

Defeating MAGA in the Midterms

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Michael Podhorzer

Over the last month or so, we've heard the chorus forecasting deep losses for Democrats in the midterms, and in the last few weeks, a hardening of the conventional wisdom that Biden's first-year failures are responsible for those dismal prospects. All the conventional signals are pointing in the wrong direction: Biden's approval is underwater by 11 points, the worst recorded other than Trump; Democrats are down by two points in the generic ballot; vulnerable Democrats are retiring; and Gallup is showing Republican Party ID surpassing that of Democrats nationally.

Thus, if 2022 is an ordinary midterm, Democrats would likely lose at least twenty seats and their House majority as well as their Senate majority. Democrats would also likely lose executive control in at least Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. But there is a realistic path to prevailing against those odds. A clear and growing majority of Americans reject MAGA – Clinton by 3 million in 2016, and House Democrats and Biden by seven to eight million in 2018 and 2020. They will do so again in 2022 if it's clear what's at stake. As the analysis to follow makes clear, the election dynamics of the 2018 midterms were unprecedented in American History, creating a new midterm electorate available again in 2022 if the issues remain the same.

While by themselves, Democrats cannot “make” MAGA/Trump an issue, in the coming months we can expect to hear much more from and about MAGA/Trump. First, there are the efforts to hold those responsible for their attempted coup coming to fruition (January 6th Committee and the Georgia Attorney General's grand jury investigation into Trump's call to Raffensperger, [investigations into fraudulent electors](#) in eight states and more) as well as multiple investigations into Trump's business dealings.

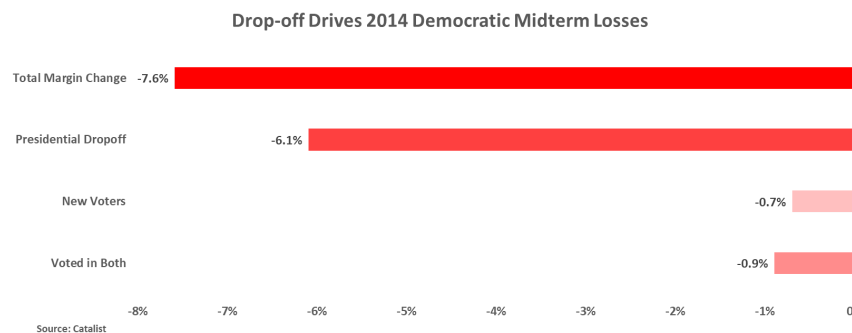
Second, there will be Trump's increasingly visible campaigning for Republicans pledging allegiance to his Big Lie, even to the point that at a Texas rally Saturday he said, “if elected to a new term as president, he would consider pardoning those prosecuted for [attacking the United States Capitol on Jan. 6 of last year](#). He also called on his supporters to mount large protests in Atlanta and New York if prosecutors ... take action against him ([NYT](#)).” And, as the New York Times just reported, “[Brazenly partisan candidates who insist that Donald Trump won the 2020 election are transforming races for the once-obscure office of secretary of state.](#)”

Third, we can expect a raft of unpopular decisions from the Supreme Court, likely in June. Central will be the decision on the *Dobbs* case (Roe). While many see abortion as an issue that motivates both sides, in the context of the midterms, three things are true: (1) even if abortion is equally motivating in a neutral environment, since Republicans are much more energized than Democrats are already, there are many more Democrats to be mobilized by overturning *Roe*; (2) polling always understates the extent and intensity of backlash to threats to things that people take for granted – we saw that in the 1990's when

Gingrich proposed Medicare cuts and in the early 2000's when Bush proposed privatizing social security – when humans answer surveys they are incapable of anticipating the loss aversion that believing something will actually be taken away triggers; and (3) up and down the ballot, the question will be called for Republicans in swing areas.

Midterm Dynamics

Midterm elections are driven very much by differences in partisan turnout. This can be illustrated by understanding the 2014 midterms. Using the voter file, along with partisan modeling, we can understand what happened.



