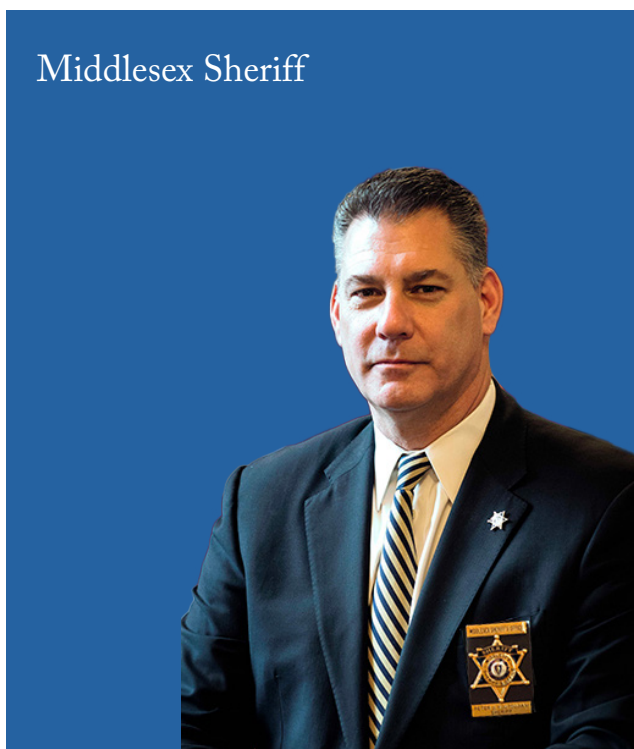


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Middlesex Sheriff



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Democratic Strategist



How Democrats Can Beat History in the 2022 US Midterm Elections and Look Toward the Future

Peter J. Koutoujian and Brendan A. Kennedy

A shaky economy with the risk of recession. Presidential approval numbers under 50%. A slim majority in the House and a draw in the Senate. An opposition party with dangerous devotion to a demagogue. At first glance, the outlook for Democrats this fall is not a pretty one.

In fact, history and traditional political science would tell us that the 2022 US midterm elections should be a disaster for Democrats. American voters have a tendency to swing like a pendulum in their elections: if one party wins big this year, the next cycle becomes a referendum on their policies and politics. The opposing party usually makes gains, especially during midterm elections when the president is off the ballot but his or her policies are featured in every congressional attack ad.

Consider some of these historic examples: Barack Obama won big in 2008, a victory that itself was a reaction to the war-weariness of the Bush years. The right wing of the Republican Party surged to power in the very next cycle of 2010, with soon-to-be Majority Leader Mitch McConnell vowing to make Barack Obama a one-term president. Republicans would ultimately gain 63 seats in the House and seven in the Senate.

Bill Clinton ended 12 years of Republican presidencies in 1992. The GOP, led by soon-to-be Speaker Newt Gingrich, staged the “Republican Revolution” just two years later in 1992. They would add 54 seats in the House of Representatives that year, and another eight in the US Senate.

¹ “Top GOP Priority: Make Obama a One-Term President.” *National Journal*, 23/10/2010. <https://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/top-gop-priority-make-obama-a-one-term-president-20101023/>.

² *Statistics of the Congressional elections of November 2*, 2010. US House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk. <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/2010election/>.

³ *Statistics of the Congressional elections of November 3*, 1992. US House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk. <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/1992election/>.

Dwight Eisenhower marched into the White House as a respected war hero in 1954. His landslide victory ended 20 years of Democratic control in the White House. Democrats gave him no peace however; two years later they would take the House and Senate (as well as eight governorships) by storm.⁴

Three presidents who, like Biden, won because they promised to be wholly different than their predecessor. Three presidents whose parties lost badly in the next midterm election.

1

Unique Trends at Play in 2022 Midterms

So, in 2022, what is a Democrat to do? The answer to that question lies in the data. We believe that there are critical trend lines within national and state-specific polling that suggest Democrats can outperform in this year and beyond. There are also unique circumstances regarding candidate strength and developing issues that bear monitoring in the coming weeks as they may curb the big gains that many Republicans expect.

