

The 2022 Midterms

January 24, 2023



Much of American society breathed a great sigh of relief after the November 8 midterm elections, as it became clear that there was no Republican red tsunami—there was hardly even a red ripple—and that many of Donald Trump’s handpicked candidates for major office had gone down in defeat.

The party in power usually loses in the midterms, sometimes by as many as 50 or 60 House seats¹ as well as several in the Senate, but the Democrats kept control of the Senate and even briefly gained a seat as Georgia Senator Rafael Warnock won reelection (a gain undone by Senator Kyrsten Sinema resigning from the Democratic Party and declaring herself an independent). Despite the fact that Republicans won more House votes than Democrats, 51 percent to 48 percent, Republicans only won control of the House by a few seats. I heard several friends, and overheard strangers, saying, “Thank God! The Democrats stopped the red wave.” There was a great sense of relief, even pride, that the American people had not been as bamboozled by Trump, Fox, and far-right social media as we had feared. After all, a Republican victory would have meant a push for a national ban on abortion rights, attacks on trans rights in particular and LGBTQ rights in general, greater restrictions on voting rights, reductions in spending on Social Security and Medicare, a general attack on the working class, together with the rhetoric of racism and misogyny, the encouragement of white nationalism and replacement theory, and flirtation with far-right armed militias and political violence like that of January 6. And it would have been a spectacular launch for Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign. But it didn’t happen. Phew!

Put in more theoretical terms, many feared that American democracy—with all of its many flaws, from the role of money to the restriction of voting rights—would be replaced this year or in 2024 by an authoritarian right-wing politics tending toward fascism, as embodied in Donald Trump. The Democratic Party campaigned on defending democracy and abortion rights, as did the party’s progressives. The Democrats held the line, but the Republican threat, the peril of another Donald Trump presidency, and the menacing growth of far-right political movements riddled with white nationalists and neo-fascists remain.

We are not back to normal, rather we are facing normalization, the continued mainstreaming of far-right politics in the Supreme Court, the Congress, and in state governments, in the media, and in society as a whole. Yet at the same time, we have real successes by progressives and socialists in the Democratic Party, and by Greens, that provide something of a counter-tendency, though the labor and social movements that stoke that trend are small.

More than ever, our elections are dominated by money, really big money. The mid-term was the most expensive such election in U.S. history, with the two major parties together spending more than \$16.7 billion. The Republicans spent \$4.6 billion, compared to the Democrats' \$3.9 billion, while other groups put up billions in dark money. Billionaires contributed to both parties, with their money making up 20 percent of all Republican, and 14.5 percent of all Democratic, contributions. The Democrats' biggest donor, George Soros, gave \$128.5 million to his own political action committee, Democracy PAC, though only \$15 million was actually dispensed, while the Republicans' biggest donor, Richard Uihlein, gave \$80.7 million. Democrats tend to receive more small donations than Republicans, but they get big ones too. With all of the money spent on the election and all of the rallies, door-knocking, and phone calling, this was a high turnout election by U.S. standards: 47 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, almost as many as in 2018.

Trump and the Republicans

The Democrats can thank Trump for much of their success. Biden's approval rating before the election was only 40 percent, but Trump's was even lower at 32 percent. Trump had endorsed more than 200 far-right candidates, all of them election deniers who claim he won in 2020, many anti-vaxxers and Q-Anon supporters: a congeries of reactionary characters, creeps, and kooks. Twenty-seven of his most prominent candidates running for Senate, House, governor, or secretary of state lost their contests, and it was this that caused the Republicans to have such a bad day November 8,² for which Trump is now blamed by some Republican politicians and right-wing pundits. We are naturally gleeful to see the Republicans fail and to witness Trump being blamed. Yet right-wing Republican Governor Ron DeSantis won a smashing victory in Florida, and Governor Greg Abbott won easily in Texas. Both campaigned on banning abortion, banning books, denying medical services to transgender children, and of course the ever-popular right-wing bogeyman, illegal immigrants.

Altogether, 13 Trump-endorsed candidates won major office, such as senator and governor,³ and the *New York Times* reported on November 10 that it had "identified hundreds of Republican candidates who questioned the 2020 election who were running in major midterm races. ... At least 200 won. Most of this group made statements that cast doubt on the 2020 election, often repeatedly. About three dozen, or 16 percent, were more direct and denied the 2020 results outright." (Another 120 election doubters and deniers lost their elections.) More than a third of the members of next year's House have questioned or denied the 2020 election, the *Times* reported. The *Washington Post* stated that about 60 percent of election-denying Republicans won their races, and the *New Republic* added that "about 70 percent of Republicans in the House are election deniers who will happily work to overturn the 2024 election given the chance." Many Republican victories were the result of gerrymandering and voter suppression.

