

From Red Wave to Red Puddle: Why GOP Success in Midterms Failed to Materialize

Ante Zrile

PhD Student at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb
ante.zrile@studenti.fpzg.hr

Introduction

Two years after Joe Biden won the election to unseat President Donald Trump, Americans were back at the polling stations for the midterm election. President Joe Biden and the Democrat-held Congress faced an uneasy election, staring at inflation running at an 8.2 percent annual rate, high energy prices, growing cost of living, and a possibility of a recession (McNair, 2022). According to polls, a staggering 75 percent of the voters said the country was heading in the wrong direction, with 91 percent of them describing their family's financial situation as holding steady or falling behind. A total of 57 percent of respondents said they somewhat or strongly disapproved of Joe Biden's job as president (McGill and Day, 2022). It is thus surprising that Republicans failed to win at least a double-digit majority in the U.S. House of Representatives and to pick up several seats in the Senate.

In this paper, the author analyzes the results of the 2022 midterms and tries to present which factors contributed to this surprising outcome. Arguably, former President Donald Trump's influence affected key races which Republicans needed for the "Red Wave" to materialize. Some analysts, as well as most GOP candidates, underestimated the importance of the abortion issue to certain voters. Reapportionment and redistricting of House districts after the 2020 census played a role as well. Several states experienced heavy gerrymandering, which eliminated toss-up districts in favor of Democrats.

Gerrymandering after the 2020 Census

The census in the United States is conducted every ten years. Based on population figures, the U.S. Census Bureau announces the reapportionment of seats for the House

of Representatives. Reapportionment refers to the reallocation of congressional seats among states. States that undergo population increase gain seats, while those that undergo population decrease lose seats. Reapportionment does not generate political controversy since the population is the sole criterion for assigning seats. The process that does generate political controversy is called redistricting, which refers to the redrawing of district lines in each state (Sabato and Ernst, 2006: 398). Redistricting is often subject to gerrymandering, which refers to the drawing of geographically unusual legislative districts which benefit the party in power (Sabato and Ernst, 2006: 161).

Following the 2020 census, five states gained one seat each in the House of Representatives starting with the 2022 election, and Texas gained two. A total of seven states lost one seat each, including California, the most populous state.¹ Overall, states in the Midwest and Northeast lost seats because their population growth stagnated. American citizens mostly migrated westward and southward and states in these areas gained seats (Skelley and Rakich, 2021). Although Republicans went into the cycle with greater influence over the redistricting process, the number of Democrat-leaning districts increased after the process had finished. The new congressional map has six more Democrat-leaning seats than the old one, with the same number of Republican-leaning seats. This is the result of Democrat gerrymandering in states such as Illinois, as well as courts overturning Republican gerrymandering in North Carolina (FiveThirtyEight, 2022b).

Republicans Failed to Sweep Across the Board

Midterms usually serve as a referendum on the incumbent president and his administration, mostly on his handling of the economy. These elections include races for governors, state legislatures, and other state and local-level public offices, but the races for the U.S. Congress receive the most consideration. Midterms usually see a decrease in turnout because voters are less interested in congressional campaigns, and the incumbent president's party usually loses congressional seats. Recent exceptions to this trend occurred in 1998, when Democrats gained House seats because of a backlash against Republican efforts to impeach Bill Clinton, and in 2002, when Republicans gained seats, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States (Sabato and Ernst, 2006: 225-226). Erikson argues that the out-party has a better midterm showing in years when it does not control the presidency, as voters move government back toward the median (Erikson, 1988: 1012). Midterm elections have been nationalized, partisan, and president-centered in recent years. This trend has been exacerbated in 2018 by the midterm election being a referendum on Trump's presidency (Lucas, Sisco, and Galdieri, 2021: 1) We can argue that this trend continued in 2022.

**Before the election, most media outlets
forecasted a Republican landslide in the midterms**

¹ Five states that gained one seat include Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Oregon, and Montana. Six other states that lost a seat include New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and West Virginia (Skelley and Rakich, 2021).