Let's start by looking at the field of play. There are 435 members of the US House of Representatives and 100 senators in the US Senate. But due to staggered terms and the politicized redistricting process overseen by many state legislatures, only a handful of politicians face a potentially competitive race. Despite the fact that all 435 seats in the House are up for re-election, nearly 400 of them are safely held by a Democrat or Republican who has virtually no chance of losing. The pioneering Rep. Patsy Mink of Hawaii famously beat her Republican opponent for one of these seats in 2002, even though voters were well aware that she had passed away weeks earlier from pneumonia.⁶

Likewise, there are only seven to eight races in the U.S. Senate that are truly competitive this cycle.

On the foreign policy front, the majority of Americans are still closely following the war in the Ukraine and rate Biden well for his leadership on the global stage

However, Democrats cannot lose a single seat if they hope to hold onto their control of the chamber. In looking at the specific races and the poor economic headwinds mentioned earlier, it is entirely reasonable for people to assume that Democrats will lose both the House and the Senate this fall.

Perhaps we will. But Democrats are also the party of hope. Progressivism requires a degree of optimism, and we see reasons to be optimistic in the weeks and years ahead.

Firstly, there are unique factors at play in 2022 that could mitigate Republican gains. While most assume that the economy is a net negative for Democrats, more Americans are at work than ever before⁷. Though inflation continues to cut into family budgets, its deceleration could lead to people realizing financial flexibility for the first time in years.

On the foreign policy front, the majority of Americans are still closely following the war in the Ukraine⁸ and rate Biden well for his leadership on the global stage. We have seen in the past that international unrest can cause voters to look for stability at home and buck the historical trend of midterm changes in party control. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democrats actually gained seats in both legislative

⁴ *Statistics of the Congressional elections of November 2, 1954.* US House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk. https://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/1954election.pdf.

⁵ Mayer, Jane. "State legislatures are torching democracy." *The New Yorker*, 15/8/2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/15/state-legislatures-are-torching-democracy>.

⁶ NBC News. "Hawaii's Patsy Mink Honored with Presidential Medal of Freedom." *NBC News*, 24/11/2014. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/hawaiiis-patsy-mink-honored-presidential-medal-freedom-n24895>.

⁷ Biden, Joe. "Remarks by President Biden on the July jobs report and signing of anti-fraud bills." *The White House*, 5/6/2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/08/05/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-july-jobs-report-and-signing-of-anti-fraud-bills/>.

⁸ Daniller, Andrew & Cerda, Andy. "As war in Ukraine continues, Americans' concerns about it have lessened." *Pew Research Center*, 22/9/2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/22/as-war-in-ukraine-continues-americans-concerns-about-it-have-lessened/>.

chambers in 1934 as fascism came to power across the globe; George W. Bush's party did the same in 2002 as the war on terror raged. While we do not expect similar results this fall, Russia's rising aggression this past month will undoubtedly be on voters' minds as they head to the polls.

Secondly, the weakness of this year's candidates may turn a Republican wave into a trickle. The GOP candidates for those rare competitive Senate seats include a TV talk show doctor with a dubious history of medical endorsements⁹ and a former American football player who just last week flashed a fake police badge while on a debate stage¹⁰. Meanwhile, this year's Democratic candidates include Sen. Mark Kelly, a Navy fighter pilot turned astronaut who supported his wife after an assassin attempted to end her own congressional career¹¹, and Sen. Ralph Warnock, a civil rights leader who preaches from the same pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta that Martin Luther King Jr. once held.¹² Those biographies alone should give Democrats pride and confidence, regardless of an election's final result.

Of course, the most important candidates are not even on the ballot. We already spoke of President Biden's influence on the election; that is a given for a sitting president. But unique to this cycle is the all-consuming influence of former president Donald Trump. His lifelong desire for the spotlight has been achieved in the political sphere, with every candidate -Republican and Democrat- having to choose how they account for his presence.

Much has already been written about Trump's effect on Republican turnout this year. He craves the idea that his endorsements will help Republicans win both the House and the Senate, and provide momentum for his likely attempt to regain the White House in 2024. But Trump is a double-edged sword. He inflames the passion of the Republican base but also motivates Democrats to show up and rebuff his divisive ideology.