So, while we may take satisfaction that several of Trump's major candidates failed, many Trumpists will be serving in the new Congress. Two of them, Republicans Derrick Van Orden of Wisconsin and George Santos of New York, were present at the January 6 insurrection and attempted coup at the Capitol, while the cartoonish, looney, and dangerous Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and the vile fascist Paul Gosar of Arizona give talks to white nationalist groups. These far-right representatives are connected to the movement of right-wing armed militias who played a central role on January 6 and the sorts of people who planned to kidnap Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The far-right Freedom Caucus has 44 members in the House, or more than 10 percent of that body's 435 representatives. Republican Senator from Missouri Josh Hawley, who raised a fist in solidarity with the January 6 insurrectionists, declared after the election, "The Republican Party as we have known it is dead," and what he seems to want to replace it with is a far-right radical party linked to armed militias—stormtroopers, as they used to be called.

The Republican Party is in trouble, still dealing with Trump's outsized influence and with rebellious

right-wingers in the party, some of whom worked to deny Kevin McCarthy the role of speaker of the House in a 188 to 31 party conference vote when he needs 218 of the whole body to become speaker. Similarly in the Senate, Mitch McConnell faced opposition from 10 senators but won the election for minority leader with 37 votes in favor. The Republicans will have a hard time maintaining party discipline, and the Democrats may or may not succeed in peeling off a few to pass some legislation to elect a moderate Republican speaker or even a Democratic Party speaker.

Meanwhile, just a week after the election, Donald J. Trump, speaking at Mar-a-Lago before a friendly crowd devoid of any Republican politicians or opinion makers, announced that he would be a candidate for president for the third time. Given his egomania, and his hope for presidential immunity in the criminal investigations he is facing, this was no surprise. Looking forward to the presidential primary, some polls show Trump leading, others indicate DeSantis is ahead; *FiveThirtyEight* thinks Trump would win. But he will face greater challenges than in the past. Several of his multi-billionaire donors, including Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman; Thomas Peterffy, chairman of Interactive Brokers; billionaire Ken Griffin; industrialist Andy Sabin; and Ronald Lauder, heir of Estée Lauder cosmetics, have indicated they won't be backing him anymore. Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox and many other outlets, has turned his back on Trump. His paper the *New York Post* ran a front-page headline, "Florida Man Makes Announcement" and buried the story of Trump's announcement in the middle of the paper. His daughter Ivanka Trump says she will not be his advisor as in the past. Still, few Republican politicians have broken with him, fearing his huge and loyal voter base. He could well come back; it depends on how the Republicans do in Congress, how the Democrats manage, and what sort of broader opposition develops. And it depends on us.

The Democrats and Their Progressives

The Democratic Party's success was best represented by John Fetterman, the party's candidate for the Senate in Pennsylvania. Fetterman doesn't call himself a progressive, and with good reason. He opposed Medicare for All, supports fracking, and gives unwavering support to Israel. But he did show Democrats how to reconnect with the party's traditional working-class base.

Fetterman, standing 6'8" tall, covered with tattoos, and wearing a hoodie, ran on working-class issues, saying, "The union way of life is sacred, and as a public servant, I have always stood up for workers. I have walked picket lines with striking workers, attended countless rallies in support of unionization efforts, and have even asked my campaign email list to donate directly to unions' strike funds. I'll take this fight for workers with me to Washington." When he suffered a stroke in May that affected his speech, he nevertheless continued his campaign. His Trump-endorsed opponent, Dr. Mehmet Oz, is a carpetbagger who moved from his home in New Jersey to run in Pennsylvania. A quack who promoted pseudo-scientific remedies, faith-healing, and the paranormal, he peddled "miraculous" weight loss drugs and other snake oil, and as a frequent guest on Oprah Winfrey's show became something of a household name. In the end Oprah endorsed Fetterman, who crushed Oz with a vote of 51.1 to 46.5 percent.

