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JD Vance is probably toast

The US Vice President has tied his political future to Trump. The midterm defeats leave him with a tarnished brand and few ways out

His name may not have been on the ballot, but the biggest loser of the midterms was Vice President JD Vance. President Trump will never face voters again. Vance, by contrast, doesn't have the luxury of ignoring public opinion. If he hopes to win the presidency in 2028, he will need to sell voters on the tarnished Trump brand.

Republicans such as Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida are already distancing themselves from the Trump presidency. On Wednesday, DeSantis characterised the election results as 'a rejection of Republicans in Washington.'

Vance will have a harder time putting daylight between himself and an unpopular president. Many Republicans have expressed fealty to Trump, but Vance has gone further. In both style and substance, he has presented himself as an avatar of the MAGA movement, more Trumpist than Trump. He has not only served as vice president but has also grown close with Trump's family, particularly Donald Trump Jr. To a far greater extent than, say, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Vance is Trump's man.

Out of options

On Wednesday, Vance issued a carefully argued statement on X in response to the midterm losses, which he attributed to frustration over the Iran war and inflation, combined with a desire to put America first and change the country's relationship with Israel. He was at pains not to appear at odds with the president. When he wrote that 'the reason we lost is the war', he was quick to add that 'the president himself said so last night'. And Trump Jr. reposted the statement approvingly ('Every word of this is 100, 100, 100').

Notably, Vance's statement made no mention of tariffs, which increased costs even before the price of gas was driven up by the war. His silence is

not surprising. Vance's political story centres on his connection to a working class left behind by globalisation. He cannot change his tune on trade without betraying his political identity.

On Iran, Vance has no good options. He argued against the venture in internal deliberations but, having lost the argument, backed the war in public. Now he has to convince voters to give him credit for privately opposing the same war he was publicly defending. That dog won't hunt, unless he breaks with Trump in a more forceful and dramatic way.

Publicly crossing the president would be risky, though, given that Vance has already changed his tune on Trump once, going from staunch critic in 2016 to vocal supporter in 2021. Another reversal would seem all too politically expedient. A hard break with Trump would also be risky given the president's support among Republicans. Though his backing has declined among independents, 82 per cent of Republicans still approve of the job he's doing.

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As for changing America's relationship with Israel, that is a pseudo-populist nothingburger. It won't improve the life of a single Trump voter (most of the money 'sent' to the country is spent in the United States) or eliminate the reasons the United States projects power globally. But cutting Israel loose is a lot easier to do than imposing tariffs and closing the border while keeping prices low.

Vance's post-mortem on Wednesday said nothing about corruption. No wonder. Trump promised to drain the swamp but instead permitted an algae bloom. Rank money-grubbing has surrounded the administration, making Hunter Biden's attempts at self-enrichment look amateur. Democrats will do everything they can to expose these tawdry dealings through congressional investigations and hearings. Many of Vance's closest allies, including Trump Jr., will be subject to scrutiny. However spotless Vance's own conduct has been, the dirt will rub off on him.

Vance retains important advantages. He has Trump's favour, has raised money for countless Republican candidates and has successfully courted important parts of the right. But his wealthy connections may prove a liability. Populists on the left like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will eagerly tie Vance to Silicon Valley's abysmally unpopular artificial-intelligence-fuelled visions of a post-human society. DeSantis, who has gone after AI companies, may be prepared to do the same. And across the country this year, voters rejected candidates with close ties to the tech titans of Silicon

Valley; even accepting a donation from someone like Elon Musk, for some politicians, seems to have backfired.

Likewise, the sectors of the right courted by Vance seem increasingly unhinged. Tucker Carlson, a long-time Vance ally and once a unifying MAGA voice, now devotes much of his time to promoting bizarre theories about Jews and Israel. Ten years ago, it seemed that populism might mean reshoring American manufacturing, securing the border, advancing a more modest foreign policy and resisting elite cultural priorities. But for many, it now means nothing more than denouncing a far-off country.

Vance is resourceful and shrewd. He made his way from the Rust Belt to Yale Law, and from saying Trump might be 'America's Hitler' to serving as his vice president. Perhaps he can complete another unlikely journey, to the presidency. But he now seems farther from that office than he did just one week ago.

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