There is one additional silver lining for Democrats. The three presidents we listed earlier -Obama, Clinton, Eisenhower- all saw their parties lose harshly during the midterm elections of their first term. However, all three share something else too -all would go on to win a second term in the next election.

The real key question, then, is not if Democrats will win or lose in November. The question is what trends

can Democrats capitalize on to build toward success in this cycle and beyond.

2

A Deep Dive into Data

Elections can seem like enigmas, but they are ultimately simple math equations. You need to get at least half of the electorate to vote for you and your position. So victory equals 50 percent of voters plus one. What is hard is knowing how you motivate at least that many people to get out and vote.

To a large extent, this is the root of the difficult conversations that Democrats are having today, from the White House to our own homes. How do we combat a cult of personality with progressive policies? How do we rebut Trump's proudly anti-democratic inclinations with concrete legislation - but also ensure we are not just "bringing books to a knife fight" as the fate of democracy hangs in the balance? Most of all, how do we win back voters who used to be Democrats but have left because they no longer feel represented by our party?

That last question is one we have spent considerable time debating ourselves. Together we have four decades of experience in Democratic politics, and believe passionately that our party is at its best when it is inclusive, organized, and forward-looking. What the Democratic Party must do -not just for the sake of the midterms but for future elections as well- is to root ourselves in those principles again.

There is no doubt that we have been experiencing a populist period in American politics. The same trend is happening throughout Europe, including Spain.¹³ We could write a whole second article on the shared and specific reasons that populism is on the rise in different countries, but today we will focus on the cure rather than the symptoms.

It can be alluring to sail on the populist winds of change -they have carried some politicians into Congress and even the White House. But by their very nature they tend to be powerful gusts rather than consistent streams

⁹ Itkowitz, Colby & Bernstein, Lenny. "As TV doctor, Mehmet Oz provided platform for questionable products and views." *The Washington Post*, 3/10/2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/10/03/mehmet-oz-senate-television-show/>.

¹⁰ King, Ryan. "Herschel Walker flashes prop badge onstage during debate with Warnock." *Washington Examiner*, 14/10/2022. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/campaigns/herschel-walker-flashes-fake-police-badge-during-debate>.

¹¹ Chamlee, Virginia. "Mark Kelly on the Senate, campaigning and life with Gabby." *People*, 6/5/2022. <https://people.com/politics/mark-kelly-talks-ukraine-war-his-legislative-agenda-and-life-with-gabby-giffords/>.

¹² Butler, Anthea. "Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy lives on in Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock and Black liberation theology." *NBC News*, 18/1/2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/martin-luther-king-jr-s-legacy-lives-rev-dr-raphael-ncna1254513>.

¹³ Silver, Laura. "Populists in Europe - especially those on the right - have increased their vote shares in recent elections." *PEW Research Center*, 6/10/2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/06/populists-in-europe-especially-those-on-the-right-have-increased-their-vote-shares-in-recent-elections/>.

of support. Often they are only good for producing stormy seas and ultimately leaving a politician, and potentially his or her whole party, stranded. It is best then to not be blown off course and instead look to anchor yourself in the pieces of your platform that can hold steady over time.

It is this philosophy that we believe can carry the Democratic Party to victory in the coming years. Better yet, we have the data to demonstrate it.

Last year there was no national election in the United States. In these “off years” the most significant elections are local ones, with the majority of US cities and towns voting for their mayors, city councilors, select board members, school committee members, and so on. Indeed, these “off years” are really anything but “off”; they are when the most polling and voting is happening across the country. Political strategists comb these local races thoroughly to determine what common themes emerge from seemingly unrelated elections across the country. The results can tell us what is motivating voters once you strip away the influence of party affiliation, name recognition, and redistricting that cause so many of the national races mentioned earlier to be non-competitive.

2021 was a particularly important year to listen to voters as well. Coming in the midst of a global pandemic and just months from a historically divisive election that culminated in the insurrectionist riots at the US Capitol, voters were telling us what they thought of this new normal. What they said provided a roadmap for future campaigns to solve that simple math equation of 50 percent plus one.

