

## "The 2022 US Midterm Election Series②"

# 2022: No Red Tsunami, Just Purple Mud

Jeremy D. Mayer  
George Mason University

What happened to the US Mid-term election in 2022? The expected Red Wave was not politically substantiated. Rather, Democrats reinforced its control of US senate by winning the finally decided seat in Georgia, adding one more seat than before. Democrats loss in the House is less than expected. Professor Jeremy Mayer, who is the experts in US politics, analyzed why the so called red wave did not happen. According to Professor Mayer, three things explains why there was no Red Wave: abortion, Trump, and young voters. His contribution will help us understand the unique characteristics of the 2022 US mid-term election. [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

The midterm elections were surprising, to pundits and scholars, and it is up to scholars to explain why so many of us were surprised (pundits can just go on making media predictions, and not account for their errors!).

The 2022 midterms violated the expectations that political scientists had for these elections. Republicans were confident of a red wave, based on these factors, and by a nearly universal set of predictions from the media and academia that they would gain.

What happened to these expectations?

Polarization happened. The norm that the president's party loses seats in the midterm was built on two related factors. First, in a presidential year, a popular president would help many borderline candidates of his party win House seats, because of his coattails. These weak incumbents would often lose in two years, when the new president was no longer on the ballot to help them. President's coattails are much smaller now, so there are fewer vulnerable incumbents, and thus less likelihood of a loss in the midterm. Relatedly, there are just fewer voters ready to swing against the president's party in the midterms. Prior to polarization, some weak Democrats might have voted Republican to send a message to Biden that they were unhappy. Today, though, a Democrat unhappy with Biden's leadership, and perhaps upset about rising inflation, would still look over the party of Donald Trump, and be unable to vote for it. Democratic loyalty to their party was solid in these elections.

How can polarization explain 2022, when we have had large swings at recent midterms in the midst of polarization, as occurred in 2006, 2010 and 2018? Those elections were significant losses for the incumbent party in the House.

Polarization is much worse now than in 2006 or 2010. Also, those earlier elections were largely produced by an enthusiasm gap that affected turnout. The out-party was raging to vote in those elections. In 2022, both sides were enthusiastic, but Democrats may have been even more driven to vote. Why?

Two big reasons: abortion, which rallied Democratic voters, and former President Trump, who made the election much more of a comparison election than most midterms.

Thus, Democrats seemed to have avoided a massive red tsunami. Instead, the election is more like purple mud—some remarkable red victories in statewide elections in Texas and Florida, blue victories in some key Senate races, and a remarkably tiny Republican surge in the House, just enough for one of the narrowest majorities in U.S. history.

But compared to what might have been, Democrats, particularly the Biden team, felt almost victorious. The news was not all good for the Democrats. Ultimately, they did lose the House, and that is terrible news for the party, even though they lost it by a very narrow margin. Make no mistake—the Biden administration will be far less able to get their policies enacted by legislation now, but the presidential administration is still usually held responsible by the voters. House Republicans can thwart Biden's efforts, confident that any blame for gridlock, with the possible exception of a government shut down or debt default, will land on the president.

More importantly, perhaps, Democrats continued to bleed Hispanic and Black voters. According to exit polls, they won both minority groups, and by solid margins, but they won less of their vote than they had in 2018, particularly among men. The Latino vote in two states should worry Democrats a great deal: Texas and Florida. These two mega states saw popular Republican governors reelected, in addition to a Florida Republican Senator. The Hispanic vote for those GOP candidates broke recent records.

Texas, as the joke goes, is the Democratic state of the future...and always will be. Democrats keep imagining that the rising Hispanic population in the state will, combined with growth among White suburbanites and a solid Black vote in Houston and Dallas, give the state to the Democrats. But year after year it remains solidly red. Florida, which has very recently seen statewide Democratic victories, went Republican by strong margins.

What is happening in Texas and Florida, and maybe across the nation? The Hispanic vote

is becoming less reliably Democratic, for several reasons. First, Hispanic voters were never as uniformly pro-immigration reform as some Democrats imagined. Many are not offended by Trump and other Republicans who are stridently against immigration, and some don't take umbrage at slurs against Mexicans. The Hispanic electorate is divided by nationality to a great extent. Also, Evangelical Hispanic voters seem to vote quite differently than Catholic Hispanics do. Trump's strident White nationalism also plays well with some Hispanics, in a way that surprises many analysts. The "dark secret" is that most American Hispanics, forced to choose between Black and White, choose White, even some who are darker skinned than Barack Obama. Some of them may be establishing their Whiteness by voting for the party that is more "pro-White" and attracts the majority of White votes. In Hispanic culture, race is defined differently. It is not a binary, but rather a spectrum. There are sometimes dozens of words to describe variations of skin shade in Portuguese or Spanish vernacular in Latin American countries. Two sayings in Brazil capture the complex nature of race among many Latinos: "no general is Black" and "money whitens." This means that your race is in part a product of your social and economic status. While more recently, in Brazil and other countries, there is a Black pride movement, the Hispanic response to Trump's White nationalism should have been expected.

