

Did the Republicans Underperform in 2022?

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A common view in the media is that the Republicans did worse in the 2022 midterm election than they should have given the state of the economy and a long history of midterm elections swinging away from the President's party. The red wave did not happen. The reasons advanced include the effects of overturning *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court, the political extremism of some of the Republican candidates due to Trump's influence, Trump himself, and concern among some voters that the democratic process was being threatened by Republicans.

Using statistical techniques it is possible to quantify how well the Republicans should have done in the election. For example, the Republicans got 51.6 percent of the two-party popular vote in the House election. What were they predicted to get? I have examined the 26 midterm elections back to 1918, and this work can be used to predict what the Republicans should have gotten without taking into account Trump, *Roe*, and other political factors.

What goes into this analysis? First, it is possible to estimate the midterm bias against the party in the White House. This estimate is 3.1 percentage points of the two-party House popular vote. This estimate is based on data from all 26 elections, not just focusing on a few examples, as is sometimes done in the press. Second, the Democrats have not done quite as well as the Republicans over the 26 elections, other things being equal, and they start behind by 1.1 percentage points.

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Third, there is evidence that if a party has done well in the previous House election (2 years before), this has a positive effect on its vote share in the current election. The Democrats got more than half the House vote in 2020, which leads to a plus factor of 1.1 percentage points in 2022. This is essentially an incumbency effect per district. Fourth, if the party in the White House has done well in the presidential election 2 years ago, this has a slight negative effect on the House vote share for the party in the next midterm election. This is called a “balance effect” in the political science literature. This leads to a minus factor of 0.5 percentage points for the Democrats.

If you add all these factors, you get a prediction for the Republicans of 53.6 percent of the two-party vote in the House. This, however, does not include the effects of the economy on voting behavior, which are also in the analysis. There are both inflation and output effects. Inflation has a negative effect on votes for the incumbent party in the White House, and output growth has a positive effect. The high inflation was thus bad for the Democrats, which added 3.0 percentage points to the Republican share. Output growth, on the other hand, was good for the Democrats, and this subtracted 3.2 percentage points from the Republican share. The economy was thus a wash, and the final prediction for the Republicans was 53.6 minus the 0.2 net effect from the economy, or 53.4 percent.

As noted above, the Republicans got 51.6 percent of the two-party House vote, or 1.8 percentage points fewer than predicted. This small difference is within the margin of error of the analysis, and in this sense the Republican underperformance is quite small. Working in the Republicans’ favor was the midterm bias against the Democrats, the slight overall bias in favor of the Republicans, and the balance effect. Working against them was the district incumbency effect. The economy was essentially neutral. Inflation helped them, but output growth hurt. The net effect is that they were about 1.8 percentage points short of what they were predicted to get.

Although the error is small, it is not trivial in a close election. Had the error been zero, the Republicans would have gotten more votes and seats in the House elections, which likely would have carried over to more votes in the Senate elections, possibly capturing the Senate.