Zrile, Red Wave to Red Puddle

Months before the election, most media reports forecasted a Republican landslide in the 2022 midterms. Even pundits, including *FiveThirtyEight* and *RealClearPolitics*, projected GOP winning at least 220 seats in the House of Representatives and up to 53 Senate seats. Fox News Power Rankings forecasted a 19-seat majority or a total of 236 House seats for the GOP. *FiveThirtyEight* projected 59 in 100 chances of Republicans winning the Senate in their final simulation on Election Day (Numa, 2022; *RealClearPolitics*, 2022; *FiveThirtyEight*, 2022a).

After all votes were cast, Republicans won a razor-thin majority in the House and failed to win a majority in the Senate. Democrats retained their Senate seats in Nevada and Arizona and picked up a Republican-held seat in Pennsylvania, while Republicans failed to pick up any Democrat-held seats (Yeip, Stamm, and Brown, 2022). Democrats flipped three governorships from Republicans: those in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Arizona, while Republicans flipped only the governorship in Nevada (WSJ, 2022).

How Americans Voted

This election has seen a big swing in key demographic groups. Compared to 2018 and 2020, Black, Hispanic, and suburban white women swung to GOP in large numbers. Although the first two groups still predominately voted for Democrats, their support slowly shifted to the Republicans in the midterms. Black voters shifted their support from 82 percent for Democrats in 2018 to 68 percent in 2022, while young Black voters moved a substantial 22 percentage points toward GOP in 2022 (McGill and Day, 2022). Hispanic voters moved from 31 percent in 2018 to only 18 percent in 2022, and Hispanic voters aged 18 to 44 moved from 39 percent in 2018 to 21 percent in 2022.

Results show that the Latino voter shift boosted Republicans across the US, even if their candidates did not necessarily win. In California and South Texas, Democratic Latino candidates won their elections with far smaller margins than just two years ago. Republicans also won a majority of the Hispanic vote in Florida, for the first time since 2006. A major win came from a heavily Latino Miami-Dade County, the state's largest, where Republican candidates won the elections for U.S. Senate, Governor, Attorney General, and several other races, except for one Congressional district (Zitner and DeBarros, 2022; *miamidade.gov*, 2022).

Suburban white women, a key electoral demographic, flipped from Dem+5 to GOP+7

Suburban white women, a key demographic group each election year, flipped to the Republicans after favoring Democrats in the past two elections – moving from +5 for the Democrats to +7 for the GOP. As a voting bloc, women were, generally speaking, equally split between Democrats and Republicans in 2022, with 49 percent favoring the former and 51 percent favoring the latter. Independents, an important voting bloc each election, favored Democrats by 4 points nationwide in 2022. In Pennsylvania, Democrat John Fetterman won the independent constituency by 20 points. This was the lowest margin in toss-up races, as Democrats won independent voters in Nevada, Georgia, and Arizona, by 21 per-

cent, 28 percent, and 36 percent, respectively (Zitner and Collins, 2022; Yeip, et al., 2022). Another demographic group whose support Republicans managed to attract more in this election includes college-educated voters, thus chipping away at one of the most important pillars of the Democratic coalition. White women with college degrees, who had backed Democrats by 19 points in the 2018 midterms, and by 21 points in the 2020 presidential election, tipped toward Democrats by only 6 points in 2022 (Zitner and DeBarros, 2022).

When it comes to the most important concerns for voters, the top of the list included the economy, abortion, climate change, immigration, and crime. Republican voters picked economy, immigration, and crime as their top priorities, while Democrat voters prioritized climate change, abortion, and then the economy. The legality of abortion was not on the mind of many voters in 2018 and 2020 when 2 and 3 percent of voters chose this issue as a top priority. However, in June 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution does not confer a federal right to abortion, which forced 10 percent of the voters to list this issue as a top concern (McGill and Day, 2022). For many voters, the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and the subsequent debate on the legality of abortion changed the election from a referendum on Democrats in Washington into more of a choice between the two parties, especially on this issue. Some voters were turned away from candidates who advocated for a total abortion ban. Most experts believe that overturning the almost 50-year-old decision helped Democrats, particularly in politically mixed states where the future of abortion remains uncertain (Kusisto and Calfas, 2022).