In his victory speech Fetterman declared, "This campaign has always been about fighting for anybody who's gotten knocked down that ever got back up. I'm proud of what we ran on: protecting a woman's right to choose, raising our minimum wage, fighting for the union way of life, health care as a fundamental human right; it saved my life and it should be there for you if you ever should need it. Standing up to corporate greed, making more things right here in America, right here in Pennsylvania, and standing up for our democracy." His stand for abortion rights mattered. Seventy-seven percent of young women voted for Fetterman, 5 percentage points more than the national average for Democrats.

The Democrats, under attack from the Republicans on the questions of inflation, crime, and

immigration, fought on two major issues: the defense of democracy and abortion rights. The latter in particular played a central role in the Democrats' success in preventing a Republican sweep. The U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, overturning *Roe* and ending federal protection of abortion rights, motivated many women to turn out and vote against the Republicans. An analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation found, "Nationally, nearly half (47%) of all voters say the Court's decision had a major impact on which candidates they supported in this election, including almost two-thirds (64%) of those who voted for Democratic House candidates." In addition, "About four in ten (38%) voters overall said that the Supreme Court decision ending the constitutional right to an abortion had a major impact on their decision about whether to vote in this year's election. The share citing the decision as a major motivator was highest among Black women under age 50 (61%), Hispanic women under age 50 (58%), those who voted for Democratic Congressional candidates (56%), first-time voters (54%), voters under age 30 (53%), and those who said they were angry about the Supreme Court's abortion decision (55%)." Bernie Sanders, writing in the *Guardian* of October 10, 2022, said he thought it was a mistake to make abortion the leading issue and thought the economy was more important, but he was proven wrong. Women's concerns, their votes, and those of their allies were largely responsible for the Democrats' success.

One sees this too in state propositions. Three states, Vermont, Michigan, and California, voted to codify abortion rights in law, and Kentucky voters turned down a measure that would have further and drastically restricted abortion rights there.

Young voters represented only 12 percent of the midterm vote, fewer than in recent elections, but about 64 percent of them voted for Democrats over Republicans.

As in the past, the Democrats relied on the votes of people of color, even if support from Latinos and Blacks has been slipping: In this midterm, 80 percent of Blacks, 77 percent of Asians, and 56 to 60 percent of Latinos voted for Democrats, according to AP VoteCast. The African American Research Collaborative found that also 65 percent of Native Americans voted for Democrats. Women, especially young women often driven by the abortion issue, played a central role in the Democratic success, with a CNN exit poll showing 72 percent of women aged 18-29 voted for Democrats in House races nationwide. Labor unions mobilized their members as usual to vote for the Democratic Party, knocking on doors and making phone calls, getting out the vote on election day, and even providing rides to the polls in some cases. Unions like the Service Employees, teachers (both NEA and AFT), and non-federal public employees make a considerable contribution to getting out the vote. But we know that no matter what their leaders say, many white male voters in industry and construction, in unions like the Steelworkers and the Carpenters, cast their votes for Republicans.

Democrats did surprisingly well at the state level. They flipped at least three statehouses and held their majorities in several other state legislatures where they were being challenged. Democrats took control of both houses in Michigan, of the Senate in Minnesota, and of the House in Pennsylvania. In Vermont the Democrats and the Progressives, a local left party, took both houses. Democrats also blocked Republican legislative super majorities in North Carolina and Wisconsin and held on to majorities in five other states. Control of state legislatures gives a party control of legislative redistricting and can determine a state's political future. Democrats also flipped the governors in Maryland and Massachusetts.

In New York, Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul just barely won reelection, and the Democrats did poorly after redistricting, losing four congressional seats. Hochul would not have won without help from the Working Families Party, which came to her aid to stop the election of the right-wing Lee Zeldin, who had been endorsed by Trump. Plus the WFP needed 130,000 votes to stay on the ballot. The collaboration paid off for both. Hochul won by 350,000 votes, 250,000 on the WFP line. Democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has called for a root-and-branch reorganization of the

state party. "It's no secret that an enormous amount of party leadership in New York State is based on big money and old-school, calcified machine-style politics that creates a very anemic voting base that is disengaged and disenfranchised," said Ocasio-Cortez. "We need to rebuild the party apparatus from the bottom up." It will be a challenge.

In Los Angeles, progressive Karen Bass became the first woman and the second Black person to be elected mayor, defeating the billionaire real estate developer Rick Caruso, who put \$100 million of his own money into his campaign. Caruso had called for beefing up the police department and launching a war on the homeless, while Bass, a social worker, called for addressing the causes of homelessness.

