

Beyond win and loss



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The long shadow of Donald Trump looms over the US election results

THE ELECTIONS HELD midway through a president's four-year term usually goes badly for the president's party. Seen from that perspective, President Joe Biden and the Democrats have done better than expected in Tuesday's mid-term elections. With cost-of-living issues — surging food, energy, and housing prices — rising in salience and Biden's approval rating at a record low, few expected Democrats to buck this historical trend. Yet while the Democrats are on track to losing their narrow majority in the House of Representatives, the widely predicted Republican wave did not materialise.

A few Senate races are still too tight to call. But Democrats may be able to hold on to their slim majority in the Senate. It is now split 50:50 between Democrats and Republicans. But Vice President Kamala Harris who presides over the Senate can cast the deciding vote when there is a tie, which gives Democrats their razor-thin majority. Democrats got a big boost by winning the Senate seat in Pennsylvania earlier held by Republicans. We may not know the outcome of one key Senate race, Georgia, till December: The state's law calls for a run-off election if no candidate gets more than 50 per cent of the vote.

Even though the election results are mixed, it could still change the US political landscape. During the last two years, despite their narrow majority in the Congress, the Democrats were able to pass important pieces of legislation in areas such as climate change, infrastructure investment, gun-control, and child poverty. That era of Democratic legislative wins may have come to an end. If it does, President Biden may still be able to veto Republican attempts to dismantle Democratic policy priorities. But, even with a narrow majority, a Republican controlled House of Representatives could mean hearings and investigations of the Biden administration on a range of issues that would cause significant political damage to Biden and the Democrats in the run-up to the next presidential election.

If Republicans manage to win control of both the House and the Senate, they will be able to thwart President Biden's political agenda. A Republican-majority Senate will be able to hold up presidential appointments

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to positions requiring Senate approval. Biden will be able to issue executive orders, but they will be open to challenges in courts.

Former President Donald Trump was not a candidate in these elections. But he cast a long shadow over them. As expected, he has already tried to take credit for the Republican victory. But a few of the high-profile unconventional candidates that he hand-picked have lost, which will undoubtedly weaken his position as undisputed leader of the Republican Party.

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Courts had, of course, dismissed Trump's numerous lawsuits claiming widespread voter fraud as baseless. But thanks to the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories in pro-Trump media outlets, the stolen election narrative that animated the January 6 assault on the Capitol continues to energise Trump's political base.

"The false claim of a stolen election," says election law scholar Richard L. Hasen, "metastasized into an election-denialist movement far worse than even those of us who worried deeply about the future of American democracy in 2020 ever imagined".

The election results appear to testify to the remarkable success of this movement.

With the Republicans in control of the House, the findings of the congressional committee that investigated the events of January 6 will now become moot. But the election of a large group of election denialists to the Congress less than a year after the political violence at the US Capitol is significant not just for its impact on Trump's political fortunes. These elected representatives, in effect, do not accept the legitimacy of the Biden presidency. This is a remarkable thing to happen in a constitutional democracy.

Indeed, two thirds of US adults say that

their democracy is "in danger of collapse." A widely respected Quinnipiac University poll conducted last August found that this view is shared across the political spectrum. Almost the same proportion of Democrats, Republicans, and independents expressed this view. But the apparent agreement between Democrats and Republicans only serves to emphasise the fundamental difference in the way they perceive the danger.

To Democrats the threat to democracy comes primarily from Make America Great Again Republicans. In President Biden's words: "Democracy cannot survive when one side believes there are only two outcomes to an election: either they win, or they were cheated." The Trumpian perception of the danger is, of course, very different. It is best captured in what they call the problems of "election integrity" — codeword for election-denialism.

In the name of protecting election integrity the last two years have seen an extraordinary level of legislative activity around voting rights. The narrative of stolen election has been extremely important for Republican Party's political mobilisation. Republican-led states have passed laws making voting more difficult. Another set of laws have shifted authority over elections from non-partisan election administrators to partisan election boards. Since some of them disproportionately burden racial minority groups, critics call these efforts "voter suppression".

Journalist and editor Monika Bauerlein once said that the default mode of political reporting in the US is that of sports coverage. It tells us which team is winning and by how much, about the actions of star players and about coaches and their game strategies. It assumes that all parties know the rules and they mostly follow them. This kind of reporting, however, has a blind spot: "play-by-play coverage means we don't see what happens outside of the game." Perhaps this way of following elections cannot make connections and see the big picture as it unfolds before our eyes — the storm clouds that have been gathering around the institutions of American democracy.

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