

# The Democrats have done better than expected

Not a Republican wave—more a weak little ripple

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Republicans will probably win the House and the Senate remains too close to call. That is the state of play as results from the midterms dribble in. Relative to what most prognosticators expected, what some of the polls suggested and what economic fundamentals pointed to, this is a very good result for Democrats. Perhaps more importantly given his presidential ambitions, it is an awful result for Donald Trump.

The president's party almost always does badly in midterm elections. In 36 of the 39 election cycles since the civil war the party that controls the White House has lost seats. The only recent exceptions were following Bill Clinton's impeachment, when many voters thought Republicans had overreached, and following 9/11. With inflation above 8%, [Joe Biden's approval ratings](#) as low as Mr Trump's were at this point in his presidency and the Senate balanced 50:50, Republicans really ought to have taken both chambers.

In the House, Republicans look on course to win a majority. That would return America to divided government, which has been the norm since the 1960s. Expect showdowns over government shutdowns, not much legislating and feckless investigations into Hunter Biden's business dealings. Yet the fact that Democrats held on in districts such as Virginia's 7th, where the incumbent congresswoman is an impressive former CIA agent, Abigail Spanberger, suggests that the Republican majority will be narrow (a result that is in line with *The Economist's* election forecast). This result points to a Republican ripple rather than a wave.

In the Senate, there is still a path to a Republican majority. Republicans could take both Nevada and Arizona, or win one and force a run-off in [Georgia](#), dragging the election out until December. But it is a narrow one with obstacles in the way. If the Democrats retain even their current slim control of the Senate (the balance of power is 50:50, with the vice-president casting the decisive vote) the Biden administration will find it much easier to get its nominated judges and other senior officials confirmed.

What explains this apparent misfire by Republicans? They ought to have done so much better: voters said that the economy was their top concern, and Republicans hit Democrats constantly with attacks on crime and immigration, two issues on which Democrats seem perennially muddled. One answer is that Mr Trump's interventions saddled his party with some awful candidates. In [Pennsylvania](#) Dr Mehmet Oz, a Trumpian pick whose main qualification for the office was that the former president liked his TV ratings, has lost to [John Fetterman](#) (see picture), a candidate who suffered a stroke earlier in the year and, as a result, struggled to debate with his opponent or talk much to the press. Mr Trump picked Herschel Walker in Georgia, a former star football player whose estrangement from reality may well turn out to have been more important than his celebrity. Elected Republicans will look at the result and conclude that Mr Trump's loyalists underperformed. In contrast, [Ron DeSantis](#)—the governor of Florida and a potential rival to Mr Trump for the Republican presidential nomination—won by 19 points, a similar margin to Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in 1984.

Yet a focus on the candidates perhaps lets Mr Trump himself off too lightly. Mr Trump remains the de facto [head of the Republican Party](#) and has tried to make avenging his defeat in 2020 its organising idea. Many voters, even those who do not like Mr Biden much, would rather move on. For a long time elected Republicans have behaved as if Mr Trump had some magic electoral power. His record shows a narrow win in 2016 after two terms of Barack Obama—an election, therefore, that a generic Republican candidate would have been expected to win. In 2018 Republicans did poorly in the midterms, losing 41 seats in the House. Then in 2020 Mr Trump lost to a rather elderly and verbose candidate never noted for his skill at campaigning. Mr Trump's special power is over the berserker faction of the Republican Party, which has sway in primaries. But to the rest of the electorate he is becoming the thing he most derides: a loser.■