



America's Bitter Divisions Continue: The Impact of the 2022 Midterm Elections

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Nearly a week after the official election day in the United States the outcome for the House of Representatives was still not entirely clear, although the Democratic Party will retain control of the Senate, and only eight week after the elections the Republicans have confirmed the narrow victory in the House. Depending on the results of the December 6 Senate runoff election in Georgia, the party will have either a one-seat majority in that chamber or Vice President Kamala Harris will hold the tie-breaking vote. Whichever side finally prevails in the extraordinarily close votes for control of the House, that party's working majority will be razor thin. The American public remains closely and bitterly divided.

On balance, the Republican Party's election strategy failed, despite impressive victories in Florida and Ohio. GOP candidates tried to highlight the country's high inflation rate (the worst in 4 decades), a disturbing spike in violent crimes, the massive influx of illegal immigrants, and a variety of cultural issues. Given the worsening economic environment (not to mention the other problems), the election logically should have been a major victory for Republican candidates and a rebuke to President Joe Biden's administration and the Democratic Party. Yet that result did not occur.

In one sense, the failure of the Republican Party's tactics was an encouraging development. Much of the GOP's rhetoric was uncaring, if not bigoted. The notion that transgender children and their parents who seek medical advice and assistance somehow pose a dire threat to American civilization was deeply offensive. So, too, was the notion that immigrants from desperately poor countries in Central America coming to the United States to fill entry-level job openings that often had gone begging for months was a dangerous criminal invasion. The GOP's position on those issues, as well as the party's embrace of the controversial U.S. Supreme Court decision rescinding

the right to obtain an abortion, mobilized pro-Democratic voters to such an extent that their ballots neutralized the Republican Party's advantages on economic and crime issues.

Although the Democratic Party's strategy proved more effective, one aspect of that successful strategy is ominous and worrisome. Biden and his followers repeatedly insisted that their political opponents were racists, fascists, and an outright threat to democracy itself in the United States. It was the explicit theme of Biden's September 1 speech at Independence Hall (with creepy red lighting) and at Washington's Union Station during the closing days of the election campaign. Merely raising questions about the 2020 U.S. presidential election became outright "election denial" in the administration's version of events. The January 6 incident at the U.S. Capitol was not merely a nasty, farcical riot, according to the White House and its media allies, it was an outright, extremely dangerous insurrection. Such exaggerations smacked of the ugly tactics that Senator Joseph McCarthy and his followers used to smear left-wing political and ideological opponents as a menace to democracy during the Cold War.

The lack of meaningful losses for the Democrats in the midterm elections makes it likely that the party will continue to employ such a toxic approach in future political campaigns. However, succumbing to that temptation will make it even harder than it has been to restore civility to America's political discourse. The United States may well become an ever more angry, polarized society over the long term, and that development is not healthy either for the United States or the world.

Given the nearly even split in Congress, with neither party having a clear mandate, there are unlikely to be many significant changes in domestic policies. A legislative stalemate is the most probable outcome, with President Biden then resorting to an even greater use of executive orders—a tactic of dubious constitutional validity when used to implement broad policy initiatives, despite the absence of congressional legislation. Biden's fondness for such measures has already sparked intense opposition and multiple court suits.

Foreign policy is the one area in which bipartisanship is likely to prevail, but that is not necessarily a good situation. On policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC), for example, both parties have vied to see which one can create the image of being tougher on Beijing. That form of bipartisanship has already led to multiple, risky gestures of greater U.S. support for Taiwan. A major example was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's high-profile visit to Taipei in July, a trip that received widespread praise from Republicans who had never made a favorable comment about Pelosi on any other issue. Bipartisan support for coercive trade and other economic policies toward Beijing also is strong and rising as well. The trend toward a more confrontational policy on multiple issues, heightens the risk of a dangerous U.S.-PRC clash.

Bipartisan support for Washington's network of military alliances and a highly activist foreign policy elsewhere in the world also will continue largely intact, although Republicans have become somewhat disenchanted with regime-change wars and nation-building ventures in the aftermath of the debacle in Afghanistan. There also is some GOP dissent about aspects of the Biden administration's Ukraine policy. However, that dissent in Congress seems confined to not giving Kyiv a "blank check" in terms of U.S. support and insisting on better monitoring and

accountability about where U.S. financial assistance and weaponry has gone. There is little opposition to the overall policy of supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia.

The days of strong opposition from some portions of the Democratic Party to bloated Pentagon budgets also appear to be over. Most Democrats in Congress have endorsed the administration's extremely generous outlays, and many have even embraced GOP amendments adding billions of dollars to the proposed budgets coming from the White House. As the United States is on track to break the \$1 trillion mark for military spending in the next few years, bipartisan support for such a financial hemorrhage remains intact.

The bottom line is that the U.S. midterm elections will have relatively little impact on the substance of either Washington's domestic policies or foreign policies. Change in the former will be difficult to achieve because of the thin governing majorities in both chambers of Congress. Change regarding the latter is even less likely, given the suffocating bipartisan consensus in favor of activist, frequently militarized, approach to world affairs. Populations in other countries have reason to view those situations with growing unease.

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