

The Most Consequential Midterms in History

American voters go to the polls every two years to elect an array of various officials: The presidential election is held every four years, members of the House of Representatives are up for re-election every other year and Senators serve six-year terms. Midterm elections historically generate lower voter turnout than presidential elections. Only about 40% of those eligible to vote go to the polls in midterm elections, compared to turnouts of about 50%-60% for presidential elections over the past 60 years. The midterms are seen by some as less important as they are more local than the national presidential election. But the 2022 midterm elections might wind up being the most consequential in American history.

As midterms are the first elections held in a president's term and at the halftime mark, they are generally seen as a referendum on the sitting president and his party. Dissatisfied voters are typically more motivated to vote, often voting against one candidate rather than for another. This helps explain why the president's party regularly suffers significant losses in the midterms. President George W. Bush's Republicans took a "thumping" in 2006, Obama's Democrats got a "shellacking" in 2010 and even President Trump's Republicans were not immune to a blue wave in 2018.

The loss of a party's majority in the legislative branch, which Democrats currently hold, is often the result of voters' perceptions about how things are going – whether this be directly the result of an administration's policies or not. And the best example of this today is voters' concerns about the economy. If history is any indication, voters will punish the president and his party for what they see as their responsibility for current record high inflation levels.

An example: In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson had an approval rating of 70%, buoyed by a number of successful legislative programs, including welfare and immigration reform and Medicare. In the run-up to the 1966 midterm elections, Johnson's Democrats held a strong majority in Congress and the Republican party was all but dead.

So how did Republicans turn the tables to stage one of the most stunning political comebacks in political history? Milk. The price of milk had skyrocketed, and people were protesting in the streets. Seizing the moment, Republican candidates brought grocery carts to campaign events and blamed Johnson's welfare reforms for the rising food prices and growing inflation. This tactic not only worked, it resulted in one of the biggest losses ever seen in a midterm election. And the "milk playbook" is still being used today.

The economy has always been one of voters' key concerns. People typically "vote their pocketbooks." Much to the dismay of the White House, price increases remained rapid in August on many goods and services despite the fall in gas prices, defying expectations of an inflation slowdown. According to the Consumer Price Index, in August prices were up 8.3% from the previous year. The cost of rent, restaurants and medical care are soaring. Although the Fed has been raising interest rates since March in an attempt to cool things off and tamp down on inflation, it has so far done little to reverse the trend.

And voters have noticed. A recent New York Times/Siena poll found that 49% of respondents said that concerns about "economic issues such as jobs, taxes or the cost of living"

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would have the greatest influence on how they will vote in the midterms. More than half of those polled said they found Republicans stronger on the economy versus 38% who said they agreed with Democrats.

Enter the milk playbook. Republican candidates are eschewing issues that have taken center stage in the past such as immigration and culture wars and instead focusing their campaign messaging on inflation. Nancy Mace, a Republican House candidate from South Carolina announced in a television advertisement that she has “had it with crazy inflation” and then proceeded to tally up the cost, item by item, of a typical breakfast.

Although average actual real incomes have gone up due in part to temporary tax cuts and pandemic relief supplements, many Americans are feeling the effects of higher prices on household goods and a message like Mace’s really resonates.

It is no surprise then that Democrats have gone on the defensive, directing voters’ attention toward legislative and administrative actions to curb inflation such as the federal gas tax, releasing oil from the strategic petroleum reserve, pushing companies to refrain from price gouging and giving Medicare the authority to negotiate drug prices.

Democrats are also focusing heavily on other issues that they believe will motivate youth and women voters in particular to turn out, including the June Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision guaranteeing the right to abortion. Biden’s plan to forgive a portion of student debt and the recent landmark climate legislation are also strong selling points.

But just as the milk playbook is a tried and true strategy to rile up voters, there is a new playbook that is being tested for first time in the 2022 midterm election with alarming frequency that has potential consequences far beyond the ballot box. We could call it the “electoral integrity playbook.”

These elections will be the first to take place since the 2020 presidential election. After claiming victory on election night, President Trump continued, as he had done throughout the campaign period, to lambast the integrity of the electoral process, claiming that if he lost, it would be due to voter fraud. This claim, also referred to as “the big lie,” and his unsubstantiated challenges to the voting process in numerous large cities in swing states have sown the seeds of doubt so deeply that a recent survey found that 70% of Republican voters do not believe that Biden is the legitimately elected president.

This doubt in the electoral process fed by Trump and his supporters has led to a number of voter suppression laws passed in multiple states as well as a strong increase in partisan poll workers who have been encouraged to look for any signs of voter fraud. While observation is an important way to ensure transparency, party affiliations of observers threaten their neutrality, potentially making their involvement more of a hindrance than an assurance of a smooth democratic process.

Candidates have also indicated that they may not be willing to accept the outcome of an election due to pre-emptive claims of voter fraud, blighting unwritten rules and accepted norms that are essential to a smooth transition of power and a functioning government. Should partisan observers block the process with overblown or bogus claims of irregularities and candidates refuse to concede, the system will unravel.

The US, once seen as an example of a strong and vibrant democracy, may become a playbook for how easy it is to destroy one. And if the seeds of doubt take root and voters lose faith in the electoral process, we will have much bigger problems than the rising cost of milk.