DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 18.11.2022 | Marco Bitschnau

A Democrats' sigh of relief

The Democrats' performance in this year's US midterms was a surprising success. Still, the results laid bare that nothing is certain in 2024

Close your eyes and hope for the best – this 'Hail Mary' cry usually sums up the mood of the respective governing party before US midterm elections. From the outside, the midterm elections may appear to be a huge test of public opinion, like a political mid-year report card; but in fact, the only question is whether the incumbent's party will do badly or disastrously, and what majorities it might lose. All in all, this is not a phenomenon specific to the US, since it is also true in Germany: whoever governs at the federal level, *ceteris paribus,* usually has a harder time in the states – and vice versa. An imbalance that is based firstly on quite different possibilities for mobilising voters, but secondly also considers the fact that whoever governs can also slip up more easily and get involved in all kinds of affairs. That's just the way political life works.

Considering this context, the Democrats' performance in this year's midterms must be seen as a surprising success. Although various polls had already suggested that there would not be a 'red wave', few expected that Biden's party would lose the House of Representatives by only a narrow margin and to win seats in the Senate. Hence, there was general jubilation in the White House and on the tactical boards of the Democratic National Committee, but sour expressions on the other side, which had probably also fallen victim to its own expectations.

Candidate quality and media timing

Much can be deduced from this election. Above all, however, the importance of right timing in a media democracy. It's not scandals or unpopular decisions that usually break one's political neck, but their presence before the election and – connected to this – the skill of the opposing party in directing the limited attention span of the electorate to what is desired at the right time.

On the Republican side, this desired thing was the omnipresent inflation,

which should actually have created the basis for a mass think piece. Such an approach had always worked well in the past, but did not really catch on this time. The reason for this was that the Democrats had received a top-class mobilisation gift this summer with the historic abortion ruling in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, which they then noisily made use of in the following months. If the Supreme Court had ruled on the case a summer earlier, the effect would certainly have been much milder. But as it was, alongside those frustrated by the petrol-price, mainly angry abortion supporters who flocked to the polls, casting their votes for the Democratic congressional majority. (Biden had announced his intention to make abortion legal if he won the election.) In many cases, the Republican positions on the issue were also successfully pushed into the twilight of hypocrisy, with the case of ex-football player and Senate candidate Herschel Walker standing out in particular. In his election campaign, Walker loudly proclaimed himself to be 'pro-life', but was then publicly accused by two women of having paid them for clandestine abortions.

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One is tempted here to think of the old phrase of throwing stones while living in a glass house, but cases like Walker's show something else entirely, that is: candidate quality matters. This is a more controversial hypothesis than it first appears. After all, everyone still seems to be following the narrative of the excessive polarisation into which the US has been slipping for some time and from which it can no longer quite find its way out. The usual socio-demographic dividing lines, it is argued, have grown into holistic identities with a tendency to segmentation and bubble formation; Republicans only talk to Republicans, Democrats only talk to Democrats, both have their own neighbourhoods, professional sectors, radio shows and networks. As a consequence of such hardened fronts, the seriousness of nominating the party candidates would hardly matter anymore. Whether moderate conservatives or radical right-wing conspiracy theorists, whether serious progressives or world-weary 'concrete socialists' – in the end, only the (R) or (D) behind the name would be decisive and not the individual campaign profile.

So much for the theory, which is not to be denied *in toto*. It is in fact not

so wrong that there is a certain tendency towards polarisation and thus also towards isolation. The US electorate still knows very well who it wants to see in office and who it doesn't. For example, in the swing state of Georgia, where the popular Republican governor Brian Kemp – an old-school conservative and Trump sceptic – easily won against the attention-seeking Stacey Abrams, but the aforementioned Walker failed against the Democratic incumbent Raphael Warnock.

The fall of Trump

That, in the end, many of the more radical Republicans fell by the wayside also represents a bitter setback for their patron, Donald Trump. On the eve of the election, the ex-president, still expecting a great victory, had let it slip that the announcement of his candidacy in 2024 was imminent. The timing for such a manoeuvre, if successful, would be quite convenient: The Democrats on the ground, Biden reeling, he in contrast vibrant, eager to fight and in the pose of the comeback kid - this was how Trump had probably envisioned the course of the evening. The fact that nothing came of it apparently affected him so much that, according to CNN's Jim Acosta, he was mainly busy shouting at his campaign team.

