**Unintended consequences**

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The dust has settled on the American midterm elections. It was widely expected the Republican Party would make major gains, as has been typical of past elections when one party controls the White House and both chambers of Congress.

Instead, the Republican Party has been able to pick up only ten additional seats in the House of Representatives, giving them a very slim majority and the speakership of the House.

In the Senate, on the other hand, the Democrats kept control and picked up an additional seat in Pennsylvania. Many candidates endorsed by Donald Trump, all supporting extreme positions including 2020 election results denial, were defeated. The Republican Party performed poorly among centrist, non-partisan voters, whose support is needed to win any statewide election.

While the Democrats are rejoicing over better-than-expected results, the US remains a deeply divided country. With control of Congress now split between the two parties, it’s widely expected that no major legislation will pass over the remainder of Biden’s term. The Republican leadership has already announced that they will be focusing on investigating what they see as the many policy failures of the Biden Administration, from the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan to Joe Biden’s attempt to write off student loan debt to low-income households.

Another major focus for the incoming Republican majority in the House will be to investigate the business dealings of the president’s son, Hunter Biden. With multiple such investigations soon to be underway, the Republican leadership is not even naming what their legislative priorities for the country will be, if any.

In addition to being deeply divided, the US remains a country also very evenly divided. A very large number of Senate and gubernatorial races in the recent midterms were decided with a less than five per cent vote differential. Out of the 50 states, 26 will be led by Republican governors and 24 by Democrats.

The next presidential election will be in 2024. Donald Trump has already announced his candidacy. Biden, 80 years old, has not officially announced his intentions, but is expected to run again, despite his age. While he appears frail at times, Biden has accomplished very significant legislative and policy measures in the first two years of his presidency, and that with the slimmest of margins in Congress.

Yet, there appears to be angst among Democrats about a Biden candidacy, related to his age.

Republicans face a somewhat different issue. Trump remains very popular among the Republican base, even though his extremist politics have turned out to be a big loser in these midterm elections. Therefore, Trump and his legacy have now become a challenge to the Republican Party’s prospects. Still, Trump remains the most popular politician among Republicans. No one in his party seems to have the courage to confront him yet. Their best hope may be that Trump’s legal troubles will catch up with him and prevent him from running again.

There is another important way in which the deep national divide will play out in the 2024 elections. While voters vote for individual presidential candidates, the US constitution actually stipulates that the country elect its president indirectly through what is called the Electoral College. Under this system, the winning candidate from each state gets the entirety of the votes from that state.

Since most states in the US have either a Republican or Democrat majority, their choice for president can be fairly reliably predicted. This means the election will be decided by a very small handful of so-called ‘swing’ states that remain unpredictable: Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and Wisconsin. Together these four states account for less than 10 per cent of the country’s population, but they are collectively expected to determine who the next president will be. As a result, both parties will focus their campaigns almost exclusively on these four states, and perhaps one or two more such as Pennsylvania and Ohio.

The remaining states, accounting for about 90 per cent of the country’s population, are going to be largely ignored, in effect disenfranchised. It is hard to imagine this was the intent of the authors of the constitution.

The US electoral system is now suffering from the proverbial unintended consequences of a process set up centuries ago. What must happen for the country to get out of this predicament remains unclear.

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