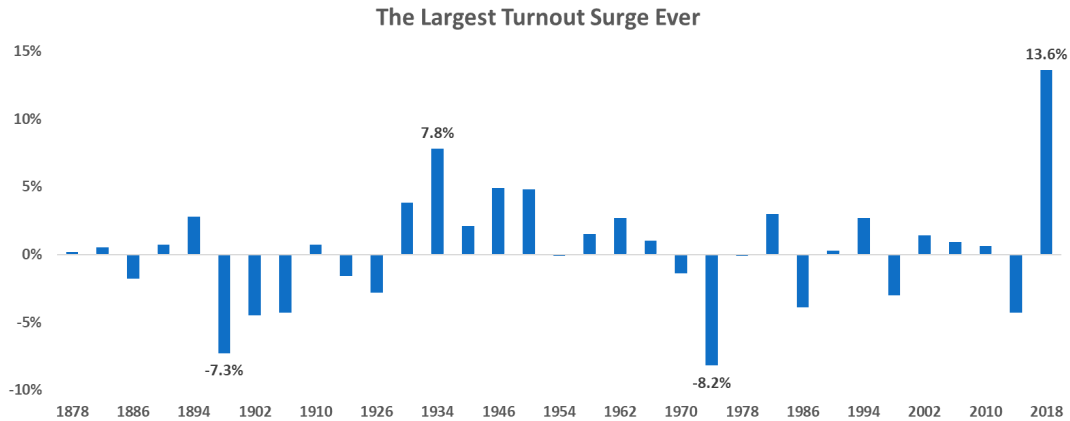
In 2012, House Democrats won nationally by 2.1 points. They lost the national vote two years later by 5.4 points, a swing of 7.6 points. As the chart shows, 6.1 points was the result of far more Obama than Romney voters not voting in 2014. Only 0.9 points of the drop was because of 2012 Democrats voting for Republicans in 2014 – we are in an era where very few voters switch.

This is the dynamic every midterm, and why, since the House expanded to 435 members in 1914, only three presidents have gained seats. Almost by definition, the party winning the presidential race benefits from greater enthusiasm, meaning that they were better able to turn out less regular supporters. Having won the presidential race, those voters relax – and paradoxically, see the incumbents' expressions of confidence and success as reasons their votes are less necessary. On the other hand, those who voted for the losing side in the presidential are aggrieved and powerfully motivated to stave off what they see as existential danger. Republicans are now motivated the way Democrats were after Trump won.

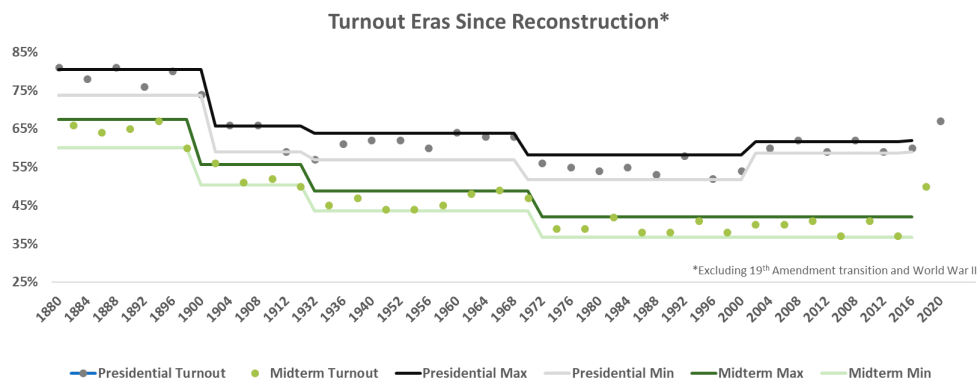
The 2018 Midterm Provides Democrats an Unprecedented Opportunity in 2022

Midterm turnout rates have been one of the most dependable constants in electoral politics. Before the 2018 midterm, turnout had increased by more than five points only once in the previous 140 years.¹ And in the eleven midterms since the voting age was lowered to 18, turnout was no lower than 37 percent and no higher than 42 percent, a mere 5-point range, and never increased by more than 3 points from one midterm to the next. And then this happened:

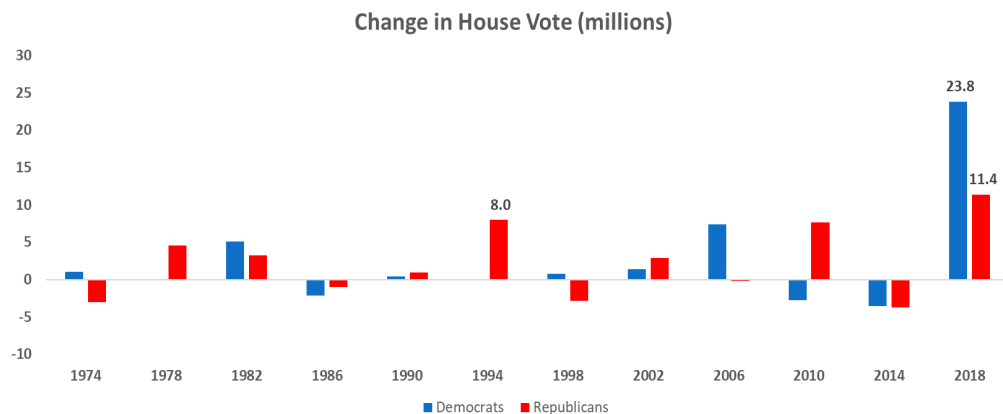
¹ This excludes the elections following the 19th Amendment when the denominator jumped and during World War II when the massive deployment of troops dropped turnout.



Given the turnout rates since the Civil War, the binomial probability of a 13-point increase is 1 in 500. In other words, voting has changed. Now, to provide more context, turnout for both midterms and presidential elections has stayed within very narrow bands for extended periods of time. In fact, unless you got your start in politics before 1972, you have lived in only one midterm turnout era.



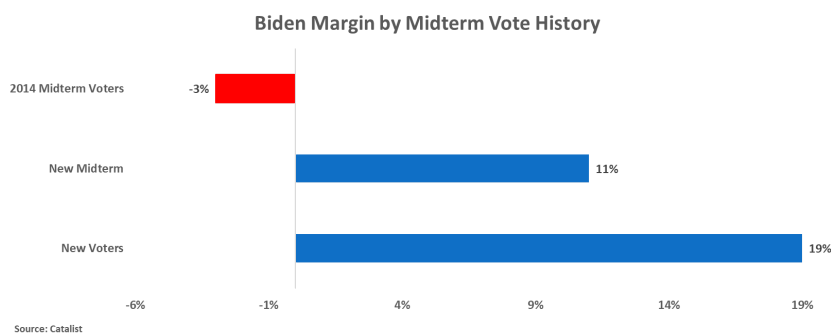
The following graph shows how that unprecedented increase in turnout benefited Democrats, who received 23.8 million more votes in 2018 than they did in 2014, nearly three times the largest increase in a party's midterm vote before that, achieved by Republicans in the realigning election of 1994.



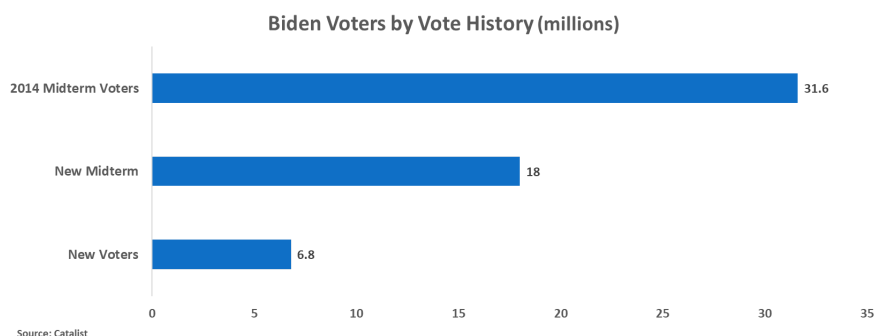
Because turnout rates were so stable it seemed obvious that when party fortunes changed, it was because the voters who had voted in the last election changed their minds. Only when voter files became available could we properly understand the role turnout plays in midterms.

In 2022, we know that nearly everyone who votes will have voted in 2020,² and, of course, there are 7.1 million more of the former than the latter. So, the best way to understand the Democrats' challenge is simply as ensuring that as many of the 81 million who voted for Biden return, and that as few of them as possible defect.

Before 2018, the pool of voters who voted in midterms was Republican leaning. And, among those who voted in both 2020 and the 2014 midterm, Trump had a 3 point margin. What makes the 2018 midterms extraordinary is that two new groups of voters showed up – those who had been voting in presidential elections but not midterms, and those who had not been voting at all. Both groups heavily favored the Democrats – the former group by 11 points, the latter by 19 points.



