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Matt Chase

‘The script’s not written yet’

A “red wave” is building this year — or [so we’re told](#).

Republicans are confident that the country’s sour mood will sweep them back into power in Congress, mainly because Americans are fed up with the coronavirus and inflation. They think they’ll pick up 30 or so House seats and four or five seats in the Senate.

“It’s crystal clear,” said Corry Bliss, a partner at FP1 Strategies, a consulting firm that helps Republicans. He added: “The red wave is coming. Period. End of discussion.”

But what if that’s wrong? We asked about two dozen strategists in both parties what would need to happen for Democrats to hold the House and Senate in

November. And while we're not making any predictions, it's possible that Democrats could retain control of Congress. Difficult, but possible.

Democrats have 222 seats in the House, and 50 seats in the Senate. That means Republicans need to pick up just six House seats and one Senate seat to take full control of Congress.

Here's what needs to happen for Democrats to pull off an upset in 2022:

Biden voters show up

Pundits often make it sound like voters are judiciously studying each party's arguments and forming conclusions. But that's not really the way American politics works. Modern elections are much more about mobilization (getting your supporters to the polls) than persuasion (convincing the other side's supporters to switch), though both matter.

Joe Biden beat Donald Trump by more than 7 million votes in 2020. So for Democrats, winning in 2022 means figuring out how to get as many of those people as possible to vote, even though Trump won't be on the ballot this time.

"Their primary motivation for voting in the last election was defeating Trump," said Guy Cecil, chairman of Priorities USA, which on Monday announced [a \\$30 million program of digital ads](#) aimed at reaching what he calls "[new Biden voters](#)" in seven swing states.

The last two elections — the 2018 midterms and the 2020 presidential vote — saw the biggest turnout in history. That means there's an unusual amount of uncertainty among insiders about which voters will show up in 2022.

Regaining a sense of normalcy

Every person we spoke with agreed: This is the biggest unknown.

While voters are upset about high prices today, inflation and the coronavirus could be down to manageable levels by the summer. Several strategists say it is also essential, politically speaking, that schools are fully open in September. If all of that happens, Democrats could enter the midterms as the party that defeated Covid and brought the economy roaring back to life, or at least fight Republicans to a draw on both issues.

But the White House is well aware that it's not really in control — the virus is.

"The script's not written yet for the remainder of the year," said Representative Brad Schneider of Illinois, chair of the New Democrat Coalition, a group of House moderates.

Biden finds a winning message

For months, Democrats have fretted that the White House was too slow to recognize inflation as a political problem, and was too mired in endless congressional negotiations. That's changing.

President Biden has been speaking more frequently about the issue, at the urging of moderate Democrats. "The president is recognizing his superpower, which is empathy," said Representative Dean Phillips, a Democrat in a swing district in Minnesota.

Sean McElwee, executive director of the group Data for Progress, told us that the president should embrace what he calls "solverism" — basically, being seen on TV every day tackling the problems that voters care about.

After a fall characterized by damaging infighting, Democrats have been working to bring more harmony to their messages. With the State of the Union address coming up, President Biden has a chance to rally the country around his vision and the improving economic numbers. But with the fate of Build Back Better now in question, what will he talk about, exactly?

Redistricting being more or less even

Democrats feel good about [the maps that have been approved so far](#). For now, there are only three Democrats running in House districts that Trump won in 2020, and nine Republicans in districts that Biden won.

But a few unknowns remain. The Democratic-controlled State Legislature in New York is still weighing how aggressively to redraw the state's maps. Courts have yet to render final judgments in Alabama, North Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania. And in Florida, Republicans are divided between Gov. Ron DeSantis's maps and those proposed by the State Senate.

We do know that many of the House districts that are up for grabs in November are in the suburbs, which have shifted left in recent elections. That could help Democrats. Liberal strategists point out that Republicans won't be able to benefit from the massive margins that they run up in rural areas and they also note that the seats Republicans picked up in 2020 [were the easy ones](#).

To which Republicans counter: Look at what happened in suburban Virginia, where Glenn Youngkin pared back the party's past losses to win the governor's race.

The Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade

In that Virginia race, the Democrat, Terry McAuliffe, spent millions of dollars

portraying Youngkin as an extremist on abortion. Democrats were [convinced that the issue would help them](#) with suburban women in particular, and McAuliffe [predicted that abortion would be a “huge motivator” for voters](#). His campaign ran three different ads on the subject, which collectively aired [more than 1,000 times](#).

It didn't work.

Youngkin danced around the issue, while saying he preferred to focus on the economy, jobs and education. According to [exit polls](#) conducted by Edison Research, just 8 percent of voters said abortion mattered most to their decision, the least of five preselected topics.

But abortion could come roaring back as a voting issue if the Supreme Court issues a clear repudiation of Roe v. Wade this year. Should that happen, many Democrats say it could help their candidates in Senate races, where they can highlight Republican positions that polls suggest are [out of the mainstream](#).

Republican candidates go hard right

Democrats are watching Republican primary campaigns closely, clipping and saving remarks that the candidates are making that could prove hard to defend in a general election. The need to cater to Trump's hard-line base of voters has made the Republican brand toxic, they say. But that's where the consensus ends.

Endangered Democrats want to localize their races as much as possible, and prefer to talk about kitchen-table issues like jobs and the economy. Nationally, Democrats are still debating how to communicate their alarm about the state of American democracy, which can come across as either abstract to voters or simply more partisan noise.

For now, Democrats are planning to use Jan. 6 as just one of several data points to portray Republicans as extremists on a range of issues, including abortion and climate.

“I don't think this election is going to easily fall into the traditional pattern, and it's because of the radicalization of the Republican Party,” said Simon Rosenberg, the head of the New Democrat Network.

Trump seizes center stage

After the Virginia governor's race, Democratic strategists launched various efforts to study the lessons of that campaign. One takeaway: Talking about Trump also energizes Republicans, which makes it tricky for Democrats to make the former president a central issue in 2022.

Democrats have also found that it's not effective simply to associate a Republican candidate with Trump, as McAuliffe did in Virginia. They believe they need to indict Republican candidates directly. But there's an ongoing debate about whether Democratic candidates need to do this themselves, or have outside groups run attack ads on their behalf.

The former president has endorsed dozens of candidates who in one way or another agree with his false notion that the 2020 election was stolen. On Sunday evening, he said it outright — claiming, falsely, that then-Vice President Mike Pence “could have overturned the election” on Jan. 6, 2021.

If Democrats manage to hang on to their congressional majorities, Trump will be a major factor.

What to read tonight

- Trump had a greater role than previously known in plans to use his national security agencies to seize voting machines, [our colleagues report](#).
- Marc Short, who was chief of staff to former Vice President Mike Pence, [has testified](#) before the congressional panel investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, Luke Broadwater reports.
- Katie Rogers reports that [the White House has chosen Doug Jones](#), the former Democratic senator from Alabama, to shepherd its Supreme Court pick through the nomination process in the Senate.



Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota filed amendments to a series of old F.E.C. reports. Cooper Neill for The New York Times

Filings cleanup

As our colleague Shane Goldmacher was digging on Monday through [the glut of campaign disclosures](#) covering the last quarter of 2021, he noticed updates to some very old filings.

The filings, from as far back as 2017, were from the Keeping Republican Ideas Strong Timely & Inventive PAC. That's better known as KRISTI PAC, as in Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota, the former Republican congresswoman who created the committee.

Governor Noem filed amendments to no fewer than 16 old Federal Election Commission reports this week. The amendments appeared mostly minor. But what is more interesting is that she was making those at all. It is the kind of cleanup that politicians typically do when they are considering a future run for president, mindful that opposition researchers will be looking for any slip-ups to feed to the press.

The KRISTI PAC treasurer, Kevin Broghamer, simply [told the F.E.C.](#) that the PAC had “conducted a comprehensive review and reconciliation of all financial activity since January 1, 2017.”

A spokesman for Noem, Joe Desilets, said that Broghamer had been asked to conduct the review “to ensure the governor’s committees were wholly compliant

and amend any filings as needed. Unfortunately there isn't anything else to read into with the amended filings.”

Thanks for reading. We'll see you tomorrow.

— **Blake & Leah**

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