

Democrats Didn't Win - They Simply Held The Line



Sonali Kolhatkar

Americans invested in the idea of living in a democracy heaved a collective sigh of relief the day after the 2022 midterm elections when it became clear that the dire [predictions](#) of a Republican sweep were overblown. Democrats made greater gains than expected, winning races in both the [Senate](#) and the [House](#) that they didn't expect to.

It happened because masses of people cast ballots, defying long-standing historical trends of low midterm turnout. Voters [almost matched](#) the high turnout of the [2018 elections](#) when outrage over Donald Trump's first two years in office pushed Congress into the hands of Democrats. Stung by their opposition's showing and by Trump's reelection loss two years later, Republicans [ramped up](#) voter suppression efforts, hoping to blunt the impact of an increasingly young, diverse, and enthusiastic electorate.

Liberal-leaning voters showed up to the polls during this latest midterm election largely in response to the overturning of [abortion rights](#), but also to stave off right-wing extremism.

Although the worst did not come to pass during the midterms, simply holding the line against a descent into [fascism](#) is not enough. Republicans are wresting control of the nation's steering wheel as hard as they can and forcing it as far right as possible. Their party has divested itself from democratic norms and

thrown its weight behind Trump and his lies. They have invested in stripping people of their bodily autonomy and fashioning a dangerous world ruled by force and a riotous mob mentality. Much more is needed in the face of such hubris: Fascists need to be placed on the defensive, and a split Congress is not enough to do so.

Three major factors explain why Democrats didn't win outright control of both congressional chambers: First, Republicans have aggressively reduced the impact of Democratic votes; second, Democrats were unable or unwilling to articulate a clear message of why their agenda is better than that of the Republicans; and third, the corporate media refused to center people's well-being in their framing of election-related issues.

Republicans have [played the long game](#) on suppressing democracy, redrawing district maps for years in order to favor their candidates and appointing [conservative, partisan judges](#) into federal courts to affirm those maps. They have done so in tandem with a slew of [voter suppression laws](#) in states they control—which is the [majority](#). Analilia Mejia, co-executive director of the [Center for Popular Democracy Action](#), says in an [interview](#) that such efforts are “a strategy utilized to negate the power of a rising Black and Brown electorate.”

The GOP is also terrified (or should be) of young people voting. Recall in the 2016 presidential race when Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump was [blamed, in part, on younger voters](#) who weren't motivated to show up to the polls. Two years later, that trend was [reversed](#) in the first midterms of Trump's presidency. Now, four years after that, [young voters](#) have realized the dangers of apathy and showed up to the polls in force, casting a majority of their ballots for Democrats.

Mejia [says](#) “the policies that really motivate people” to vote are “the policies that we know will essentially save humanity and the planet and stop climate change; the policies that we know will ensure that our children, that our elders, that those most vulnerable in our communities have the resources that they need to not only survive but thrive—[these] are policies that are supported by the vast majority of people.”

This—including the overturning of [abortion rights](#) at the Supreme Court—was precisely what motivated so many young people and people of color to vote in the 2022 midterms. Varshini Prakash, executive director and co-founder of the

Sunrise Movement, a youth climate justice organization, [told Common Dreams](#), “For us, it’s never been just about defeating Donald Trump... We turn out to fight for the issues our generation faces every day, like the impending climate crisis, protecting our reproductive freedoms, and ending gun violence in our schools.”

And yet, climate justice, economic justice, and racial justice were largely missing from the story that Democrats told in order to motivate people to go to the polls.

Rather than tout how his administration and his party would ensure a just transition to renewable fuels, President Joe Biden was [fixated on gas prices](#) and how to lower them. Instead of showcasing how the [2021 American Rescue Plan](#) was a good example of federal government action on inequality, candidates running for office were on the defensive against Republicans’ and the media’s hammering of [inflation](#) as a central election issue. In contrast to [their 2020 promises](#) to tackle racist police brutality and mass incarceration, Democrats decided to pass a [bill to increase police funding](#) and stave off GOP accusations of being “soft on crime.”

Voters showed up in spite of this. But they may have shown up to elect Democrats in even higher numbers had climate, economic, and racial justice been front and center ahead of the midterms. “These are popular ideas,” [says](#) Mejia.

Not only did Democrats refuse to fully articulate these popular ideas, but the corporate media also shaped its coverage to suit the GOP’s agenda. Outlets aggressively played up the Republican Party’s line that inflation was the central issue of the election—one for which, they alleged, Democrats bore sole blame.

Take one New York Times article published on Election Day. “Inflation is almost certainly the issue pushing the economy to its current prominence,” wrote the Times’ economic reporter Jeanna Smialek in a story headlined, [“Inflation Plagues Democrats in Polling. Will It Crush Them at the Ballot Box?”](#) Just hours after it was published, such a confident claim fell apart as the Democrats were most certainly not “crushed” at the ballot box.

Mainstream U.S. corporate news media outlets could have taken a page out of their British counterpart’s book, the [Guardian](#), which publishes analyses like that of former U.S. labor secretary Robert Reich. “Corporations are using rising costs as an excuse to increase their prices even higher, resulting in record profits,” wrote Reich, offering an explanation for inflation largely missing from U.S.

outlets.

One Wall Street Journal [article](#) went as far as explaining quite convincingly that rather than being sparked by Democrats' policies, inflation was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the U.S. was in line with other nations and with historical trends. Yet the Journal couldn't resist framing the piece with the misleading headline: "Midterm Election Could Make Democrats Latest Governing Party to Pay Price for Inflation."

Most U.S. newspapers have spent the past year [banging the drum of inflation](#) and exaggerating its impact. They have [accepted the dogma](#) that higher wages, lower unemployment, and government assistance are the source of rising prices rather than corporate greed.

Mejia is aghast at the consensus that is emerging to tackle inflation through increasing interest rates and slashing benefits. She [finds it](#) "unbelievable that the way we dig ourselves... out of an economic crisis is by inflicting strategic targeted and sustained pain to those who are most vulnerable."

She says that "the only way out of here, out of this moment, is through investment in people, in civic participation, and increasing our political power and voice."

Perhaps if the Democratic Party had centered its midterm platform on such an approach, and perhaps if the corporate media had not distorted the truth, victory would not have been defined by simply holding the line against a fascist GOP; it would have been—and could have been—an outright defeat of authoritarianism and injustice. Too much is at stake, and our standards of success cannot be low.

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