While we're happy to see Trump and the Republicans defeated, the Democrats represent no great alternative. Without a doubt, Biden and the Democrats' social and economic policies, such as their handling of COVID, were far more humane than Trump and the Republicans. Still, the Democratic Party failed over the last 40 years to keep its promises to its constituents, the union workers, women, Blacks, and Latinos who for so long voted for it. The Democrats, when they held the majority in Congress, never succeeded in codifying abortion in federal law, never passed the labor law reform they had promised since the 1970s, not only failed to create a civilized justice system but promoted massive incarceration that particularly affected Black communities, and failed to create a humane immigration policy. The Democrats cannot represent working people because of their greater commitment to capital. Like the Republicans, they largely depend for their financing on mining, oil, manufacturing, services, and high-tech corporations. Scores of Democratic Party senators and representatives are corporate lawyers, or were until they became professional politicians. Committed to capitalism at home, the Democrats are equally dedicated to imperialism abroad, as witnessed by their support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the long history of military interventions in Latin America, and their relationships with Israel and the petrol-monarchies of the Middle East.

The Progressives, Socialists, and the Greens

Within the Democratic camp, progressive candidates did well. "There's no question that this will be the most progressive Democratic caucus in decades," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington, chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, which has more than 100 members. Progressives were newly elected in congressional districts in Texas, Illinois, Michigan, Florida, Hawaii, California, Pennsylvania, and Vermont. Jayapal said that of the 18 candidates the Progressive Caucus endorsed in this cycle, 15 won their races. Maxwell Alejandro Frost, age 25, the first member of Generation Z to be elected to Congress, ran on the issue of health care for all and defeated his Republican opponent 59 to 39 percent. Summer Lee, backed by the Democratic Socialists of America, won her Pennsylvania race, overcoming the campaign by AIPAC, the pro-Israel group that spent \$4 million to defeat her. Greg Casar, who has emphasized police reform, affordable housing, and immigrant rights, won 72 percent of the vote in his Texas district. And, with Senator Bernie Sanders' endorsement, Rebecca Balint won in Vermont.

The Democratic Socialists of America, the country's largest socialist group, down from 90,000 members a few years ago to 67,000 dues-paying members today, remains committed to running socialists and endorsing progressives in the Democratic Party, but is opposed to running on a socialist ticket. DSA endorsed more than 35 candidates for local, state, or national office, and 16 won. DSA candidates Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush, and Rashida Tlaib, all of "the squad," all won reelection. Eunisses Hernandez and Hugo Soto-Martínez defeated incumbents to win seats on the Los Angeles City Council. Darrin Madison and Ryan Clancy will be going to the Wisconsin State Assembly, Elizabeth Fiedler and Rick Krajewski will join the Pennsylvania state legislature, and Javier Mabrey and Elisabeth Epps will join the legislature in Colorado. In New York, voters elected

Sarahana Shrestha and Kristen Gonzalez to the statehouse. Three other new DSA state legislators are Erika Uyterhoeven in Massachusetts, Gabriel Acevero in Maryland, and Rachel Ventura in Illinois.

The Green Party, which has ballot access in many states and represents the most significant political alternative to the left of the Democratic Party, continues to run candidates despite constant attempts by the other parties, particularly the Democrats, to drive them off the ballot. Greens in 2022 (including spring local elections and special elections) ran 155 candidates in 26 states, winning 31 of the races, and at least 14 of 28 Green candidates for various county, city, school, and special districts were elected on November 8. Greens currently hold at least 136 local offices across 19 states. In campaigns for major office, the Greens ran ten candidates for the House and four for the Senate, winning between 1 percent and 3 percent of the vote. In statewide contests, Green candidates generally got less than 1 percent. Driven off the ballot in New York, the Greens got 10,000 write-ins in the state on November 8.

To improve its electoral chances, the Green Party is fighting for ranked choice voting, says Howie Hawkins, eco-socialist and Green Party presidential candidate in 2020. “We worked for ranked choice voting in 2020 in 24 local jurisdictions. We come out of the 2022 election with ranked choice voting in three states and 115 local jurisdictions. Ranked choice voting is a reform we are winning.”

The Missing Elements

With the government now divided—a Democratic president and Senate but a Republican House—it seems that we will see a return to legislative paralysis. Especially in a time of economic uncertainty because of rising inflation, this sort of situation breeds political cynicism and demoralization. And that may continue to fuel the growth of the right.

