

## OMNIA Podcast | 2022 Midterm Elections: What Happened?

Kristen Welker (NBC News):

*24 hours after ballots were cast, tonight, control of Congress is still up for grabs. Republicans who had been hoping to take the House in a red wave now just looking for a win. The G O P still favored to take over, but with a smaller margin than expected.*

Alex Schein:

The 2022 midterm elections took place on Tuesday, November 8th in the United States and, as of this recording, are still being decided in many parts of the country. Historically, the President's party loses in the midterms, and yet this year, Democrats, the party of President Joe Biden, maintained their control of the Senate and may only lose their majority in the House of Representatives by a slim margin. So what happened?

In this episode, we speak with political science professor Daniel Hopkins about why this year's midterms were so different than the historical trend and what the next two years might look like in American political life. Welcome to OMNIA, the podcast on all things Penn arts and sciences.

Leading up to the midterms, most media outlets were reporting on polling that suggested a Republican red wave that would mean major gains and seats for their party. One critical indicator of this, says Professor Hopkins, was President Joe Biden's approval rating.

Daniel Hopkins:

Joe Biden is, even in Democratic leaning polls, generally running at about 43, 44, 45% approval. That level of approval was the same that Barack Obama had when the Republicans took 63 seats in the House of Representatives in 2010. So presidential approval was one flashing warning sign to Democrats that this had all the makings of a wave election.

Greg Valliere:

*I'm beginning to think this election will be a wave, as in tidal wave, election with the Democrats badly losing the House. I'm not sure they can even hang onto the Senate.*

Alix Steel (Bloomberg)

*Wow.*

Matt Schlapp:

*It's going to be a big red wave no matter what people in the media say.*

Ari Melber (MSNBC):

*You're feeling confident. All right.*

Matt Schlapp:

*Take it to the bank.*

Daniel Hopkins:

The basic structural facts about midterms are that, in a sentence, the President's party loses midterms. And so, we have seen very, very consistently that voters shift against the party of the presidency in midterm elections. There are only two elections between 1934 and this most recent election in which the president's party has not lost seats in the House of Representatives. Those were 1998, which was an unusual year with the Clinton impeachment, and 2002, which was an unusual year in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. So, I think it was a very good bet that the Democrats would lose seats and indeed it looks like the Democrats are almost certain to lose at least a few seats in the House of Representatives. But the fact that they didn't lose by more has been striking and has forced those of us in political science to re-evaluate why did that not happen?

Alex Schein:

Daniel Hopkins is a professor of political science whose research focuses on American elections and public opinion. He is also a contributor to FiveThirtyEight, a popular website that looks at topics like elections, politics, sports, and science through the lens of statistical analysis. On the night of the election, he was live blogging for FiveThirtyEight when he started to see some unexpected trends in the results early in the evening.

Daniel Hopkins:

I was live blogging for FiveThirtyEight and what that means is basically I'm watching a set of races and then trying to provide real time reactions. So I was more focused on Pennsylvania simply because that was the main state that I was trying to provide some coverage on and I was struck by the fact that John Fetterman seemed to be performing better than Joe Biden, had crossed a wide range of jurisdictions. I was also struck that Josh Shapiro was outperforming Fetterman pretty consistently.

Now, some of us had expected, and indeed I had expected, the possibility of real regional patterns and there's still plenty of analysis left to do, but you might have expected, for instance, that John Fetterman would outpace Josh Shapiro in maybe the southwestern parts of the state -- John Fetterman being from the western part of the state and having tried to cultivate more of a kind of blue-collar appeal, for want of a better term. And so, I was surprised to see the extent to which Josh Shapiro outperformed across the board, and that may partly reflect Josh Shapiro's incredible fundraising advantage. Josh Shapiro probably spent \$20 roughly for every \$1 that Doug Mastriano spent.

Alex Schein:

Professor Hopkins is teaching a class this semester called Changing American Electorate with second, third and fourth year students. He was prepared to present a lecture to his class the following day about the midterms and realized through election night that he would need to update his lecture slides as the results started to come in.

Daniel Hopkins:

Early on, you always have to be careful because the order in which votes are counted is not the same as the order in which those votes are cast. And so we sometimes use a kind of horse race frame that the Democrats are coming from behind, when, in fact, all of these votes were legitimately cast votes before the election ended. And so, it's just a question of the processes through which we count them.