These midterms once again proved that the personality and the quality of candidates matters, often more than any other factor. Several candidates lost safe seats because voters deemed them politically weak, compared to their opponents. Former governor of Alaska and former GOP vice-presidential nominee, Sarah Palin, failed to win a congressional seat as a Representative from Alaska twice in 2022.² She lost the election in a state which *The Cook Political Report* rated as +9 for the Republicans in 2021, whereas incumbent GOP Senator Lisa Murkowski and incumbent Governor Mike Dunleavy won their reelections easily (Wasserman and Flinn, 2021; Wise, 2022). Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell even warned in August that GOP may not win Senate majority, citing "candidate quality" as an important factor. He correctly predicted Republicans winning a majority in the House of Representatives, but cautioned that Senate races are statewide, and hence different from those for the lower chamber (Kapur and Thorp V, 2022).

In 2018, Democrat Beto O'Rourke lost the election for the U.S. Senate in Texas by only 2.56 percent against incumbent Republican Ted Cruz. Afterwards, O'Rourke had a devoted base of supporters and volunteers, near-universal name recognition, and the ability to raise money quickly, which gave hope to Democrats that they could turn Texas blue (FEC, 2019; Goodman, 2022). So, in 2022, O'Rourke tried to unseat two-term Governor Greg Abbott. Despite drawing large crowds across Texas, Beto failed to gather enough votes to win. In the end, Abbott won the race by almost 11 points (WSJ, 2022). Beto's rhetoric or personality hardly changed from 2018, so we can argue that Governor Abbott was a much stronger candidate than Senator Cruz was four years ago, winning the gubernatorial race by double digits.

² On March 18, 2022, incumbent Republican Representative from Alaska Don Young died, triggering a special election in August to fill his seat until the end of the 117th Congress. A regular election for the full term in the next Congress was held in November with the rest of the midterms.

Zrile, Red Wave to Red Puddle

In Georgia, Governor Brian Kemp won his reelection by almost 8 percent, while Republican senatorial nominee Herschel Walker failed to follow Kemp's success and win his race in the first round. Since neither he nor his opponent, incumbent Senator Raphael Warnock, gained more than 50 percent of the vote, their race headed for runoff (WSJ, 2022). Warnock ultimately won in the runoff on December 6. Governor Kemp refused to overturn the results of the 2020 election in Georgia, where Joe Biden was declared winner. Former president Donald Trump thus made the governor his No. 1 enemy, railing against him and recruiting a credible primary challenger. Nevertheless, Kemp easily won his primary race in May, and the general election in November (Warren, 2022).

Arguably, Donald Trump cost a lot of candidates their victories. Arizona GOP gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, and senatorial candidate Blake Masters touted their endorsement from Trump and lost their races by wide margins. TV personality Dr. Mehmed Oz failed to win his race for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, as did Adam Laxalt in Nevada. All these races were labeled as "toss-ups" before the elections (Numa, 2022). On the other side, Kemp, and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis sidelined Trump, as did Governor Glenn Younkin in his 2021 race, and won their reelections easily.

Ranked-Choice Voting in Alaska

In the 2020 general election, Alaskan voters approved an initiative to establish a Nonpartisan Pick One Primary Election system and Ranked-Choice Voting in the general election, for the general state and federal elections. This measure divided Alaskans, because Republicans, Democrats, and Independents both supported and criticized the measure. (Alaska Division of Elections, 2022a; Sbrano, 2020: 296).

Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV) allows voters to rank each candidate in order of their personal preference. If a single candidate wins a majority of the first-choice votes, he or she wins the election. If no candidate wins a majority of first-place votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated from the calculation and his or her votes flow to the next-ranked candidates. If no candidate receives a majority in the second round, the process continues until a candidate receives a majority of votes (Sbrano, 2020: 297; Santucci, 2018: 297). RCV is not a novelty in American elections, as it has been implemented in some capacity in nine states. It is used to elect around 20 local governments, and a handful of states use it for one or more party primaries and or conventions. Maine uses it in primaries and federal general elections (Santucci, 2020: 345).

