years, but they are critically important to the policy agenda of the second half of a president's term and to party prospects going into the presidential election. U.S. presidents win elections thinking they have been given a mandate to lead for four years, only to find, most of the time, that half way through their term in office the American public decides to surround them with many more members of the opposition party in Congress.

Americans seem to like divided government. That has more often been the norm than single-party control during my lifetime. Not that long ago though, divided government was an invitation to negotiation and compromise in order to govern the country responsibly. Today, with intensified polarization in the country among its leaders, that is no longer the case.

The stakes of midterm elections thus have become greater. Even with low popularity, President Joe Biden in his first two years in office has accomplished an impressive amount of significant legislative action. If the Democrats could have held partisan majorities in both houses of Congress in the midterm elections, he would have been able to unleash an even more robust agenda in the second half of his term and strengthen his case for reelection in 2024. With GOP control of just one House of Congress though, the president will have great difficulty moving forward any of his policy agenda.

All projections in 2022 pointed to a very strong Republican performance in the midterm

elections. Among non-partisan political analysts, forecasters and prominent opinion leaders, it was rare to find any voice in opposition to the view that a “red wave” of Republican election victories would sweep the nation. That expectation was well-founded, based on historical evidence and contemporary conditions in the U.S. Yet it largely was proven wrong by a strong Democratic Party showing in the elections. Although the GOP took control of the House of Representatives, its margin fell very far short of typical midterm election cycles for the political party out of the White House. The GOP also failed to make a net gain of one seat, which it needed to take control of the Senate. In what follows, I show just how far short the Republicans fell in this election cycle and explain the causes of the historically aberrant results.

The Context: Why an Expected Red Wave?

By historical standards alone, the Republican Party came into this election cycle with a very large advantage. First, in the past 100 years of midterm elections, only three times has the party in control of the White House gained seats in the House of Representatives. Each case was a historical aberration: (1) 1934 during the Great Depression when the country largely blamed the Republican Party and looked to the party of President Franklin D. Roosevelt – the Democrats – to save the economy; (2) 1998 when the Republicans in the House of Representatives pursued the very unpopular impeachment of President Bill Clinton and the country punished the GOP in the elections; (3) 2002 when President George W. Bush, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, had unprecedented high popularity for his anti-terrorism actions and policies. In the same 100 years period, the party in the White House gained seats in the U.S. Senate only six times, and with the exception of 1934 again, the gain was a mere one or two seats.

Second, presidential popularity has a large impact on the electoral fortunes of the party in the White House. President Joe Biden's continued low support, as measured in national opinion polls, was a predicted major drag on Democratic electoral prospects. At the time of the midterm elections, Biden's popularity in the Gallup Poll stood at merely 40% among all voters (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/329384/presidential-approval-ratings-joe-biden.aspx>). Historical data again are telling. In the latest eleven midterm election cycles, going back to the Carter presidency (1978), at the time of the elections six incumbent presidents had Gallup approval ratings of between 40-45% (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/329384/presidential-approval-ratings-joe-biden.aspx>). Thus, President Biden's standing at election time was not unusual. But in the previous five midterms in which the incumbent president had such low public approval, the average loss for the party in the White House was 32 House seats.

Third, compounding the trouble for Democrats was the general state of the economy and public anxiety about inflation, gasoline prices, and declining stocks market values. Whether fair or not, during periods of economic anxiety, Americans blame the party in the White House for the circumstances. Further, the U.S. was not confronting a common down period in the economic cycle, but the worst inflation in the country in over four decades.

Fourth, midterm elections are typically low voter turnout events. In presidential election years, turnouts generally hover around 60%, for midterms about 40%. Two factors drive lower turnouts: (1) lack of a presidential race, which commands vastly more attention; (2) the small percentage of competitive races where one's vote has a chance of affecting the outcome. Low turnout elections are a Republican advantage because its voter base is overwhelmingly White and older than the Democratic voter base. The Democrats' political fortunes are driven by a coalition of minorities and young voters – groups that have lower turnout rates than the GOP base.

Finally, the Democrats pinned their electoral hopes of defying historical trends on factors that most analysts believed were shaky. A major theme in Democratic campaigns was that democracy itself was under threat, given growing Republican base voter support for authoritarian candidates and policies. Democrats also noted the continued presence of former president Donald J. Trump as a threat to democracy and peoples' rights. Related, Democrats reminded the country that the threat to personal rights was very real, given the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in June to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade abortion rights decision. Public opinion polls showed that Trump remained unpopular in the country and that the Supreme Court abortion decision was very unpopular.

Why did analysts see these appeals as electorally shaky? Public opinion polls showed that voter concerns focused on economic conditions – real tangible circumstances as opposed to, for most voters, a vague and not directly experienced threat to democracy. While Trump indeed remains unpopular, he was not on the ballot in the midterms (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/11/14/before-midterms-trumps-image-among-republicans-had-become-less-positive/>). Most notably, abortion did not show up in pre-election polls as one of the leading factors driving voting decisions.

