**The pundits got it wrong**

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Much ink has been spilled before and since the US midterm elections, with most of it missing the mark. Pundits who had unrealistic expectations regarding the outcome are now reacting in shock (or horror or delight, depending on their political persuasion) as their projections have been found wanting. For example, those who forecast a “big red wave” are left to explain why it didn’t materialise. Never satisfied with simply being wrong, there are those who are now breathing a sigh of relief and incorrectly assuming that the closeness of this election means that the US electorate is moving away from the polarisation that has come to characterise our polity. They are wrong. There never was going to be a “big wave,” and we remain as deeply divided as ever. As I wrote a few weeks back, this election was always going to be a “nail-biter”—with the outcome never assured. Even before votes were cast, it should have been clear that the needle separating the gap between the two parties in Congress would move centimetres, not meters. Here’s why:

[UN decides to set up investigation into Iran protests](https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Nov-2022/u-n-decides-to-set-up-investigation-into-iran-protests)

As a result of a decennial redistricting process favouring them, Republicans appeared certain to pick up a few new seats. They were counting on the public’s sour mood over inflation and high disapproval ratings for President Biden to give them an extra advantage in winning additional seats. But there were limits to how far they could grow their numbers because, of the 435 congressional seats that were being contested, only about 10 percent were competitive. The remaining 90 percent were solidly either Democratic or Republican. With Democrats holding a slim eight-seat majority in the House of Representatives, it was reasonable to assume that Republicans might take control of the Congress, but unreasonable to assume a landslide. Even now, days after the election, at least 21 congressional seats remain “too close to call” with the networks projecting a possible 221-214 Republican majority (which might still swing a bit either way when the final votes are counted). The Senate is no different. It now appears likely that the current 50-50 split between the parties will continue into the next Congress. Another area where the pundits are wrong is in their assessment of the fading power of Donald Trump. Before Election Day, commentators mistakenly framed the contest as a nationalised popularity contest between President Biden and former President Trump. While it was true that Trump had a hand in advancing some of his favoured Republican candidates, midterm elections are mostly localised contests. So, while some Trump acolytes lost against more popular Democrats, it’s a stretch to see the outcome as a definitive referendum on the former president. In the wake of the election, there is a virtual media frenzy portraying Trump as the big loser and a drag on his party. There are reports of other Republicans feeling emboldened to challenge the wounded leader in 2024. For some in the media, it’s a done deal—Trump is out, replaced by a new “flavour of the month.”

[Veteran actor Ismail Tara passes away](https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Nov-2022/veteran-actor-ismail-tara-passes-away)

Once again, caution is advised. It’s important to recall how many times Trump was declared finished in 2015-6. Each time there was a new scandal or an embarrassing debate performance, the press declared his candidacy dead. There were rumours as late as the Republican Convention that the party leadership would try to end his candidacy. Although he is a deeply flawed human being, his hold over a substantial component of the Republican constituency remains strong. And should Trump decide to run again, the party establishment will quietly gripe, fuss, and fume, but they’ll avoid alienating Trump’s fervent base. One last observation about how some got this election so wrong: The defeat of some Trump loyalists and the closeness of the final results do not mean that Americans are coming together. As the exit polls make clear, the country remains as deeply polarised as ever—it’s just evenly divided between two warring camps. Democrats voted for their party’s candidates, Republicans for theirs. Independent voters split down the middle. Democrats give Joe Biden high ratings, Republicans don’t. Republicans give high ratings to Donald Trump, Democrats don’t. Similarly, partisans on each side have deeply unfavourable views of the “other side.” And their views on issues like abortion, climate change, immigration, gun control, and racism are mirror images of each other. Not only didn’t this election ease the polarisation, but it also accelerated it. Both parties and their related interest group political committees spent an unprecedented $10 billion in TV and digital advertising during this campaign. There were no positive messages of healing and national unity. Many of the ads focused on attacks against the other party’s candidates and projections of negative doomsday scenarios if that other party should win. This incessant polluting of the political discourse has been corrosive. A few examples: 60 percent of Republicans still believe that Biden didn’t win the election and is an illegitimate president. And in just the first 10 months of 2022, there have already been 9,625 recorded threats against members of Congress.

[Clarity needed for effective narrative building against extremism: Kaira](https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Nov-2022/clarity-needed-for-effective-narrative-building-against-extremism-kaira)

Because we still don’t know what the final outcome of this election will be, it’s hard to make projections moving forward. If Republicans do win control of the House, they will be unable to restrain themselves. There will be investigations of the president and his family, maybe even a move toward impeachment, and government shutdowns owing to their refusal to pass budget extensions. All of this will only deepen the polarisation, making the next two years both difficult and divided.