RCV is not a novelty in American elections, as it has been implemented in some capacity in nine states

Reformers in Maine noted that nine out of the eleven governors have been elected with less than 50 percent of the vote. In 2010, Republican Governor Paul LePage won the general election with just 38 percent of the vote. In 2014 LePage won his reelection in a three-way race, with 48 percent of the vote. His Democratic opponent garnered 43 percent of the vote, and the third-party candidate won 8 percent (Santucci, 2018: 297-298). That same year the measure to reform the election method was also on the ballot. Voters approved

the measure to adopt RCV for state-wide elections, including gubernatorial, congressional, and state legislative races. However, the Maine Supreme Judicial Court decided that the RCV conflicted with the state's constitution, which allowed candidates to win state-level elections with a plurality of votes, as opposed to a majority of votes. In response, citizens voted to partially repeal the statute, allowing RCV to be used only in federal and state primaries, and federal general elections (Sbano, 2020: 301).

Those in favor of RCV argue that it alleviates partisanship in elections by promoting civility and compromise. RCV encourages candidates to reach across party lines to attract as many votes as possible, even for their second-choice option. If candidates appealed to more voters than their base, politicians would be incentivized to focus on their policies rather than their opponents (Sbano, 2020: 303). We can confirm this based on the results of the General Election in Alaska for U.S. Senate. Centrist Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski won her reelection, defeating another GOP candidate Kelly Tshibaka, who was backed by former President Donald Trump. Murkowski won the majority of the votes in the first round, with 43.37 percent of the support, but fell short of the 50 percent needed for the win. In the second round of the tabulation, Democrat Patricia Chesboro was eliminated and a whopping 20 543 of her votes have been transferred to Lisa Murkowski, compared to 2 209 votes transferred to Kelly Tshibaka (Wise, 2022; Alaska Division of Elections, 2022b). We can conclude that Democratic voters preferred a centrist candidate, known for reaching across the aisle in the U.S. Senate and working with several Democratic presidents, for an extremist candidate backed by a controversial former president.

Conclusion

Despite the great prospect of winning at least a double-digit majority in the House of Representatives and picking up several Senate seats, Republicans managed to win only a slim majority in the House and failed to win a majority in the Senate. It is hard to point out a single reason why the GOP win failed to materialize. Possibly, several minor factors accumulated and turned the election results against them.

The first factor refers to former President Donald Trump. His divisive rhetoric and unproven claims of 2020 election fraud turned away many voters, most notably independents. A slate of candidates he endorsed in toss-up states lost the election simply by siding with him. Many of these candidates were also weak politically, failing to provide a platform to run on. Some of them were also competing in their first election ever.

The GOP failed to understand how much the issue of abortion rights means to voters

The GOP failed to understand how much the issue of abortion rights means to voters. Their radical rhetoric of restricting access to abortion turned away many voters in crucial states. Most voters see this issue as a human rights issue for women. To win them back, Republicans will need to propose legislation that is in line with most citizens.

Zrile, Red Wave to Red Puddle

If Republicans intend to win back the White House in 2024, they need to sideline Donald Trump. The GOP must come up with a strategy to win back independents, as they are crucial voters in each election. They also need to keep expanding their base by attracting minority voters. Democrats, on the other hand, might consider replacing Joe Biden, who recently became the first president to turn 80, and whose approval ratings are continuously below 50 percent. Furthermore, they need to emphasize kitchen table issues that concern average voters, over issues like climate change or immigration.

References

- Alaska Division of Elections. (2022a). Alaska Better Elections Implementation. *elections.alaska.gov*. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/RCV.php>
- Alaska Division of Elections. (2022b). State of Alaska 2022 General Election RCV Detailed Report. *elections.alaska.gov*. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/results/22GENR/rcv/US-SEN.pdf>
- Erikson, R. S. (1988). The Puzzle of Midterm Loss. *The Journal of Politics*, 50(4), 1011-1029. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131389>
- FEC (Federal Election Commission). (2019). Federal Elections 2018. Election Results for the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. *fec.gov*. <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/federaelections2018.pdf>
- FiveThirtyEight. (2022a). 2022 Election Forecast. *FiveThirtyEight*. November 8. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2022-election-forecast/senate/>
- FiveThirtyEight. (2022b). What Redistricting Looks Like in Every State. *FiveThirtyEight*. July 19. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redistricting-2022-maps/>
- Goodman, D. J. (2022). Texas Democrats Look to a Future Beyond Beto. *The New York Times*. November 9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/09/us/texas-beto-orourke-abbott.html>
- Kapur, S. and Thorp, F. V (2022). McConnell says Republicans may not win Senate control, citing 'candidate quality'. *NBC News*. August 18. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2022-election/mcconnell-says-republicans-may-not-win-senate-control-citing-candidate-rcna43777>
- Kusisto, L. and Calfas, J. (2022). Abortion Features Prominently in Midterm Elections After Demise of Roe v. Wade. *Wall Street Journal*. November 7. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/abortion-features-prominently-in-midterm-elections-after-demise-of-roe-v-wade-11667826002>
- Lucas, J., Sisco T. S., and Galdieri C. J. (2021). The Politics of the 2018 Midterm Elections. *Congress & the Presidency*, 48(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07343469.2021.1892383>