More than anything, Democrats believed the overturning of abortion as a national right would fuel a massive Blue Wave of party voters. The evidence continually suggested that the issue would not overcome concerns about inflation, crime, immigration, and other issues. The Schar School has a joint public opinion poll with the Washington Post. We conducted a national survey one month after the Court decision and there were some key findings. The not s

urprising one was that the group most opposed to the Court decision was women under 40 years of age (you would expect women of child bearing age to be most offended by the Court action). The most surprising finding though was that the demographic group least likely to say they planned to vote in November also was women under 40 years of age. Only 1 in 3 of that group reported that they definitely planned to vote (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/29/abortion-roe-midterms-poll/>).

Other findings were concerning to Democrats: although 52% of those who said the Court decision was a loss of rights for women also said they planned to vote, 70% of those who said the decision was not a loss of rights for women reported they definitely planned to vote. And Republicans by a 12-percentage points margin over Democrats said they definitely plan to vote (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22122964-2022-07-25-abortion-trend-for-release>).

All of this suggests that the intensity factor, even after the controversial Supreme Court decision, favored the Republicans. That is not unusual – White voters turn out in larger percentages than minority voters, and older more than younger. Women though turnout more than men, and that has been the case in U.S. elections since the 1980s. Since the 1980s as well, the gender-gap in voting has been notable and growing, with women leaning strongly Democratic and men Republican. Democrats hoped that by Election Day, women would mobilize in large numbers to protest the Court decision, which had been made possible only by Republican presidential nominations of justices to the Court.

Predicting U.S. elections outcomes is not a science, and time and again notable elections forecasters have gotten it wrong. Nonetheless, with history as a reliable guide, the forecasters had every reason to believe that 2022 would be a Red Wave election year, and it was nearly impossible before the election to find an opposing voice.

What Happened?

The Democrats substantially outperformed all expectations and historical patterns of midterm elections. The party lost a mere net of nine seats in the House of Representatives. Compare that, for example, to President Trump's one midterm election cycle (2018) GOP loss of 40 House seats, or President Barack Obama's first midterm cycle (2010) Democratic Party loss of an astounding 63 seats. The Democrats this year also notably held their control of the U.S. Senate, gaining one seat in the chamber. It was only the 7th time in the past century of midterms that the party in control of the White House gained at least one seat in the US Senate.

What happened? First, pre-election polls failed to pick up the potency of the abortion issue. That failure stunned observers. In the exit polls, abortion ranked either second or a close third as the issue that most motivated voter choices. The exit polling data showed, in contrast to many pre-election polls, that the intensity on this issue favored Democrats, especially among women and young voters.

Second, young voter turnout was unusually strong and it went overwhelmingly Democratic. Among men ages 18-29, the vote went 54% Democratic, 43% Republican. Among women, 72% Democratic and 26% Republican (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/midterm-exit-polls-show-that-young-voters-drove-democratic-resistance-to-the-red-wave/>). Notably, in the 18-29 age group, only 56% of voters were White. Before long, a majority of that age group will be minority voters, thus suggesting a possible boost for Democrats in future election cycles.

Third, the Republicans nominated some very poor candidates in a number of races. Although former president Trump was not on the ballot, his presence in this election was amplified by his influence on GOP nominations around the country. Unlike past former presidents who have stayed quiet during intraparty nomination contests, only pledging to support the eventual nominee, Trump made endorsements of various candidates who expressed fidelity to the former president and his movement, and Trump actively advocated against party candidates who had broken with Trumpism. Trump's interventions worked, in that his hand-picked candidates did well in most nomination races in which he became involved. Ultimately, many of the Trump-loyal GOP nominees lost in races that should have been GOP advantage contests. Among them were the U.S. Senate races in Pennsylvania and Georgia, both of which should have been easy GOP gains and the party would now be looking to holding a majority of both legislative chambers. Even if the GOP wins the runoff contest in Georgia, the Democrats will hold control of the Senate.

The Best Outcome Possible for President Biden and the Democrats?

Logically, the best possible outcome for the Democrats would have been holding control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Politically though, the Democratic Party may fare better with split-party control of Congress. Why?

Because the country likely will face a recession next year, with little prospect for a major economic turnaround in time for the 2024 elections. If Democrats were to hold the White House and both houses of Congress, they would own full responsibility for the state of the country going into the next presidential election cycle. That would be the electoral dream circumstance for Republicans in 2024, and especially of former president Donald Trump who remains favored to win his party's presidential nomination. With split-party control of the

government, Biden and the Democrats can continue to blame the Republicans for obstructing policy progress intended to solve economic woes, and they can replay their 2022 strategy of running against extreme policy positions held by leading Republicans. Democrats want that to be the focus of voter attention, not the perceived failure of the party in control of the government during an economic downturn.

With the GOP controlling one house though, the prospects are not positive for President Biden's policy agenda. As the president says that he plans to run for reelection, Republicans in the House of Representatives will not want to give him any significant policy victories that would help his electoral chances. Already the Republicans are making noises about obstructing Biden's agenda at every turn the next two years as well as planning investigations of the Biden Administration and of the financial dealings of the president's son, Hunter Biden. The likelihood for the next two years in the U.S. is one of policy stalemate and posturing for the 2024 elections.

Author Bio

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