Those two groups of new Democratic midterm voters – those who previously only voted in presidential races and those who had not been voting – amounted to 25 million people, nearly as many as regular midterm voting Democrats.



To sum up, in 2018, 25 million Biden voters showed up who had not voted in midterms previously, a 13-point advantage over Trump voters who voted in the 2018 midterms. Furthermore, it's crucial to understand that this surge in Democratic support was hardly limited to "base" areas – it was spread across all geographies.

² Those who become eligible to vote in the previous two years rarely amount to more than a few percentage points, and even if they split their vote 60-40, their impact is a fraction of a point on the overall margin. According to Catalist, in New Jersey only 4 percent and in Virginia 5 percent had not voted in 2020.

The Anti-Trump/MAGA Majority

As the 2016, 2018 and 2020 elections demonstrated, a majority of Americans reject Trump/MAGA. However, we can be less confident that there is a consistent majority supporting Democrats. When voters believe that the election is “about” Trump, turnout soars – but more so among his opponents than among his supporters.

Democrats cannot recreate the anti-Trump/MAGA energy that powered victories in 2018 and 2020 by themselves – when they try, it is heard as the usual partisan name calling. But, several important factors over the next several months have the potential to impact voter enthusiasm:

- **Accountability.** In March, the January 6th Committee will begin high-profile hearings. In May, a [Georgia grand jury](#) will be addressing [Trump's call to Raffensperger to “find” 11,000 votes](#). SDNY and the New York Attorney General are coming to the end of investigations that will result in criminal charges. While Trump's loyal base and the majority of the GOP remains opposed to these endeavors, [swing voters strongly favor January 6th investigations](#), and the majority of all voters, [including 22% of Republicans](#), feel that accountability for January 6th attacks is important.
- **Republican Primaries.** Nearly every [important race in 2022](#) will be protecting a Democratic incumbent, which means that Republicans will have very intense primaries. Republican primary debates already held have been a spectacle of each contender trying to be [more Trumpy](#) than the others. Even in some races with a Republican incumbent, candidates who have found themselves on the former president's bad side for one reason or another are now facing [Trump-sanctioned Republican challengers](#). This will mean that in the general election, nearly every Republican challenger will either have to affirm the pledges they made to the most unpopular aspects of MAGA/Trump in the primaries, or face Trump's [wrath](#).
- **Trump on the Campaign Trail.** Trump has already begun to [endorse candidates](#), and will likely continue to do so in a highly visible manner as Republican primary contests heat up. By endorsing candidates who are running against incumbent Republicans, Trump is not just breaking party norms, but also defying [other party leaders](#) like Mike Pence and Mitch McConnell, who have expressed that they will [support GOP incumbents](#). A [significant number](#) of Trump's endorsements are in states that were critical to deciding the 2020 election. Earlier this month he held a [rally in Arizona](#), where speakers included Paul Gosar, who was recently censured by the House for sharing a [video depicting violence](#) against Representative Ocasio-Cortez and President Biden.
- **Big Lie Candidates.** This past year we have already seen state officials [erode democracy and voting rights](#) in the name of the Big Lie, and we should expect these attacks to be amplified in 2022. According to the [Washington Post](#), “At least 163 Republicans who have embraced Trump's false claims are running for statewide positions that would give them authority over the administration of elections.” Big Lie candidates are running in every important secretary of state races, and hundreds of other offices further down-ballot that are related to election administration. Often overlooked in elections, these election administration positions are where the stakes are perhaps the highest in 2022, with a disturbing number of [Trump loyalists](#) intent on occupying the office for the explicit purpose of avenging what they claim is a stolen election, often promising 2020 “audits” once elected.

Finally, nearly everyone is over-interpreting Virginia – Youngkin was in the unique position of not having a primary at all, and did not have to contend with the Trump surround sound that is already coming back. It is worth noticing here, since the media that praised Youngkin for his ability to distance himself from Trump hasn't been, what Youngkin has done already, including:

- Ending mask mandates in public schools
- Banning the teaching of critical race theory and (just to make sure) creating a hotline for parents to report their children being taught CRT
- Opening the door to public funding for for-profit colleges and universities
- Mass firings in the civil rights division.