That said, the Eastern states, understandably, the polls close earlier and there are some eastern states that don't have much, if any, voting by mail. And so those states, particularly a state like New Hampshire, seeing that incumbent Democratic Senator Maggie Hassan was performing very well, was an

initial clue. I think seeing that the Democrats in both of the New Hampshire House races were performing well was instructive, partly because American elections nowadays are quite nationalized by and large.

And so, if you tell me that the Democrats are doing unexpectedly well in New Hampshire, that tells me something about how they're going to do in Michigan. Michigan obviously was then another state that relatively early in the night made clear that it was not a tremendous Republican wave. I think Michigan's third congressional district was one that had gotten a lot of attention after the Republican incumbent Peter Meijer had voted for the impeachment of Donald Trump the second time around and then was ousted in the primary by John Gibbs, who is a Trump-backed election legitimacy questioner. And so seeing that that race went towards the Democrat, seeing that the Democrat looked strong in a few of the other hotly contested races in Michigan and Virginia, those were all indications that the night wasn't going in the way that I had told my students it was likely to go, which was in a significantly Republican direction.

Alex Schein:

Professor Hopkins studies how American political behavior has become substantially more nationalized and, in 2018, published his book, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. Professor Hopkins says that with the electorate becoming increasingly polarized, swing voters have a greater potential impact on elections.

Daniel Hopkins:

It is undeniably the case that our elections have polarized and they've nationalized, that there are more and more voters who have a side and are very, very likely to support that side. That said, we even so do see meaningful shifts from election to election, partly because there's a fraction of voters who do float between parties. Related to that, there're also voters who may or may not show up depending on the conditions. So that all adds a level of volatility, even if 70 or 80% of the electorate is pretty stable in its partisan preferences. If the unstable fraction happens to overlap with the 50% line, then you could get very different elections. I think one of the challenges in contemporary American politics is precisely that both parties have a reasonable chance at winning almost any election for federal control. As a consequence, they have no incentive to help the other party or to come together and pass bipartisan legislation because there is always that next election right around the corner and they would always rather wait to see if they can get more power in the next election.

Alex Schein:

A number of races throughout the country appear to feature split ticket voting, when a voter votes for candidates from different political parties for different offices on the ballot.

Daniel Hopkins:

So, it was very clear that in some races and in a number of states, we saw real divergence between how people voted in the governor's race and how people voted in the Senate race. That was very clear in Georgia where Brian Kemp, the incumbent Republican governor, who rose to national prominence in the aftermath of the 2020 election, won handily beating Stacey Abrams in a rematch. Well, at the same time, Raphael Warnock, the Democratic incumbent Senator, narrowly edged out Herschel Walker in a race that will now go to a runoff next month.

So that was one instance, but there were other critical examples. Even here in Pennsylvania, Fetterman won, but Shapiro won by significantly more. We also saw in New Hampshire that Republican governor

Chris Sununu was returned by a sizable margin, even as Democratic senator Maggie Hassan was returned by a sizable margin. Wisconsin split its votes as well, narrowly reelecting Tony Evers, the Democratic gubernatorial incumbent, while at the same time also narrowly reelecting Ron Johnson, the Republican Senate incumbent.

So when you have elections that are pretty closely decided, a relatively small number of swing voters can determine those outcomes. I think that when voters judge candidates to not be qualified for the jobs they're seeking or to be outside the scope of acceptable politics, you can see real meaningful levels of split ticket voting.

Alex Schein:

One of the most scrutinized aspects of elections, especially in recent years, has been political polling. Since 2016, when Donald Trump defeated a heavily favored Hillary Clinton in the US presidential election, the reliability of political polls has been questioned. In 2020, the national polls overstated support for Biden relative to Trump and President Biden's 306 to 232 victory in the electoral college was narrower than predicted by many election forecasters. Professor Hopkins says that despite the criticism, polling remains absolutely vital to understanding public opinion and guiding public policy between election cycles. However, he says polling faces some real challenges.

Daniel Hopkins:

40 years ago, the vast majority of Americans had a landline and would answer that landline telephone if you called and would frequently take surveys. So, high quality surveys enjoyed response rates of about 80%. If 80% of the people that you ask respond to a survey, you'll get a pretty good measure of public opinion. Nowadays, however, response rates are frequently below 5% and sometimes below 1%. The New York Times spent a lot of money in this cycle on polls, and yielded response rates that were sometimes below 1%. So when response rates are that low, the question is not what's going wrong, but did everything line up perfectly so that 1% represents the other 99%?

