

Opinion **US midterm elections**

This will be the mother of all American midterm elections

The enduring belief that Donald Trump was robbed in 2020 has put the US political system itself on the ballot

EDWARD LUCE



For most Americans, petrol prices have become a higher priority than a healthy democracy, with Donald Trump's election denial supported by many Republican candidates © FT montage: Getty Images/Reuters

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Midterm defeats can upend US presidencies. Think of Newt Gingrich's new model Republicans in 1994, Nancy Pelosi's Democratic wave in 2006, or the Tea Party sweep of 2010. These sounded the death knell for the domestic agendas of Bill Clinton, George W Bush and Barack Obama respectively. If Democrats lose next week, a similar fate would befall Joe Biden. Yet the 2022 race belongs in a class of its own. Roughly half the Republicans running for federal or statewide office believe the presidency was stolen from Donald Trump in 2020. That means America's system itself is on the ballot next Tuesday.

The main thing Democrats have going for them is a dread of what their defeat would portend for the US republic. By most historic measures, Biden's party should be heading for a drubbing. Inflation is at a 40-year high. The murder rate is on the rise. And the president's approval rating is stuck far below the 50 per cent that has previously been needed for his party to retain control of Congress. Most polls suggest Republicans will capture both chambers. But US pollsters are suffering from a crisis of self-confidence. Their models may be overcompensating for having missed the strength of Republican turnout in the past three cycles.

A good night for Republicans would have two consequences. The more trivial one would be a return to toxic gridlock in Washington. Republicans would pretend to impeach Biden and Democrats would pretend to care. It is largely discounted in the

impoverished and Democrats from pretend to care as largely unaccounted for in the price. Washington's political theatre is getting progressively nastier. But the real-world impact is limited. Such kabuki may even benefit Biden if he stands again in 2024. The more of a madhouse Congress chooses to be, the more Biden could make a virtue of his advancing maturity. The only real damage Republicans could wreak is if they follow through on their threat not to raise the US debt ceiling. That could trigger a market crash. Most of the rest is ghoulish posturing.

What happens in the states, on the other hand, could alter the course of American history. This specifically means the gubernatorial and legislature races in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Wisconsin and Michigan. Each of these swing states has a Republican gubernatorial candidate who claims Biden stole the presidency. In 2020, three out of four of these states had Democratic governors. The other, Arizona, had a Republican, Doug Ducey, who is now treated as a traitor by Trump's *Maga* base. Ducey refused to contest Biden's victory two years ago. Any of these Republicans who win next week have signed up to doing so in 2024.

The more sophisticated backers of Trump's stolen election myth subscribe to the "independent state legislature theory", which says the US constitution gives a state's assembly the power to decide the outcome of federal elections, including the presidency. The doctrine has no basis in constitutional law. But that has not stopped revisionists from succeeding in the past. America's second amendment, for example, protects the existence of "well-regulated militias", not unregulated private arsenals. Yet the latter still morphed into conservative judicial consensus. Interpretation of US election law could be heading in a similar direction.

Anxiety about the spectre of a US civil war has been growing since the storming of Capitol Hill on January 6 2021. Last Friday's attempted attack on Nancy Pelosi — in which a hammer-wielding would-be kidnapper broke into her San Francisco home and hospitalised her 82-year-old husband — has stoked such fears. The fact that Trump and many senior Republicans failed to condemn the attack is as unsurprising as it is disturbing. But the danger to US liberal democracy is more top down than bottom up. It comes from state capitols and the judicial bench, not the mushrooming of citizen armies. The latter remains highly improbable. The former is on next week's ballot.

So why do so many voters seem not to care? The brutal reality is that most voters see a healthy democracy as nice to have rather than decisive. Protecting the US republic from itself is primarily an elite concern. Petrol prices and physical security rank far higher on voter priorities. Millions on the right, however, have swallowed the canard that US elections are riddled with mass fraud. This is the type of belief that takes root

that US elections are riddled with mass fraud. This is the type of belief that takes root among those who go down the rabbit hole of conspiracy internet. Their candidates claim to stand for “election integrity”, which is code for “if we lose we were cheated”.

Should 2024 turn into another contested election, popular sentiment would count for little. The US Supreme Court would decide.

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