By and large, voters told us that they were concerned about their security and wellbeing - an understandable statement given the upending of daily life that they had been experiencing. They made this statement through the issues they self-identified as being most important to them. Despite the fact that these elections were held in different states, were held for different offices, and featured different campaign-specific trends, voters kept coming back to the same themes when asked some variation of “What issue is most important to you?”

Let’s look at just a few examples from 2021 that demonstrate this.

Here in Massachusetts, we had an open race for mayor of Boston that featured several impressive and well-known candidates. The election would ultimately be won by Michelle Wu, and many pundits rightly focused on her historic win. But left overlooked was what Boston voters said were the issues that made them most likely to vote. Polling during the race found housing, education, and crime as the top three issues motivating voters.¹⁴ Housing and education are perennial issues in Boston and its mayoral races as they are two areas over which the mayor exercises the most direct control. But crime had not cracked the top three for issues since 1993 when Boston was grappling with unprecedented levels of gun violence.

Those numbers pale in comparison to voters in New York City however. Anywhere from 34%¹⁵ to a whopping 46%¹⁶ identified crime as their top priority in 2021. Unsurprisingly, they would overwhelmingly choose Eric Adams, a retired police captain, as their next mayor.

Crime was top of mind for voters during Atlanta’s municipal elections.¹⁷ It emerged as a critical issue in a Texas special election that saw Republicans flip a traditionally Democratic seat by running a candidate who was a firefighter and former sheriff’s deputy.¹⁸

Despite all these warning signs telling us that voters were concerned about public safety, Democrats in 2021 were still debating whether to make “defund the police” into a litmus test for party purity. Perhaps no modern Democratic politician understood this dissonance better than President Biden, who had fought for better training and funding for police throughout his career from the Senate to the White House. Even so, it would be several months until he could use his position as the party’s standard-bearer to reset this narrative.¹⁹ The importance of messaging around public safety is just now showing itself in 2022 races²⁰ and in national polling, but it has been years in the making.

We chose this issue because we had the opportunity to see it up front and close. As a nationally recognized

¹⁴ 7NEWS. “7NEWS/Emerson College Poll: Wu leads pack, tight race for run-off spot.” *WHDH News*, 26/8/2021. <https://whdh.com/news/7news-emerson-college-poll-wu-leads-pack-tight-race-for-run-off-spot/>.

¹⁵ Emerson College Polling. “NYC 2021: Adams Poised to be Next Mayor of NYC, Leading Sliwa by 40 Points.” *Emerson Polling Reportable News*, 2021. <https://emersonpolling.reportablenews.com/pr/nyc-2021-adams-poised-to-be-next-mayor-of-nyc-leading-sliwa-by-40-points>.

¹⁶ Cuza, Bobby. “Exclusive poll: Crime takes center stage in mayor’s race, fueling support for Eric Adams.” *NY1 News*, 7/6/2021. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/decision-2021/2021/06/07/crime-takes-center-stage-in-mayor-s-race--fueling-support-for-eric-adams>.

¹⁷ Bunch, Riley. “Election Day is here. The top issue for many voters? Crime.” *Georgia Public Broadcasting*, 2/11/2021. <https://www.gpb.org/news/2021/11/02/election-day-here-the-top-issue-for-many-voters-crime>.

¹⁸ Svitek, Patrick. “Republican John Lujan wins special election runoff to flip Texas House seat in San Antonio.” *The Texas Tribune*, 2/11/2021. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/02/john-lujan-frank-ramirez-texas-legislature-san-antonio/>.

¹⁹ Gurman, Sadie. “Biden: The answer is not to defund the police.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1/3/2022. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/state-of-the-union-address-latest-news/card/biden-the-answer-is-not-to-defund-the-police-pvJZnvvL5gpk6UPEmcu>.