While the Republicans have been stopped for now, and while there are important gains for progressives, democratic socialists, and Greens, what is missing from the scene are labor and social movements that might provide the social power to transform American politics. The one social movement that did matter in 2022, the reproductive rights movement that appeared after the *Dobbs* ruling in June and that held hundreds of demonstrations throughout the country, drawing in hundreds of thousands of new women activists, had a tremendous impact on the election and may be what saved the Democrats from the threatened red wave. The uptick in labor, best represented by the organizing at Starbucks and Amazon, is still too small and not yet successful enough to spark a broader labor upsurge. The Black Lives Matter movement that brought between 15 and 25 million people into the streets in 2020 subsided, surprisingly without creating a new independent Black organization. Other movements remain too small and too sporadic to bring much to the broad left at this time.

At the same time, the socialist movement that might offer a vision and strategy to such groups is too small at the moment and, more important, lacks a commitment to socialism from below. The growth of campism and even neo-Stalinism in the contemporary left is disheartening and disorienting. The idea that there is no socialism without democracy and no democracy without socialism is held only by a handful of small groups and publications.

These two problems—the lack of a mass movement and the lack of leftist organizations committed to socialism from below—are the fundamental problems that leave us facing a Republican Party normalizing right-wing views and a neoliberal Democratic Party that serves as a poor alternative. We who stand for socialism from below have to take on those two problems.

Notes

1. The Democrats lost 50 seats in one midterm of Clinton's presidency and 60 in one of Obama's. See the American Presidency Project, "Seats in Congress Gained/Lost by the President's Party in Mid-Term Elections."

2. Where Trump's candidates lost: **Senate Races:** Mehmet Oz, defeated in Pennsylvania by John Fetterman; Don Bolduc, defeated in New Hampshire by Sen. Maggie Hassan; Leora Levy, defeated in Connecticut by Richard Blumenthal; Gerald Malloy, defeated in Vermont by Peter Welch. I'm not sure it's worthwhile (or fair) to include races in overwhelmingly blue states (VT and CT). Some candidates Trump endorsed in the primaries and played a real role in getting them nominated (Oz, Bulduc) and for the winners Vance. This is different from him chiming in to endorse the obvious choice. **House Races:** Bo Hines, defeated in North Carolina's District 13 by Wiley Nickel; Steve Chabot, defeated in Ohio's District 1 by Greg Landsman; Madison Gesiotto Gilbert, defeated in Ohio's District 13 by Emilia Sykes; John Gibbs, defeated in Michigan's District 3 by Hillary Scholten; Yesli Vega, defeated in Virginia's District 7 by Abigail Spanberger; Karoline Leavitt defeated in New Hampshire's District 1 by Rep. Chris Pappas; J.R. Majewski, defeated in Ohio's District 9 by Marcy Kaptur; Sandy Smith, defeated in North Carolina's District 1 by Don Davis; Robert Burns, defeated in New Hampshire's District 2 by Ann McLane Kuster; Sarah Palin, defeated in Alaska's At-Large District 2 by Mary Peltola; Jim Bognet, defeated in Pennsylvania's District 8 by Matt Cartwright. **Governors races:** Tudor Dixon, lost to Governor Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan; Doug Mastriano, lost to Josh Shapiro in Pennsylvania; Lee Zeldin, lost to Governor Kathy Hochul in New York; Dan Cox, lost to Wes Moore in Maryland; Geoff Diehl, lost to Maura Healey in Massachusetts; Tim Michels, lost to Governor Tony Evers in Wisconsin; Darren Bailey, lost to Governor J.B. Pritzker in Illinois; Scott Jensen, lost in Minnesota to Governor Tim Walz; Mark Ronchetti, lost in New Mexico to Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham; Derek Schmidt, lost in Kansas to Governor Laura Kelly. **Secretaries of State:** Kim Crockett, defeated in Minnesota by Steve Simon; Kristina Karamo, defeated in Michigan by Jocelyn Benson.

3. Trump candidates who won major offices: Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, Nevada Governor -elect Joe Lombardo, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, North Carolina Senator-elect Ted Budd, Ohio Senator-elect J.D. Vance, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley, Utah Senator Mike Lee, Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, and Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose. I'd only include Lombardo, Vance, and Johnson, which were competitive races.