- McGill, B. and Day, C. (2022). How We Voted in the 2022 Midterm Elections. *Wall Street Journal*. November 14. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-different-groups-voted-in-the-2022-midterm-elections-11667955705>
- McNair, K. (2022). 2022 Midterms: Voters Worried About the Economy. *CNBC*. October 31. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/10/31/2022-midterms-voters-worried-about-the-economy.html>
- Miami Dade County. (2022). Certificate of County Canvassing Board Miami-Dade County. *miamidade.gov*. November 22. <https://www.miamidade.gov/elections/library/2022-general-election-official-results.pdf>
- Numa, R. (2022). Fox News Power Rankings: Republicans expected to control House, but both parties hold on to pathways in Senate. *FoxNews*. November 1. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-power-rankings-republicans-expected-control-house-both-parties-hold-pathways-senate>
- RealClearPolitics. (2022). Battle for Senate - RCP Projection. *RealClearPolitics*. November 8. <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2022/senate/elections-map-rcp-projection.html>
- Sabato, L. J. and Ernst, H. R. (eds) (2006) *Encyclopedia of American Political Parties and Elections*. New York: Facts On File.
- Santucci, J. (2018). Maine ranked-choice voting as a case of electoral system change. *Journal of Representative Democracy*, 54(3), 297-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2018.1502208>
- Santucci, J. (2020). Variants of Ranked-Choice Voting from a Strategic Perspective. *Politics and Governance*, 9(2), 344-353. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i2.3955>
- Sbano, A. (2020). How Should Alaskans Choose? The Debate Over Ranked Choice Voting. *Alaska Law Review*, 37 (2), 295-308.
- Skelley, G. and Rakich, N. (2021). Which States Won — and Lost — Seats in the 2020 Census? *FiveThirtyEight*. April 26. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/which-states-won-and-lost-seats-in-the-2020-census/>
- Wall Street Journal (2022). Live Election Results 2022. *Wall Street Journal*. November 26. <https://www.wsj.com/election/2022/general>
- Warren, M. (2022). How Brian Kemp took on Trump and created a blueprint for the GOP. *CNN Politics*. November 11. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/11/politics/brian-kemp-2024-donald-trump-republican/index.html>
- Wasserman, D. and Flinn, A. (2021). Introducing the 2021 Cook Political Report Partisan Voter Index. *The Cook Political Report*. April 15. <https://www.cookpolitical.com/cook-pvi/introducing-2021-cook-political-report-partisan-voter-index>
- Wise, L. (2022). Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola Win Re-Election in Alaska. *Wall Street Journal*. November 24. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/alaska-to-announce-election-results-in-senate-house-races-later-wednesday-11669224488>
- Yeip, R., Stamm, S., and Brown E. (2022). 2022 Senate Results Turned on Meaningful Shifts From 2020. *Wall Street Journal*. November 17. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/2022-senate-results-turned-on-meaningful-shifts-from-2020-11668695984>

Zrile, Red Wave to Red Puddle

Zitner, A. and Collins, E. (2022) Why Independent Voters Broke for Democrats in the Midterms. *Wall Street Journal*. November 12. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-independent-voters-broke-for-democrats-in-the-midterms-11668249002>

Zitner, A. and DeBarros, A. (2022) GOP Gains College-Educated and Minority Voters in Slim House Pickup. *Wall Street Journal*. November 19. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gop-gains-college-educated-and-minority-voters-in-slim-house-pickup-11668853803>