

The US Midterm Elections: Significance for Israel

Eldad Shavit | No. 1657 | November 13, 2022

The emerging results of the midterm elections in the United States depict the polarization of the American political system in recent years. No less, they are evidence of the growing public concern over the implications of the conduct of former President Trump and his supporters for the future of American democracy. Experience shows that this does not necessarily portend the outcome of the presidential election in 2024. However, the campaign for that election will likely start earlier than usual and will be charged and stormy. The midterm elections generally do not affect the administration's foreign policy, even if it will be more restricted due to a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, and thus no change is expected in the administration's support for Israel. President Biden has shown that he is committed to Israel's welfare and security, and relations between him and incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are good. The administration respects the democratic processes in Israel, although it is expected to examine the new government by its actions rather than its rhetoric. A Congress opposed to the administration is an opportunity for Israel, since it affords space to maneuver. On the other hand, Israeli actions that are interpreted by the administration as an attempt to outflank it by way of Congress could be harmful to Israel and the bilateral relations. Israel must exercise great caution, and above all avoid as much as possible being dragged into political disputes in Washington, since its interest is that support for Israel should continue to be based on a bipartisan consensus.

In the midterm elections in the United States, it appears that the Republican party will likely achieve a narrow majority in the House of Representatives, while the Democrats retain control of the Senate. While these results reflect

accepted processes in American politics in midterm elections, the early predictions of a Republican “red wave” proved false. President Biden was quick to describe the results as an achievement, particularly since before the elections he issued warnings about the substantive danger facing American democracy.

Do the elections portend the expected outcome of the presidential elections in 2024? Even if the results show some gains for the Republicans, experience indicates that no conclusions should be drawn about the next presidential elections. However, the close finish is a strong illustration of the sensitive and polarized situation characterizing American politics in recent years. Even a declining economy and low ratings for the incumbent president apparently did not make a difference, particularly with large sections of the American public influenced by the dramatic Supreme Court ruling that overturned the Roe v. Wade decision on abortions, and by the persistent denial of the election results by supporters of former President Trump, against the background of the ongoing investigation of his involvement in the attack on the Capitol building on January 6, 2020. It appears that the problematic impression left by the ex-President’s conduct convinced many Democrat voters to go out and express their concern over the future of democracy in the United States. Indeed, their victories in the gubernatorial races in key states will help the Democrats ensure they have control of the election processes in those states in the 2024 elections.

Moreover, over the next two years numerous global and US domestic events that impact heavily on the public mood are anticipated. Donald Trump’s expected announcement of his intention to run for president will be the opening shot in a longer than usual campaign. It is also possible that the results of the midterms will encourage the Republican Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, who beat his Democratic rival by a large majority, to challenge Trump and announce that he is running for president, and thus open a struggle among the Republicans. The relatively positive results for the Democrats and Trump’s expected announcement may well encourage President Biden to announce his intentions to run for a second term.

Whatever the case, Republican control of the House of Representatives could bring to a halt most of the legislative processes in the United States. The difficulty for presidents to work with a divided Congress is well known, and was evident during the latter part of Trump's tenure. Moreover, at present the likelihood that both parties will reach agreement on important legislation is very slight due to their intense mutual hostility. In any case, a narrow Republican majority in the House of Representatives and a Senate under Democratic control will make it hard for the Speaker of the House to control his/her party and give the administration more room to maneuver in Congress.

In general, the US midterms do not influence the administration's foreign policy significantly, although it will probably be more constrained with a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. Even if the Biden administration is forced from time to time to act with restraint in order to obtain support in Congress, in most cases it is expected to proceed with its current agenda, including by means of executive orders. The Republicans will try, in the relevant committees of the House of Representatives, to undermine the administration's intentions, mainly by promoting alternatives to the policies and placing obstacles – if and when the administration seeks to promote issues requiring action by Congress. In addition, anticipated global developments will provide no shortage of controversial topics. For example, they will probably highlight differences in policy toward the war in Ukraine. Even before the elections, Republican legislators expressed reservations about the administration's policy of granting aid to Ukraine, and promised to take steps to reduce the military aid. There are also likely to be disagreements on Iran, particularly if the administration seeks to promote moves that will enable a return to the nuclear treaty, even though at the moment the talks on this issue are stalled, and it is not clear if the coming months will see any advance.

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No change is expected in the administration's support for Israel. President Biden has already shown that he is committed to Israel's security and welfare. His relations with incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

are good and the administration respects the democratic processes in Israel. However, the administration is expected to examine the new government by its actions rather than its rhetoric. As long as it estimates that Israel is upholding shared liberal democratic values and not moving in the direction of damaging civil rights or implementing unilateral policy on the Palestinian issue, the administration will probably continue to maintain a fundamental dialogue with Israel's new government.

Also, it appears that changes in Congress will not lead to changes in the administration's policy in the Middle East. In recent years, and particularly against a background of the growing competition with China and the war in Ukraine, the American reference to the global threat has changed, which also affects the importance that the United States attaches to the Middle East. The administration is still obliged to pay attention to the region, but this focus is more limited compared to the past and aimed at damage control rather than promotion of opportunities. In particular there is a trend to reducing military inputs. Israel's focus will be first and foremost on Iran, and it appears that the administration will have to formulate an alternative policy on this matter. In this context, there may be some disagreements with the new government in Israel, which will urge the US to adopt a more assertive approach, including the preparation of a credible military option. Yet while the administration itself will continue to harden its line against Iran, it will also be looking for diplomatic ways to promote a settlement. The Palestinian issue, which has been sidelined over the last two years, could receive renewed prominence if the Israeli government adopts what the administration sees as a unilateral policy, and certainly if the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and the subject of annexation once again take center stage in Israeli policy.

A Congress opposed to the administration is in certain respects an opportunity for Israel, giving it more room to maneuver. On the other hand, any Israeli actions that are interpreted by the administration as an attempt to outflank it through Congress could harm Israel and its relations with the US. The Democrat administration and Biden himself have unpleasant memories of past Israeli conduct, particularly the attempt by Prime Minister

Netanyahu to exploit the disagreement between Congress and the Obama administration in order to exert pressure regarding the Iranian nuclear issue.

Israel must show great caution, and above all refrain as much as possible from being dragged into the political controversies in Washington. Israel's interest is to ensure that it continues to enjoy bipartisan support. Already there are many Democrat legislators who criticize Israel and its policies, and this criticism can be expected to increase if Israel tries to use Congress to attack the administration. Therefore, it is important for Israel to be careful to maintain good relations with both the administration and the legislators – from both parties.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen