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WEBINAR | After the US Midterm elections on American and global outlook | 10th November



Charles Kupchan (*Professor of International Affairs, School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations*)

Reality is never too simple to read nor to interpret, nonetheless, according to Charles Kupchan, this year's mid-term elections appeared as a relief compared to the presidential elections of 2020, where the atmosphere was out of the norm. Such relief has been driving the American political system in a more conventional and democratic direction by demonstrating how leading institutions have survived a very dangerous moment in American politics. Indeed, not only did the election run a smooth path but numbers suggest a broad, yet not entire, rejection of the hard right Trump-centred party.

Whereas socially, republican supporters are still widespread, for independent voters who vote for candidates on issues rather than for political ideology, Trump is just too over the line, and whilst Biden may not be exciting, he is a stable, decent, predictable, and safe candidate; given the current scenario, in many respects, Americans voters opted for political safety. Indeed, those voters who wanted to move away from the Biden administration because of mismanagement of economic policy, eventually didn't end up switching sides because of maladministration of social matters such as abortion. These mid-term elections have in fact seen an exponential increase of women voters standing up for their rights. Furthermore, the inevitable demographic shifts that have been unfolding have led to new generations and new levels of diversity accessing American politics with the Democratic party giving hope to those socially and politically marginalized.

Although it is a constant trend that the opposition party usually outperforms the party in power during the first mid-term, this election was poised to be a republican landslide. The latter has been further aggravated by the ongoing fight between republican leadership and republican establishment, clash which is doing nothing but enlarging the inner party division and increasing the widespread polarization.

Regardless of the current democratic tendencies, it appears clear that the Republicans will take over the house making it unlikely for the US to have bipartisan consensus on most topics. Indeed, with a red congress, several are the implications affecting Biden's playing field both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. Whilst with regards to the former Republicans are likely to place roadblocks on pretty much anything the President will put forward, the latter will certainly be limited in respect to foreign aid provision, with Biden losing its leeway. For the matter, with Republicans in control, it results more politically acceptable to question the size of assistance to Ukraine, and whilst the policy approach may not change, obstacles will amount. In contrast, pressures for diplomatic efforts will likely increase; especially with the current energy crisis, efforts are required to move actors towards the negotiation side of the table as to give room to diplomacy and mediation, yet congress will still make it challenging for the administration.

The current presidency has been giving extensive attention to pressing matters with the goal of rebuilding the social fabric, yet they have been met in large part with opposing views. Critical issues include social matters such as childcare, health reforms and immigration policies, as well as environmental concerns. For the matter, there has been a worrisome lack of initiatives developed to tackle climate change. With the advent of the war in Ukraine, efforts have been put in place to add more fossil fuels in the market as to meet the energy demands in the short term. Whilst there is a clear need for technological innovations that allow the market to move away from fossil fuels in a way that makes economic sense, there is an overall lack of bipartisan consent to introduce such effective measures.

Even though fears of a heavy red wave have begun to fade away, liberal democracy, on both sides of the Atlantic, is witnessing a paralysing moment in large part because of economic causes which include but are not limited to, inflation, energy prices and energy shortages. By adapting to and mitigating against the implications of the pandemic, Biden's administration took steps that had inflationary effects, with rates increasing even more due to supply chain disruptions and the war in Ukraine. Whilst the FED has repeatedly raised interest rates, the economy hasn't yet adjusted. Indeed, it appears almost as surprising how during the elections there was no shift towards the right, exclusively because of inflation.

Overall, the relief of these mid-term elections is a call for action for the US to get its house in order and to renew its political centre as an investment in the restoration of the democratic institutions. The vast ideological divide that characterises the relationship between republicans and democrats persists in having serious repercussions on a socio-economic level, to the extent that if the US were to go back to a normal opposition between the two parties, democracy would benefit on a global scale.

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MAKING SENSE OF MIDTERM AMERICA?



Richard Haass (*President, Council on Foreign Relations*)

A political earthquake in the United States was averted in the midterm elections. With the Democrats exceeding expectations, US foreign policy will remain mostly on familiar terrain for the next two years, until the 2024 presidential election – after which anything can, and possibly will, happen.

NEW YORK – Midterm elections take place in the United States every four years, halfway into a president's term and two years before the next presidential election. At stake is one-third of the Senate, the entire House of Representatives, some governorships, and many state and local offices. There is no national vote, but the results tend to reflect where the country stands and are interpreted as a referendum on the party in power (in this case the Democrats, led by President Joe Biden). And while votes are still being counted – and in some cases recounted – it is not too soon to draw some initial conclusions.

Above all, what was expected to be a decisive no-confidence vote in Biden for the most part failed to materialize. Republicans were widely expected to perform better than they did. The party in power almost always loses seats in midterms, as voters seek to express unhappiness and look for change, and many of the issues at the top of voters' minds, including inflation, crime, and illegal immigration, ought to have resulted in big Republican gains. But voter concerns about other issues, from abortion rights to the health of American democracy, together with questions about the fitness of more than a few Republican candidates, worked in the Democrats' favor.

As is often the case, foreign-policy concerns seem to have mattered little to voters. Despite the fact that a war is raging in Europe, and that the US is providing the lion's share of assistance to Ukraine, the reality is that, with few US troops in conflict zones, most voters are preoccupied with domestic matters. Still, the midterms will have some impact on US foreign policy. The fact that the elections largely took place peacefully and as planned should reassure America's friends and frustrate those who were hoping that there would be a repeat of the protest and violence that followed the 2020 presidential election. For now, at least, American democracy has held.

Regarding policy, the mixed outcome provides no mandate for significant change. This likely means that economic and military support for Ukraine will continue, although it is possible that there could be some attempts by Congress to limit its scale or link it to some future negotiations. Sanctions against Russia will remain in place. So, too, will the hardline stance toward China, which reflects a strong political consensus. Indeed, one of Biden's few bipartisan legislative victories was the CHIPS Act, which provides hundreds of billions of dollars to boost US competitiveness in areas like semiconductor manufacturing. With a divided Congress, one of the few areas for potential agreement will be similar legislation that takes aim at China. For example, the US could introduce a screening process for outbound investment, set new ground rules for Chinese investment in the US, or both. Support for Taiwan will also continue. The Taiwan Policy Act, which would upgrade bilateral ties in ways sure to provoke China and provide Taiwan with greater military assistance, could be revived by the new Congress. Should Kevin McCarthy become Speaker of the House of Representatives, as is quite possible, he will likely travel to Taiwan, which would similarly prompt a strong Chinese response.

Trade is another area where policy will remain largely unchanged, as there is little support from either party for new initiatives. The US is unlikely to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership or other trade pacts. As for Iran, there are disagreements over how to address the nuclear issue. The mounting protests in Iran, however, along with evidence of Iranian military support for Russia, have ended any chance for the US to rejoin the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

North Korea, with its continued provocations and a seventh nuclear test looming, presents another challenge, but neither US party has a viable alternative policy to put forward. This means that the US will continue to sanction the North. Support for Israel will continue to receive broad congressional backing. The same cannot be said, however, for initiatives designed to contend with climate change. More generally, continuity will mostly prevail, partly because the US political system gives the president broad latitude in conducting foreign policy. The main risk is that a Republican-controlled Senate could block personnel appointments, and a Republican-controlled House could hold hearings on such issues as the Afghanistan withdrawal, which could embarrass and distract the Biden administration.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the midterms is that the results have weakened former President Donald Trump, whereas Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who easily won re-election, has emerged as a serious contender to lead the Republican party. While the Democrats exceeded expectations, questions within the party remain as to whether Biden should seek a second term in 2024.

In short, a political earthquake was averted. US foreign policy will remain mostly on familiar terrain for the next two years, until the presidential election. After that, anything can, and possibly will, happen.

DEFENDING DEMOCRACIES' INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE



Anne-Marie Slaughter (*Former director of policy planning in the US State Department, CEO of New America, Professor Emerita of Politics, and International Affairs at Princeton University*)



Ben Scott (*Director of Reset*)

What is driving some people to reject the legitimacy of fair elections, embrace conspiracy theories, and even resort to political violence? The answer may lie in a novel threat to democracies around the world: the deliberate, systematic distortion – enabled and heightened by digital capabilities – of an entire information ecosystem.

WASHINGTON, DC – After the United States' recent midterm elections, Americans are breathing a sigh of relief that social-media fuelled threats of violence against voters and election officials did not materialize. It is a disturbing sign of the times that a peaceful vote is a pleasant surprise.

What is driving some people to reject the legitimacy of fair elections, embrace conspiracy theories, and even resort to political violence? We believe the answer lies in a novel threat to democracies around the world: information insecurity. Information insecurity is much more than vulnerability to propaganda. It is the deliberate and systematic distortion – enabled and heightened by digital capabilities – of an entire information ecosystem.

Consider the parallels to natural disasters and climate insecurity. In the past, we dealt with hurricanes, droughts, and floods as isolated emergencies. Today, we understand climate change as a threat to entire systems of agriculture, energy, and public safety. Similarly, we once addressed famine with case-by-case responses. Today, we understand food insecurity as a permanent threat not only to life but also to social cohesion and political stability. Systemic threats require a systemic response that addresses the enabling technological conditions. Our twentieth-century tactics – isolating or blocking channels of propaganda broadcast by our adversaries – will not suffice. Those channels were broadcast by a limited number of known sources that were easily recognizable by origin, vector, and contrast to conventional media fare.

Today's information operations are multicast across hundreds of channels – optimizing speech and reach by using an interplay of broadcast and digital media, including social media, and leveraging the techniques of online advertising, targeting, and algorithmic manipulation to maximize audience size. For example, the Kremlin not only pushes its Ukraine-related propaganda over state media channels, both broadcast and digital, but also relies on a large network of covert digital channels across multiple languages and platforms. These channels spread conspiracy theories about Nazis in Kyiv, blame the West for the absence of food shipments blocked by Russia, and stoke unrest in the European Union over energy prices and refugees.

These tactics amplify home-grown conspiracies and blur the distinction between foreign and domestic agents. Moreover, the objective is not simply to persuade but to weaken confidence in facts and to sow suspicion of “fake news” everywhere. Algorithms tuned to maximize attention accelerate the effect.

Autocratic governments like China respond to this threat by seizing control over both the production and distribution of media domestically. Though the authorities cannot eliminate all dissenting views online, they prevent any major disruption to the party line. Russia has chosen a similar approach – albeit with far less efficiency. Democracies must find another way. In democratic societies, freedom of expression is essential both as a basic human right and as a principal mechanism of holding government accountable. In our response to information threats, we must ensure that the cure is not worse than the disease.

We cannot delete our way out of this problem. To respond to information insecurity without restricting freedom of expression, we must address the structure of the market and the logic of a business model that privileges controversy over integrity. This means directly engaging the big technology platforms (largely American and Chinese) that hold unprecedented control over global information distribution. These firms did not cause the social problems that drive contemporary political conflict. But they are the single biggest factor in accelerating trends towards extremism. Despite their efforts to curb illegal activity and thwart exploitation of their services, their products are still designed to profit from outrage and remain vulnerable to widespread abuse. Meanwhile, the market power they wield over advertising has gutted the commercial viability of traditional journalism, which once stabilized democratic politics by establishing a consensus about basic facts. Many traditional news media have responded by joining the race to the bottom.

Democratic governments should treat information systems as critical infrastructure, just like gas, water, electricity, and telecommunications. The first step is to require American platforms Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to curb the exploitation of their services by authoritarian governments mounting deliberate disinformation campaigns. To harden democracies’ defences further, we need standards for information markets against which to assess possible security risks, such as the impact of Chinese control over TikTok (the most popular platform among young people).

These standards must not be governments dictating what content is allowed and not allowed on media channels. That is a decision for private actors to make, as they have. But while every technology platform in the market today has rules governing content and behaviour as well as the collection and use of personal data, too often they do a poor job of applying their own rules. Government regulators should hold them to their promises and set additional standards for consumer protection, in the same way that we regulate the safety of food, pharmaceutical, and natural resource industries.

Moreover, to reconnect citizens with a common base of facts, democracies must strengthen public-service journalism. One approach is to use competition policies – such as those recently applied by Australia – that compel tech companies with market power over digital advertising to negotiate revenue-sharing agreements with news organizations. Taxes on digital transactions can also be used to boost investment in public media, local media, media literacy, and journalism schools. Rules, standards, and investments in the media marketplace are not simply economic policies. They are security imperatives, alongside green energy, and public health. Unless we act soon, our information security will weaken further, dividing us against ourselves. Autocrats and domestic rabble rousers can then shape a self-serving narrative of intensifying democratic dysfunction.

US President Joe Biden’s National Security Strategy, released in October, identifies a set of “transnational challenges” that are not “secondary to geopolitics,” but lie “at the very core of national and international security.” These challenges include climate change, food security, communicable diseases, energy shortages, and inflation. Information insecurity belongs on that list, too, because it exacerbates these other challenges and poses its own grave threat to democracy.