

Opinion – The Midterm Elections and US Support for Ukraine

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, NOV 15 2022

A week after the midterm elections, the Democrats have defied the odds by keeping control of the Senate and threatening to keep control of the House of Representatives. While Republicans are still likely to gain a slim majority in the House, the Democrats have a chance of maintaining control. Now that the Democrats no longer need to win the race in Georgia to be decided in a run-off election in early December, the party has a newfound confidence to continue enacting President Biden's agenda. The Democrats have the support of millions of Americans who rejected the politics of the extreme right and Trump-backed election deniers, viewing the safeguarding of democracy and the protection of fundamental rights as paramount concerns.

The results of the midterm elections have tremendous consequences for the future of US support for Ukraine. The collapse of a Republican 'red wave' has certainly eased concerns in Kyiv, and Washington will announce a new military aid package in the next few weeks, signalling the continuation of aid to Ukraine remains unaffected by the election results. The Senate is likely to continue its present course, with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell both in favour of continuing President Biden's strong support for Ukraine. However, the House is another matter, as given the tight margins it will be difficult for significant legislation to pass. Kevin McCarthy, potentially the Speaker of the House leading a Republican caucus with a majority of only 5-10 votes, faces a crisis of legitimacy in his speakership from the start. Infighting amongst the GOP is likely to dominate events on Capitol Hill, and prominent Republican voices on the extreme right like Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene have expressed their dissatisfaction with the Biden administration's current Ukraine policy.

Given the divided government and partisan rancour set to continue in the next session, McCarthy will be pressured to pursue investigations into President Biden and his family while working to strengthen Republican policies heading into the 2024 presidential election. Thus, Ukraine may take a back seat to other domestic priorities that can reap tangible gains for the Republicans, rather than wooing voters with abstract conceptions of how support for Ukraine enhances their security at home. As they craft an agenda heading into 2024, GOP leaders are likely to match the growing dissatisfaction amongst Republican voters towards Ukraine. According to a recent Wall Street Journal poll, 48% of Republicans now say the US is doing too much to support Ukraine, up from only 6% in March. The two most vocal Republican supporters of Ukraine in Congress are also the two members who will no longer be serving next year, Rep. Adam Kinzinger and Rep. Liz Cheney, who chastised Taylor Greene for her position.

Within the Republican Party, some members are more pro-Putin than others and see an ideological ally in Putin's mission against the perceived excesses of liberalism and in support of traditional, conservative, and Christian values. However, it is far too simplistic to say these members of Congress are doing Putin's bidding and are firmly on the side of autocracy. It is possible to question US support for Ukraine and still be on the side of democracy, although the antidemocratic tendencies within the Trump wing of the Republican Party remain strong. For principled conservatives, questioning government spending and ensuring its proper allocation, as Kevin McCarthy outlined in a recent interview, is a noble and legitimate position. A 'blank check' for Ukraine is in no one's interests, but thus far the checks being provided to Ukraine have reaped incredible dividends not just for Ukrainians but to all citizens of NATO member states. In contrast to McCarthy and Taylor Greene, the Reagan-era conservatives like Liz Cheney who are more hawkish on defence and foreign policy matters rightly believe Ukraine is the bulwark and frontline to

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freedom. For Cheney, Ukraine's fall would signal a greater collapse of the international order that would harm US interests and strengthen Washington's anti-democratic adversaries like Russia.

President Biden often talks about the global battle between democracy and autocracy, recognising the significant pressures to democratic institutions that exist at home. The 2022 midterm elections may have represented a victory for democracy and against election denialism, but the period between the midterm elections and the next presidential election in 2024 is likely to be extremely fraught in America. Former President Trump is likely to announce his election bid on November 15 and numerous investigations into his conduct are continuing. While fewer pro-Trump election deniers will serve as elected officials than expected, the rift between election denialism and adherence to the rule of law within the Republican Party remains strong. Until the peaceful transfer of power occurs again in America, each election will be a stress test that risks further chipping away at the rule of law. 'Team normal' may have prevailed in the words of Liz Cheney, but there is still a lot of work to do in order to normalise and elevate the more moderate voices within the Republican Party.

As the Republicans may gain control of the House, albeit by a slimmer majority than expected, they would be wise to reflect on their roots and their recent history. For the act of supporting Ukraine is both forward-looking and historically minded. It draws upon the best impulses of America and the Republican Party in the waning days of the Cold War while working to create new allies and extend America's reach into the crown jewel of Putin's near abroad. Isolationism is a persistent and nagging impulse in American politics, and it is understandable that at a time of deep economic pain the issues of faraway Ukrainians will not be as pressing to American voters. However, as President Zelenskyy has so aptly demonstrated throughout this crisis, the Ukrainian fight is also America's fight. Zelenskyy is not looking to China or to other rising powers for support but to the tried-and-true allies of the West, most notably Britain and the United States. Furthermore, as a determined and united country, Ukraine will continue to play a greater role in ensuring America's own security in the decades to come.

As Americans have cast their ballots and many nations suffer from rising inflation, the Ukrainians are likely to endure one of their harshest winters in living memory. Millions of Ukrainians lack access to heat, electricity, and water as Russian missile and drone attacks continue, and total evacuation orders may be given for Kyiv if the situation worsens. The Russian retreat from Kherson, the only regional capital they were able to control since the start of the invasion, signals a major defeat for the Kremlin. The jubilant scenes of Kherson's liberation and Zelenskyy's arrival in the city are likely to strengthen the desire of the Ukrainians to fight on and work their way towards retaking Crimea. However, despite the symbolic and strategic loss of Kherson, Russia has many tools with which it can still prolong the conflict and stifle the Ukrainians' advances well into 2023. Continued US military support will be critical, particularly when it comes to increasing Ukraine's air defences as more sophisticated drone and missile attacks from Iranian-made systems enter into operation.

For Ukraine, daily survival is a challenge, but societal cohesion and political legitimacy is not in question. For the US, the opposite is true as political polarisation, and the likelihood of political violence threatens to deepen. In the severe darkness of winter, Ukraine offers lessons for Washington that the GOP, regardless of its position as majority or minority party, would be hard-pressed to ignore. These lessons pertain to the Ukrainian leadership and citizenry's ability to be nationalistic without being vindictive, and uncompromising without being vitriolic. Zelenskyy is a model in bridging the persistent fault-lines in Ukraine between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers, opting for cohabitation rather than demonisation in a time of conflict.

The greatest challenge for the Republicans is ensuring that their leadership lives up to Zelenskyy's perception of them as the inheritors of a great Reagan-esque tradition in American politics. Ukraine is a treaty ally-in-waiting, with interests and values increasingly bound together with those of the US. As the Biden administration has begun to realise, it is increasingly hard for Washington to forge alliances with states based on both shared interests and values in the 21st century. However, in the next decades of increased geopolitical competition, Ukraine will be one of those special states that meets both criteria, making it fully deserving of continued bipartisan support.

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