Even harder for Trump than the failure of his 'picks', however, must have been the fabulous result of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who had provided one of the few Republican glimmers of hope in his populous and economically strong state. He had won the governor's seat in 2018 by a mere 33 000 votes but now received more than one and a half million – an improbable success that not only gave the Republicans three additional congressional seats, but also shifted the party's balance of power further south. The fact that for Trump, the offensively presented claim to leadership by America's youngest governor – the two are separated by 32 years – is a thorn in his side, has been an open secret for some time. After all, DeSantis, an Iraq veteran and Yale graduate, is not only successful, telegenic and popular at the base, but also able to incorporate the ex-president's more popular idiosyncrasies into his act without losing charisma. In this sense, he is indeed a 'better Trump'.

The 'worse Trump', who also follows the basic principle of 'there can only be one' when it comes to party leadership, apparently sees attack as the best defence in the face of ever-growing pressure and targets his rival in the making directly: 'Ron DeSanctimonious' is an 'average *republican* governor', he said in a statement published on Friday, in which he also explains how DeSantis begged him for support for his primary campaign against the favoured Adam Putnam in 2017. 'He was politically dead […] When I endorsed him, it was as though […] a nuclear weapon went off.' This can be seen as the usual mixture of self-congratulation and all-round

attack, but also as a sign of an overstretched restlessness, an inkling on Trump's part that he no longer holds the reins. The idea that the man from Queens had completely subdued the 'Grand Old Party' was already exaggerated at the time of the greatest Trump-mania; now, however, it is becoming clearer by the day that few Republican leadership cadres maintain anything other than a functional relationship with their figurehead. As long as Trump's course promised success, the game was played by necessity. Now, however, with the third setback in a row after 2018 and 2020, the knives are being sharpened. And at a certain point, all that is missing is a determined Brutus to deliver the first, fatal stab to the ageing Caesar.

In any case, it will be even more difficult for the president, who is already struggling with numerous obstacles, to push through his ambitious reform agenda.

This does, of course, not mean that such a stab has to happen. In politics, inevitabilities of this kind are rarely found, especially since it cannot be ruled out that the erratic Trump, in the event of a non-nomination (the announcement to run in 2024 has meanwhile been made in relative obscurity), could for his part burn all bridges with his party and run as an independent. From the Republican point of view, this would be tantamount to a catastrophe; a remake of the 1992 presidential election, in which Bill Clinton won so confident mainly because large sections of the Republican clientele had turned away from George H. W. Bush with annoyance and supported the alternative candidacy of Texan billionaire Ross Perot. In a case where the schism would come from the heart of one's own party, the consequences could be even more dramatic and lead to years of wandering in the much-cited 'political wilderness'. It still seems questionable whether the Republican Congressional grandees want to take such a risk – or whether, in view of the 76-year-old's age and lifestyle, they are not rather speculating that nature will lead the way in due course.

Despite all these prospects, the Democrats would do well to temper their celebratory mood for the time being: a 'red wave' may have failed to materialise this year, but the party's vote collapse in traditional strongholds and the losses among (predominantly male) voters of Hispanic and Asian descent should give the leadership something to think about. The same applies to the fact that even a narrow defeat in the battle for the House of Representatives ultimately remains a defeat.

Republican majority leader Kevin McCarthy will have a hard time keeping such a slim majority together, but if anything unites his fraction, it is the strident rejection of the Biden agenda. In any case, it will be even more difficult for the president, who is already struggling with numerous obstacles, to push through his ambitious reform agenda. He still has a free hand in appointing judges and ambassadors, but those election promises that had been postponed in recent years due to the post-Covid investment packages, are now in danger of falling by the wayside completely. Also bearing in mind the succession problems in the presidential camp and an unfavourable 'senate map', the following applies with regard to 2024: Everything is possible.



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