Finally, analysts of Latin American political culture talk about the role of machismo, a complex worldview in which strength and masculinity are valued, in politics and business. Trump and Republicans in his mold will naturally attract voters operating under machismo.

Another reason the Democrats lost the House is gerrymandering, or the practice of drawing Congressional district lines to favor a party or a candidate. Districts need to be redrawn every ten years by state governments, to reflect population changes. Historically, both parties have gerrymandered when they could. When control in a state is divided, with one party controlling the governorship, and the other one or both houses of the state legislature, compromise and balance often results. Recently, Republicans have had complete control of more state governments, and that gave them a boost in House elections after the censuses of 2000 and 2010. But in 2020-22, Republicans had a huge additional advantage: Democrats have been giving up on gerrymandering. The Republicans exploited their control of Ohio, Texas, Florida, Alabama, and many other states to give them dozens of safe Republican House seats. Democrats did the same in a few states like Maryland and Illinois, but in the two largest Democratic states, New York and California, the Democrats did not gerrymander. In California, Democrats had supported unilateral disarmament, in which districts are drawn by an independent commission. This gave the Republicans almost a dozen seats that they would not have had otherwise. In New York, the state supreme court

ordered the Democrats to district fairly, and so they gave up on a partisan gerrymander. The contrast with Ohio is illustrative. There, the state supreme court ordered fairness as well, but Republicans simply ignored the court, over and over, until it was too late to change the unfair lines. In addition, the few states who have joined California in districting in a non-partisan way are almost all blue or purple. This gave the Republicans a large advantage in the 2022 midterms.

Midterms are also about the Senate. And there, the Republicans paid a huge price for letting Trump affect the nominations of their candidates. They lost a very winnable race in Arizona with an untested candidate who questioned the 2020 election and also suggested privatizing Social Security. In Pennsylvania, a Trump-supported TV star took the nomination from a more moderate Republican who probably would've won. Even when the Trump candidate won, as in Ohio, he cost the Republicans tens of millions of dollars in expenditures that they could have spent in other states. In Georgia, Trump supported a sports hero who demonstrated an extraordinary level of ignorance about many topics, was revealed to have held a gun to his ex-wife's head, had multiple children with women he was not married to even as he campaigned on family values, and seems to have paid for two abortions while stridently opposing legal abortion.

The Democrats not only held the Senate, thanks to Trump's interventions, but may add to their margin if Herschel Walker, that deeply flawed Georgia candidate, loses the December runoff.

The midterm elections are also looked at for signals of who is rising in the out party, and who is possibly angling for a chance to be the presidential nominee in two years.

On the Republican side, all eyes look to Florida, where the incumbent governor, Ron DeSantis, added to his national profile with a stunningly large victory, and large support among Hispanics. He is seen as the Republican most likely to beat Donald Trump. More quietly, the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, was reelected with a large margin. His candidacy would represent history for physically disabled people. While we had a president who was crippled by polio, FDR, his condition was hidden from the nation as he pretended to be able to walk in crucial public appearances. Abbott, by contrast, has been a proud spokesperson for the disabled community.

On the Democratic side, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan has risen sharply in the esteem of Democrats following her strong defense of abortion rights and her successful reelection in a crucial purple state in the Midwest. She could well become our first female president, either in 2024 or in later years. Of course, the 2024 nomination for Democrats is

clouded by the question of whether Biden, who will be 82 in 2024, runs again.

So, in the end, what did we learn about America from the 2022 midterm elections? We are still a deeply polarized nation in which neither party has established a firm hold on the people's affection. Trump is now a problem not just for Democrats, but for Republicans and for our democracy in general. He doesn't seem to be at all interested in retiring from American politics. And, with votes still being counted weeks after the election, it is revealed to the world once again that our system of election administration is rather pathetic. The system is not rigged, and the big lie Trump tells about the 2020 election reflects his narcissistic inability to ever admit failure or fault rather than corruption in our elections. But while our elections are not tainted by corruption, they are far less efficient and competent than those in almost any advanced democracy.

#### Author Bio

Jeremy Mayer is an associate professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, where he also directs the masters and PhD programs in political science. He is the author of *Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns 1960-2000* (Random House 2002) as well as the brief textbook *9-11: The Giant Awakens* (Wadsworth 2002, 2nd edition 2006), and *American Media Politics in Transition* (McGraw Hill 2006) and coauthor of *African American Statewide Candidates in the New South* (Oxford 2022), *The South and the Transformation of U.S. Politics* (Oxford 2019) *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in Higher Education* (Brookings 2008). He has written articles on diverse topics such as presidential image management, Christian right politics, public opinion and torture, and comparative political socialization, in journals such as *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and *The Historian*. Source: <https://schar.gmu.edu/profiles/jmayer4>

December 2022

Copyright © Jeju Peace Institute, All Rights Reserved.