So we should start from the premise that polls are likely to have error in them. That said, this election, the public polls seemed to perform certainly better than they did in 2020. And as I just said, with response rates this low, there's never going to be, "This one weird trick will fix our polling," right? Because if it did, we would employ that one weird trick.

But that said, I think that pollsters learned after the 2016 election that it was really important to adjust for educational attainment because people with higher levels of educational attainment, like a lot of the people I'm lucky to work with and teach here at the University of Pennsylvania, they're more likely to take polls too. When even the Republicans and the Democrats who have college education are voting differently than the Republicans and Democrats who don't have college education, then you can't just say, "Oh, this survey has partisan balance and is going to be fine," right? That's what happened in 2016 in a nutshell. Though, again, there's no one explanation for polling failure because it's coming from a variety of factors.

In 2020, the added problem was not just about education, which pollsters had adjusted for, but also about political engagement. There were a lot of people who were highly engaged in politics who were rather less favorable towards Donald Trump, and there were a lot of people who were less engaged in politics in general, but who liked Donald Trump and showed up and voted for him in 2020. Those less engaged voters, the fact that they don't take surveys that often, but they showed up to vote in unanticipatedly large numbers meant that the polls in some key places were off.

This election, it may well be that turnout was enough lower and that the set of voters who were engaged matched the set of people who were taking polls to enough of an extent that our polls, while

you certainly can point to some cases where public polling was not super accurate, it is clear if you look at the polling that the races where Republicans did relatively better are indeed the cases where Republicans did relatively better. There were some election night surprises such as Sean Patrick Maloney, who was in the Democratic leadership and who had deliberately moved to another district in New York in the New York northern kind of suburbs in order to have a safer district, that he lost was surprising. But the polls had already told us that the Democrats were not looking so hot in New York.

Alex Schein:

As of the recording of this interview with Professor Hopkins, the outcome of the election was not fully known. As we know now, Democrats will maintain control of the Senate and Republicans will control the majority of seats in the House of Representatives. Professor Hopkins discusses potential agenda items for both parties given a Republican controlled House and a Senate controlled by Democrats.

Daniel Hopkins:

The most likely outcome, from our vantage point right now Friday afternoon on November 11th, is that the Republicans will control the House by a slim margin. That's going to set up both challenges within the Republican Party and between the Republicans and the Democrats. Within the Republican party, if say Speaker Kevin McCarthy has a five or a seven vote margin in the House, then any group of eight Republicans knows that they can stop what's happening on the House floor.

Given the trend in the Republican party towards an interest in symbolic position taking and the lack of coalescence around a clear policy agenda beyond say tax cuts or stripping the IRS of authority, certain kinds of actions related to kind of reigning in government authority, I think it's a little bit of a wild card. I think that what I would expect is if the Republicans control either chamber, we are very likely to return to the kinds of brinksmanship that we saw six years after the 2010 election during the Obama administration when Republican members of Congress were at odds with Obama and there were pitch standoffs, concern about the United States breaching the debt ceiling. There were government shutdowns. I think that it is likely that we return to something like that.

To some extent, the Democrats with a 50-50 majority in the Senate, I mean 50-50 isn't a majority, but with 50 votes, and so control over the chamber thanks to the Vice President in the United States Senate, they've been living on borrowed time and they have actually accomplished far more than I would've expected them to a little less than two years ago when this window opened. The very fact that they have made change control of the Senate Chamber for two years, to say nothing of the fact that they've passed several major peaches of legislation which have redefined federal spending.

I think my expectation is that we'll certainly hear more about the Electoral College Act, and I wouldn't be surprised if there were additional efforts on questions of healthcare spending, maybe with picking up some of the proposals that fell by the wayside last time. But I think that Democratic control of both chambers is not the most likely outcome. I think that the Democrats all else seek probably would prefer to control the Senate because that would allow them to continue to confirm Cabinet officials and other presidential appointees and confirm justices for two more years.

Alex Schein:

A lot of the media attention in the days following the midterm elections has focused on former President Trump, who just this week announced his candidacy for president in 2024. Many of the candidates he endorsed lost their races, and there have been questions as to whether his influence as a political leader of the Republican party is starting to wane.

