

Opinion **Instant Insight**

Joe Biden defies low expectations as red 'tsunami' collapses

President fares better than Clinton and Obama in midterms while Trump's candidates take a battering

EDWARD LUCE



Joe Biden's strong showing will come as a relief to US allies backing Ukraine's fight against Russia © Dominick Sokotoff/DPA

Edward Luce 7 HOURS AGO

Tuesday night could have been so much worse for Joe Biden. Forecasters said the US midterm elections would deliver a red wave, a “tsunami” even. In the event, it was an average ripple by the standards of past midterms.

At the time of writing, the Democrats had a better-than-even chance of holding on to the Senate and a somewhat slimmer one of retaining the House of Representatives. Whatever the final tally, which could take days to verify, Biden has avoided the shellacking that befell both Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, his Democratic predecessors. In today’s bleakly polarised America, that qualifies as a win.

There will be plenty of time to pore over what was yet another mediocre performance by the US polling industry. It was also a reputational blow to prominent aggregators, such as Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight. Their models were distorted by a flood of partisan polls from the right.

The age of the “geek gods” seems to be fading. Whatever the final division of spoils in Congress, and for hundreds of state-wide positions across America, three conclusions can be drawn.

The first is that Donald Trump is weaker than polls would suggest. Shortly before polling stations closed he said: “Well, I think if they [Republicans] win, I should get all the credit. If they lose, I should not be blamed at all.” In reality the more extreme

candidates that Trump endorsed fared worse than the average Republican. That includes Doug Mastriano, his 2020 election-denying favourite for Pennsylvania's governor, Daniel Cox for Maryland governor and Don Bolduc for a New Hampshire Senate seat.

Among the Trump-endorsed candidates who won, including JD Vance for an Ohio Senate seat, most distanced themselves from Trump's more extreme stances after they won their party's nomination. The same applies to Blake Masters, who looked set to lose his race for an Arizona Senate seat.

Most ominous for Trump, however, was the thumping re-election of Ron DeSantis as governor of Florida. DeSantis, whom Trump has nicknamed "DeSanctimonious", is Trump's most plausible rival for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination. Though he is untested outside of Florida, DeSantis has become a champion of conservative "anti-woke" politics through his attacks on liberal teachers' unions and his disdain for federal Covid-19 regulations.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of DeSantis's conservative potency is the trademark menace with which Trump now talks about him: "I would tell you things about him [DeSantis] that won't be very flattering," Trump said on Monday. "I know more about him than anybody — other than, perhaps, his wife."

Biden can anticipate some collateral benefit from the political fratricide that looks likely to be unleashed between the author of the Maga movement and his increasingly impatient heir.

The second conclusion is that Biden keeps beating low expectations. The recent consensus is that he is waning as president and fading as a campaigner. The former is hard to substantiate, since his legislative record in two years is considerably better than Clinton's after eight and arguably Obama's as well.

Biden's performance on the hustings — and the relative scarcity with which he has hit the campaign trail since September — has been fumbling. But that has been true for most of Biden's political career. America's pundit class often overrates the salience of fine oratory. It is nevertheless remarkable that his Gallup approval rating of just over 40 per cent did not cause greater damage to his party's turnout.

None of this lessens the fact that even a slender Republican House majority, which is still the most probable outcome, will be massively disruptive to Biden's presidency — Tuesday night's third conclusion.

Kevin McCarthy, the likely next Speaker of the House, has made it clear that he plans to bury the White House in subpoenas. He will launch House investigations into alleged cover-ups of the “lab leak” theory of Covid’s origins in Wuhan, into Biden’s chaotic US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, into his son [Hunter Biden’s alleged monetisation](#) of the family name and into the Department of Justice’s role in investigating Trump.

McCarthy will also come under acute pressure from the right to impeach Biden as a tit-for-tat move against the House Democrats’ two impeachments of Trump. It is unclear for what crimes or misdemeanours Biden would be charged.

Most of this will be mere theatre. If Democrats retain control of the Senate, such measures will ultimately get nowhere. If they lose control, Biden can veto any legislation that has less than a two-thirds majority, which is inconceivable in today’s Washington.

On foreign policy, Biden will retain free rein. For America’s allies, particularly in the coalition backing Ukraine’s fight against Russia, that will be some consolation. But that will only hold for the next two years. After that — as ever in today’s America — all bets will be off.

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