

Opinion **Global Insight**

US Democrats are facing a world of electoral pain

Joe Biden's party should brace itself for a stinging defeat in November

EDWARD LUCE



Recent trends threaten to turn probable defeat for the Democrats in November into a wipeout © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

A collective groan could be heard on Monday when Philadelphia said it was reinstating the city's mask mandate. It was a bad omen for Democrats. Leave aside whether it is necessary — most experts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, think it is not — liberals will pay a price for any restrictions, even essential ones. Voters were already furious about the school closures in the first year or more of the pandemic that in hindsight look like overkill. A return to enforced masking is just the kind of move that will boomerang.

The question is whether Democrats can reverse their waning fortunes. The party was already facing probable defeat in this November's midterm elections. Recent trends threaten to turn that into a wipeout. Pollsters pay close attention to the enthusiasm gap — the difference in motivation between Republican and Democratic voters. That was already at 11 percentage points in November last year when Democrats lost the governor's race in Virginia. Since then it has widened to a yawning 17 per cent.

Most of the factors that fed into the Democratic defeat in liberal-leaning Virginia have deteriorated since then. These include inflation, which hit 8.5 per cent last month, its highest rate since December 1981; friction over lingering pandemic restrictions, which most Americans believe should be over; illegal immigration, which looks set to rise next month after President Joe Biden scraps the Title 42 rule that allowed border guards to turn people away on pandemic grounds; and anti-incumbency. Biden's

approval rating has continued to fall. At 41 per cent, it is only a point or two higher than Donald Trump before the 2018 midterm landslide against Republicans.

A lot of voter unrest boils down to inflation. The US jobs market is booming: monthly job creation has been close to record highs since Biden took office. At 5.6 per cent over the past year, wage gains have also been very high. But inflation is considerably higher, which means inflation-adjusted wages have fallen by almost 3 per cent in the same period.

Moreover, what little Biden can do to tackle inflation, rising crime and other voter concerns risks alienating the Democratic left, and particularly the young whom they need to turn out in November. Biden's approval rating among [under-30s](#) is in the low thirties, which is unusually bad — the worst of any demographic.

An example of why this is happening was Biden's decision last month to release 1m barrels of oil a day from the US strategic reserve to dampen petrol prices. The new supply is having a modest effect. But it undercuts Biden's drive towards a post-carbon economy, which is very popular with the young. After having declared the fight against global warming as one of his top priorities, Biden is now pushing energy companies to use their fracking and drilling permits on federal land. This is quite a U-turn. Blaming it on Russian president Vladimir Putin — whose Ukraine invasion triggered sanctions that are fuelling all kinds of commodity inflation — is unlikely to sway voters. Inflation rose in each of the 12 months before Russia's invasion.

Nor is Biden getting credit for his handling of the [Ukraine crisis](#). Seven in 10 voters expressed low confidence in Biden's ability to manage the war, according to an [NBC poll](#). A roughly equal number said they were worried US troops would be put in harm's way even though Biden has made it clear Nato will not directly intervene.

What can Biden do to avert the oncoming train wreck? One Democratic hope is that Republicans will screw things up, which is always a live possibility. If the US Supreme Court this summer overturns Roe vs Wade, the 1973 ruling that legalised abortion, it could galvanise women voters back into the Democratic fold. An escalation of the Ukraine conflict could also cause voters to rally round the president. The only recent time a president's party kept control in his first midterm election was George W Bush in 2002 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Barring a big change in the political weather, however, Biden should probably brace for a hostile Washington in the second half of his presidency. Two years after that, America is likely to be treated to a rerun of the 2020 presidential election. Trump is

saying he wants to run again in 2024. Past form suggests he should be taken literally.

edward.luce@ft.com

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
