

# WHY DID REPUBLICANS NOT DO BETTER?

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Going into Tuesday's U.S. midterm election, the Democrats held 220 of the 435 seats, with Republicans at 212. Three seats were vacant.

At midnight, U.S. Eastern Standard Time, it looks like the Republicans are going to win the House, but with a slim margin. The most they can hope for in the Senate is a 51-49 majority.

An abundance of opinion polls suggested that Republicans had a strong momentum and that they were going to ride on a strong voter wave into all sorts of majorities. So what happened?

Before we try to answer that question, it is important to know that highly contested races will be recounted once, maybe even twice. Some states have recount trigger laws, mandating a full recount when the margin between two candidates is below a specified threshold. Furthermore, Georgia forces the two top-performing candidates into a run-off election if nobody gets at least 50% of the total number of votes cast.

For these reasons, we cannot know for certain what the outcome of the election will be, at least not for several days. At the same time, the very fact that there will be recounts and possibly at least one runoff for a U.S. Senate seat only gives more weight to the "what happened?" question.

Some are trying to give a simple answer. Based on the performance, for instance, of Republican senatorial candidates in Arizona and Pennsylvania who did worse than expected, some election-night commentators tried to make the case that former president Donald Trump's endorsement worked to their disadvantage.

This is not true, at least not as a general explanation. Other senatorial candidates with Trump's backing did very well. One of them, J.D. Vance in Ohio, handily defeated his Democrat opponent. Another strong-performing Trump candidate, Herschel Walker, also did well. As of midnight Eastern Standard Time, he was running neck-and-neck with incumbent Democrat senator Raphael Warnock—impressive considering Walker has no previous political experience and that he's running against an incumbent.

Given this, and given that Trump-backed candidates for the House of Representatives did relatively well overall, the former president cannot be blamed for the weaker-than-expected Republican wave. A more likely explanation is that anti-Trump forces within the Republican party diverted resources away from candidates who aligned with the former president's 'America First' agenda.

Nobody went as far as Liz Cheney—now-defeated Republican Representative from Wyoming—who traveled the country and endorsed Democrats. However, it was pretty clear that some influential Republicans, such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, were trying to avoid allocating party funds to the support of candidates that aligned themselves with Trump. This gave Democrats a head-start in highly contested races.

If Republicans manage to win majorities in both chambers of Congress, they will be forced to unify the party. There are signs that this is already happening, with aforementioned Majority Leader McConnell throwing last-minute money behind Trump-backed J.D. Vance in Ohio. It is also a matter of simple arithmetic: if leaders within the Republican party want to actually hold their majority, however narrow, they will have to make sure that every member of their caucus feels welcome and is taken seriously.

New 'America First' candidates coming to Congress will put pressure on party leadership to unify and work as a team. If they do this successfully through the next two years, their chances of winning another two years of Congressional majority will be stronger.

Whoever emerges as the Republican presidential candidate will need this support. On that

front, this election actually gave the Republicans confidence—and two names to float as tentative candidates for 2024.

One of them is Donald Trump, whose relentless campaigning around the country, with large rallies under his 'America First' banner, has kept the conservative flame alive through the past two years. His largely successful endorsement of candidates for both the House and the Senate has also earned him credentials for another presidential run.

The other apparent candidate is Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida. On Tuesday he won re-election with a strong margin, and he did it while winning Miami-Dade, one of Florida's most solidly Democrat counties. The large Hispanic vote in that county apparently came out strongly for DeSantis, reinforcing the impression that Hispanics in general are moving over to the Republican column.

DeSantis gave a victory speech brimming with confidence, but also with a determination to continue to fight for conservative values. He sounds in many ways like Donald Trump did in the 2020 campaign when he was running on his four-year success record as president.

The final verdict over Republican performance in this election remains murky until definitive results are in place. Clearly though, America remains as polarized as it has been for at least a decade, with entrenchment on both sides.

For now, voters have put a restraining order on the radicals in the Democrat party. How well it holds up over the next two years is an open question.