



REPUBLICANS CONGRESS MIDTERM ELECTIONS

The Dangers of a MAGA Wave Election

If Republicans win big in 2022, governance could become impossible.

By Jeet Heer

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Jim Marchant, election denier—and Republican candidate for secretary of state of Nevada. (*Jim Rassol / AP*)

If polls are to be trusted, Democrats are on the verge of defying history by blunting the normal loss of congressional seats during a midterm election when they hold the presidency. Bill Clinton in 1994 and Barack Obama



in 2010 both oversaw major losses for the Democrats in backlash midterms that severely curtailed their ability to pursue a legislative agenda. Earlier this year, it looked like Joe Biden was destined for the same fate, with the rocky economy and plummeting presidential approval ratings threatening to create a third red wave. But right now, thanks to the new salience of abortion, an array of inept GOP candidates, and improved economic conditions, things look better for the Democrat.

At the end of September, respected pollster Stan Greenberg, who founded Democracy Corps, argued in *The American Prospect*, “Democrats have the momentum in the 2022 midterm election, our new Democracy Corps survey shows. Democrats have pulled into a 3-point lead with registered voters and 2 points in the likely electorate. Amazingly, Democratic partisans are no longer less enthusiastic and engaged.” If Greenberg and other pollsters are reading the political mood accurately, Democrats have a good shot at keeping the Senate and losing the House only by a handful of seats.

But can the polls be trusted? In recent years, polls in both the United States and internationally have become less reliable, particularly underestimating the strength of right-wing populists. Voters who embrace conspiracy theories about a corrupt system tend to be wary of talking to pollsters, which explains why Donald Trump overperformed polls in 2016 and 2020 and Jair Bolsonaro did much better than expected (although still coming in second) in the first round of this year’s Brazilian presidential election.



Given such recurring polling failures, the inevitable question is: What if there are hidden reserves of shy Trump supporters who hang up on pollsters but are ready to speak loudly on voting day? There are enough close elections that a pattern of quite small polling errors could still mean the difference between a modest Democratic victory and a decisive rout. Even if a GOP victory falls short of the scale of the Gingrich revolution of 1994 or the Tea Party triumph of 2010, it could still be large enough to derail Biden's presidency and endanger American democracy.

Electoral waves have a way of littering the shore with all sorts of odd political beasts. The 1994 election is a case in point, with the conquering GOP caucus including a hefty faction of conspiracy theorists and anti-government fanatics well to the right of the newly minted House speaker, Newt Gingrich, himself no moderate. Notably, there was an entire crew of Congress members who aligned themselves with right-wing militias and helped to mainstream lurid fantasies of UN conspiracies and mysterious black helicopters: figures like Helen Chenoweth of Idaho, Linda Smith of Washington, Jack Metcalf of Washington, and Steve Stockman of Texas.



Beyond the militia faction, there were dozens of new representatives who were so hard-core anti-government that they rejected the normal negotiations that make governing possible. As historian Nicole Hemmer notes in her new book *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*, this right-wing faction, which she calls the True Believers, caused problems not just for President Bill Clinton but also for the nominal leader of their party in the House, Gingrich. “In early 1995, just a few weeks after Gingrich took up the speakership, a congressional aide told the *National Journal* about a faction of thirty to forty conservative representatives who already distrusted Gingrich,” Hemmer records. “The tension wracked the Republican Party throughout Gingrich’s speakership, helping to feed tactics like the government shutdown in 1995 and 1996 (which the True Believers fought to continue even as it destroyed public opinion about their party) and, ultimately Clinton’s impeachment.”

If the 1994 GOP divide was between moderate Republicans and anti-government hardliners, the 2022 divide is much more dire: between conventionally right-wing Republicans like Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger and nihilistic MAGA supporters who refuse to accept the legitimacy of elections they lose. The more conventional Republicans are already on the way out, either defeated in primaries (like Cheney) or unwilling to run again (like Kinzinger). In other words, even before the election, it’s clear that MAGA will be in charge of the GOP. This will be even truer if the GOP sweeps the midterms.



The 2022 Republican class is already shaping up to be much more extreme than either the 1994 or the 2010 wave.

Writing in *The Washington Post*, Dana Milbank notes the “exotic” nature of many of the candidates the GOP is fielding. Milbank describes them as “a motley assortment of election deniers, climate-change deniers, QAnon enthusiasts and Jan. 6 participants who propose to abolish the FBI and ban abortion with no exceptions, among other things. Some won nominations despite efforts by party leadership to stop them and continue without financial support from the National Republican Congressional Committee.”

Many of these candidates who have flourished in the MAGA era don't have either the temperament or the personal history to make judicious elected officials. Mehmet Oz, Doug Mastriano, and Herschel Walker have grabbed many headlines with their tawdry antics.

And there are plenty more of their ilk. Milbank provides a partial list of this wild menagerie: “the Texas woman accused by her estranged husband of cruelty toward his teenage daughter; the Colorado woman who backed an effort to secede from her state; the Virginia woman who speculated that rape victims wouldn't get pregnant; and the Wisconsin man who used campaign funds from his failed 2020 race to come to Washington on Jan. 6, 2021, where he apparently breached Capitol barricades.”

At a political rally on Saturday, Jim Marchant, the Republican nominee to be secretary of state in Nevada, said, “If [we] get all our Secretaries of State elected around the country like this, we take our country back.” Marchant, like more than half of Republicans running in 2022, is an



election denier. His words should be read as a threat that if the GOP controls the levers of power, it will not allow a Democratic victory, no matter what the votes say.

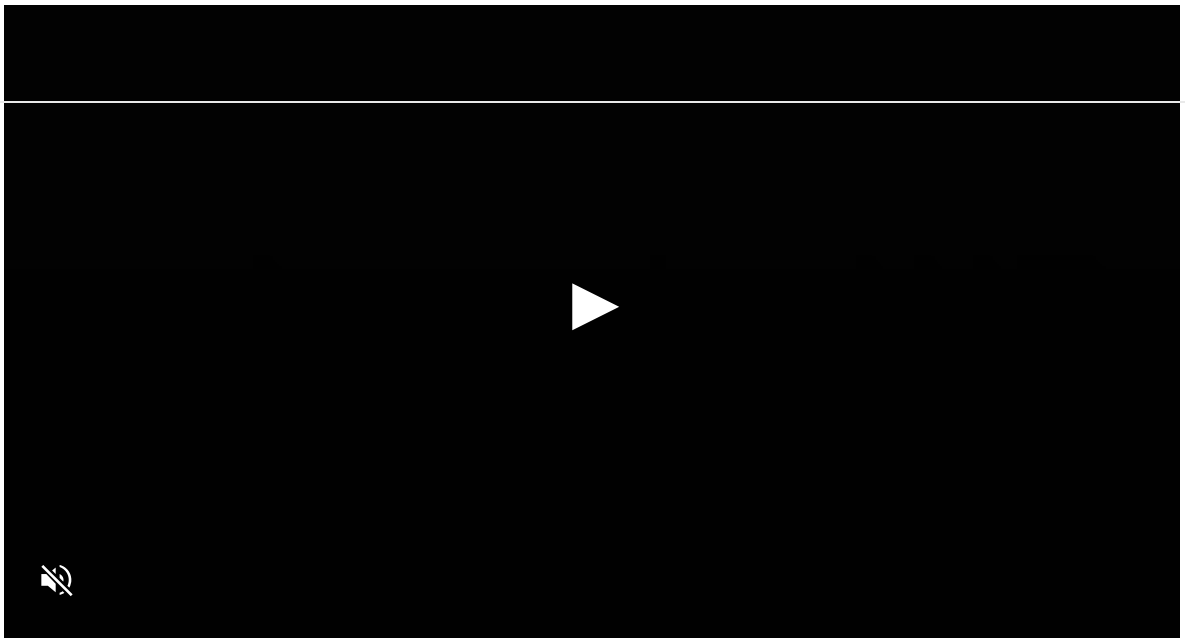
Imagine an entire Congress dominated by this faction. It's a recipe for more government shutdowns, more meaningless investigations like the Benghazi hearings, more spurious impeachments like the 1999 war against Bill Clinton. It also promises that in 2024, secretaries of state like Marchant (if he wins) will thwart the will of the people.

Joe Biden has properly spoken out against MAGA Republicans. But this line of argument needs to be bolstered by specific accounts of how the GOP, if it gains power in the midterms, will make the United States ungovernable. The most effective way to blunt the threat is to make sure voters realize the stakes.

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A marijuana activist holds a flag during a march on Independence Day on July 4, 2021, in Washington, DC. (Alex Wong / Getty Images)

Joe Biden just made marijuana reform a major 2022 Issue. Democrats should run with it, says John Nichols—and they are already, in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

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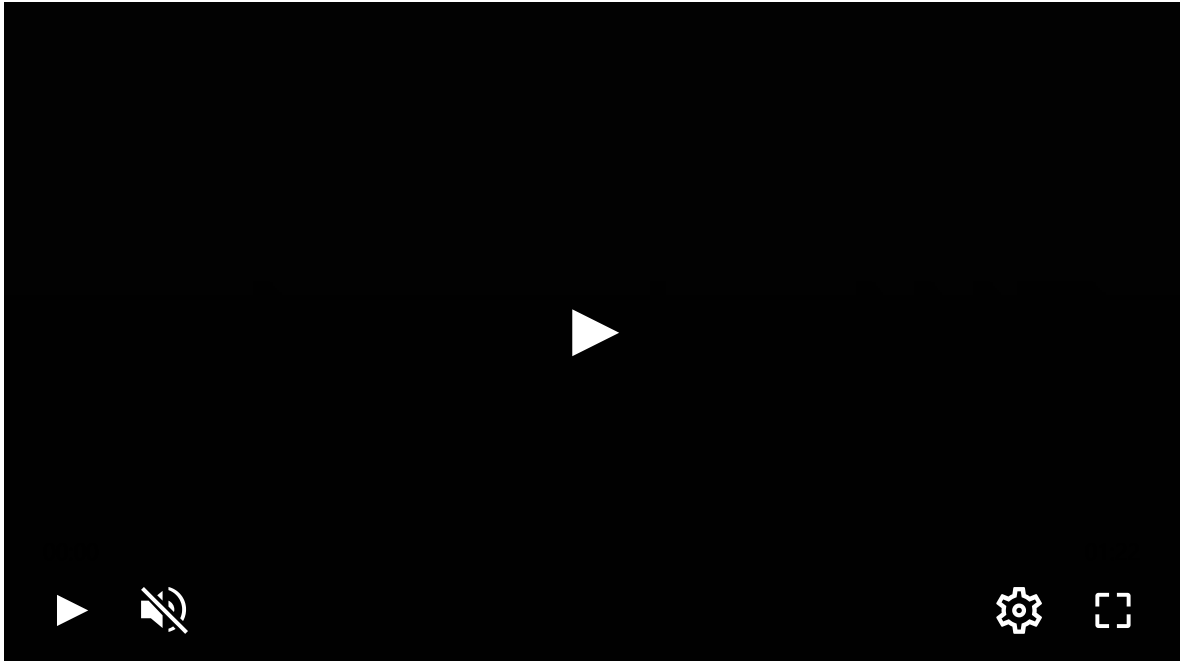
[Julia Wiener](#) · Jon Wiener is a contributing editor of *The Nation* and co-author (with Mike Davis) of *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*.

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