²⁰ Sink, Justin & Fabian, Jordan. “Biden Sees ‘Clear Message’ to Fight Crime After California Vote.” *Bloomberg*, 8/6/2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-08/biden-says-california-vote-is-a-clear-message-to-address-crime>.

law enforcement leader, Sheriff Koutoujian was intimately involved with congressional negotiations on policing reform and the President's work on an executive order to strengthen public safety by ensuring it is both effective and accountable.²² We remain actively engaged in efforts to evolve the mission of policing in America and expand the tools available to officers and leaders. This includes an innovative collection of police chiefs and sheriffs from across the country, working in collaboration with author and leadership guru, Simon Sinek, known as The Curve. Our goal is a world in which all people feel justice is administered with dignity, equity, and fairness. We are inspired by principles laid out by Sir Robert Peel when he first constructed what a modern, ethical, professional policing force could look like in 1820s London. The nine Peelian principles are as valid today as they were 200 years ago -yet another proof that good policy anchors can help you stay steady over time. Central to the Peelian philosophy is that policing can only be effective if it has the consent and approval of the general public. This maxim is worthy of everyone's reflection as we debate and discuss the future roles that American law enforcement ought to fulfill in our society.

However, public safety is just one thread amongst the fabric of issues that voters are using to express their motivation. Several other issues fit under the theme of personal security and wellbeing which we stated earlier. We have already discussed the importance of the economy in the 2022 midterms; much like crime, this trend has its roots in 2021 races.²⁴

Most notably, the rapid and aggressive repeal of abortion rights across the country in the wake of the US Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* has galvanized Democratic voters. While we do not yet have enough data to fully state its effect, the decision has quite rightly led voters to question just how secure their personal well-being can be if the Supreme Court has become beholden to partisan politics over legal precedence.

3

Looking Toward the Future

So, we know it is historically unlikely for an incumbent party to hold onto power during midterm elections of a president's first term. We also know what is on the minds of voters and their desire for greater security and wellbeing after a turbulent few years. If the Democrat Party hopes to beat history during the midterms, our messaging must be sharply focused on how Democratic policies and politicians have fought for greater prosperity and safety.

We have done it by reimagining policing in America, so that it is trusted as a public service and officers are not being asked to do more than their resources and responsibilities allow.

We have done it by alleviating financial burdens on millions of Americans. From minimum wage increases to student loan forgiveness, it is Democratic policies that have restarted our economy and put more dollars into the pockets of working class Americans.

We have done it by being the party which stands against Russian aggression, supporting democracy and human rights in the Ukraine. Our security and wellbeing requires leaders who will stand up to strongmen and not seek to appease them.

Each of these messages highlight at least one Democratic priority within a context that relates to voters' mindsets. It is no coincidence that they also harken back to messages used by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1934 and George W. Bush in 2002, when both presidents managed to expand their congressional majorities.²⁵

President Biden and the Democrats may not be as successful in 2022. But if we stay the course, if we resist the populist winds of change and remain focused on the strength of our candidates and our policies, we will have earned our moniker as the party of progress. And we will be ready for 2024, whatever and whoever may try and run against us.

²¹ Schneider, Elena. "Midterm voters key in on crime." POLITICO, 10/5/2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/05/midterm-voters-crime-guns-00060393>.

²² The White House. "FACT SHEET: President Biden to Sign Historic Executive Order to Advance Effective, Accountable Policing and Strengthen Public Safety." The White House, 25/5/2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/25/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-sign-historic-executive-order-to-advance-effective-accountable-policing-and-strengthen-public-safety/>.

²³ Nagle, Michael. "Sir Robert Peel's Nine Principles of Policing." *The New York Times*, 16/4/2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/nyregion/sir-robert-peels-nine-principles-of-policing.html>.

²⁴ "Virginia voters rank the economy as top issue." WUSA9, 2/11/2021. <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/local/virginia/virginia-voters-economy-top-issue-when-voting-in-2021-election/65-29347cb5-a4b0-48bf-8c4b-180f4f33d48d>.

²⁵ "Franklin, George and Joe: What Biden can learn from Roosevelt and Bush." *New York Daily News*, 4/9/2022. <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-biden-bush-roosevelt-20220904-d66p22ich5cgxledeoqyo3vm5a-story.html>.