Geoff Duncan:

*There's no way to deny Donald Trump got fired Tuesday night. The Trump drag factor is real, and it's only getting worse.*

Winsome Sears:

*The voters have spoken and they have said that they want a different leader, and it is time to move on.*

Alex Schein:

Professor Hopkins weighs in on whether the Trump era might be coming to a close in American politics.

Daniel Hopkins:

I do a lot of exit polling, a lot of talking to voters about politics. If I go to a precinct in West Virginia or in Alabama or here in Philadelphia, I can tell you in the aggregate, I'll probably, over the course of today, talk to 25 Democrats and 75 Republicans. But any one person can always surprise you and even a person who's wearing a hat that says NRA or wearing a crucifix, many people can surprise you with their political views. And so, I have a lot more leverage as a social scientist to explain large groups of people than to explain the psychology of any one person.

One thing I've realized through the Trump era is I certainly don't think I have any particular insights into former President Trump's mindset, so I will keep my thoughts limited to voters. I do think that we saw that there is a significant appetite to move beyond Trump. Trump's polling now is really pretty negative in general elections, but also in the six years since Donald Trump won the presidency, his hold over the Republican party has only grown.

I think that as Mark Twain said, that rumors of his death were greatly exaggerated, and I think that similarly, the waning of Donald Trump's political power often feel more like wish casting than anything grounded in analysis. Until you get to a point where key members of the Republican party move in a concerted, unified way to limit Donald Trump's power in the party, I don't see that happening. I think they were scared in 2015 and 2016 that he would take enough of their voters with him if he were to leave the party in a huff, that, that would doom them. He is still very much a prominent figure in the Republican party and Jeff Flake and Bob Corker, and now our Senator Toomey, a long line of his critics, Representative Cheney, have all exited stage left.

And so, I think that it is challenging once Trump became a dominant figure in the party and has been dominant for long enough that he's really been able to remake it in his image, that the choice ultimately, I imagine, will be his, as to whether and when he wants to relinquish that power.

Alex Schein:

On election day, students from Professor Hopkins's Changing American Electorate class were out conducting their own exit polls. On Wednesday's class right after the election, Professor Hopkins talked with the students about their experience talking with voters.

Daniel Hopkins:

So the next day in class, I acknowledged that I had expected the Democrats to have a worse night and the Republicans to have a better night. We talked about some of the particular results, but we mostly talked about our experiences exit polling and what we had learned from being on site in this pivotal election.

They came up with a wide range of great questions. They were curious which candidates were perceived to be more or less extreme. They were curious about voters' views on abortion. They were curious about which issues voters were most concerned about. They were curious if voters thought that economic or social issues were more important. Then there were a wide range of issues, specific questions about fracking here in Pennsylvania. It's a great class exercise to let the students write the questions, test them out with their friends, and then put them on a live exit poll.

Alex Schein:

According to exit polls, young voters were a key group backing Democrats in this year's midterm elections.

Daniel Hopkins:

I think that when we talk about younger voters, it's important to acknowledge that the abortion issue was salient for many younger voters and, in particular, there was a wide partisan gap between younger men who lean somewhat democratic and younger women who lean overwhelmingly democratic. And so, I think that the generational patterns were related to the abortion issue. At the same time, the abortion issue isn't just an issue for those who identify as women. Also, it was an issue generationally. I think we will have to see once in the coming weeks and months as voter files are updated, we'll have a much better picture of what generational turnout looked like. I don't want to speculate too much on the basis of weak evidence.

On election night, what we really see are groups that are spatially clustered. So we can say a lot about what rural voters did because rural voters live in rural places. We can sometimes say something about what Latino voters did or what Black voters did to the extent that we can look at their precincts, or we can look at the counties that are predominantly Black, say. We can look at American Indian voters that way.

But young voters are found in a lot of places, and so it's harder to, you can look at the precinct here at the University of Pennsylvania. That's going to tell you about a very particular slice of young voters. And so, I partly just want to wait till we get the voter file data and can see very clearly which groups turned out in which numbers and which states.

Alex Schein:

This concludes our episode on the 2022 midterm elections. Special thanks to Professor Daniel Hopkins for sharing his time and expertise. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

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