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To: Interested Parties

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Re: **How Democrats Prevented a Red Wave**

By all major political indicators, 2022 should have delivered the type of shellacking that the president's party typically endures in midterm elections: Over 70% of voters believed the country was on the wrong track, 76% rated the economy negatively, and President Biden's approval rating of 43% has historically resulted in a loss of about 40 House seats.¹ Yet, despite these strong headwinds, Democrats and President Biden bucked history by holding the Senate and only narrowly losing the House of Representatives. So how did they do it? Below are some takeaways from post-election survey data that help explain how Democrats avoided a red wave.

- **Democrats made this election a choice rather than a referendum on President Biden.** Midterm elections are typically a referendum on the president, but Democrats outperformed the negative political environment by managing to make this one a choice instead. A choice not only on the economy and inflation, but also on issues like abortion and the state of our democracy, and on the quality of Republican candidates, many of whom expressed extreme views that alienated voters. Instead of a referendum on President Biden, Democrats managed to make the midterms a referendum on extreme GOP candidates like Oz, Masters, Walker, and others across the country.

In past midterm elections, even those voters who only *somewhat* disapproved of the president have heavily favored the opposition party in their vote for Congress. This was the case in both 2018 and 2014, when those who somewhat disapproved of Trump and Obama voted against each president's party by more than 20 points.² However, 2022 represented a dramatic reversal of this trend, with those who somewhat disapproved of President Biden favoring Democratic congressional candidates by a 25-point margin.³ Despite these voters' dissatisfaction with Biden, they still strongly preferred his party in their vote for Congress.

¹ [2022 Exit poll data; The American Presidency Project](#)

² [2018](#) and [2014](#) exit poll data

³ [AARP 2022 Post Election Survey Data](#)

- **Democrats won by winning over Independents, not by turning out their base.** Both exit polls and AARP's post-election poll of 63 targeted congressional districts revealed that Democrats bucked history and won Independents. This was the first time that the president's party won Independents since 2002 and only the second time since 1986.

That Democrats won over Independents was critical since Republicans appear to have bested them in turnout based on both finalized geographic data and exit polls. The latter found that Republicans had a 3- to 4-point advantage in party ID and that each party won about 95% of their own partisans. It was therefore Democrats' performance with Independents, not turnout, that helped prevent a red wave.

- **Democrats were able to make this election a choice due to abortion and threats to democracy being as important to voters as inflation and the economy.** In AARP's poll of targeted districts, the share of voters rating abortion (28%) and threats to democracy (25%; 53% combined) as one of their top issues was just as high as the share prioritizing inflation (33%) and the economy (21%; 54% combined). While Republicans won voters focused on inflation and the economy by a wide margin, Democrats did even better among those most focused on abortion and threats to democracy, helping them to overcome the headwinds created by voters' economic concerns.

President Biden was criticized for delivering a major speech on the threats to our democracy shortly before election day, but these results – along with our Wall Street Journal poll in late October which showed threats to democracy as the second most important issue to voters – suggest that the President was right to highlight this issue, which had real resonance with a significant portion of the electorate, particularly seniors.⁴

- **Abortion and threats to democracy resonated most strongly with different age groups, making them a potent combo for Democrats.** Abortion was the top issue with voters under 50 in the AARP survey, while threats to democracy was the most important with seniors. The strength of these two issues with two distinct age groups allowed Democrats to improve their margins at both ends of the age spectrum.
- **Democrats performed well among seniors thanks to these voters focus on threats to democracy and Social Security.** Social Security was a top issue with seniors – behind only inflation and threats to democracy – and was another

⁴ [Wall Street Journal Survey](#)

issue that voters heavily favored Democrats on. The importance of threats to democracy and Social Security helped boost Democratic support with seniors, with President Biden's passage of policies to reduce prescription drug costs as part of the Inflation Reduction Act likely also playing a role. As a result, the AARP poll found that Democrats won seniors in targeted congressional districts by a 3-point margin. This was a major achievement for Democrats, given that seniors made up nearly a third of the 2022 electorate nationally and that Republicans had won them in every midterm since 2006.

- **Late deciders did not heavily break towards Republicans.** In midterms, those who don't decide whom to vote for until late in the campaign typically break heavily against the president's party. But this year, Republicans won those who decided whom to vote for in the last week by only 3 points, which was not nearly a big enough margin to create a red wave.
- **Voters, and especially Independents, expressed a clear desire for more bipartisanship.** A key factor in Democrats' ability to win over Independents was that these voters wanted more bipartisanship and felt Democratic candidates were more likely to deliver it. By an 11-point margin (53% to 42%), voters preferred a candidate who would "work in a bipartisan manner and compromise" over one who would "stay true to their beliefs." Among Independents, the preference for bipartisanship more than doubled to 24 points. Democrats benefited from this desire by winning the voters who preferred a bipartisan approach by a 30-point margin.
- **The passage of the Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS Act allowed Democrats to cut into the GOP advantage on the economy and reduce frustration over a lack of legislative accomplishments.** We saw in much of our polling that the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the CHIPS Act helped Democrats narrow Republicans' lead on economic issues. The passage of these laws also helped reduce frustration about the lack of legislative accomplishments from President Biden and Democrats in Congress that we regularly heard about in focus groups prior to passage. By delivering these pieces of legislation, President Biden and Democrats were able to mollify concerns and tout the passage of popular economic policies in paid advertising, such as bringing the manufacturing of supply chains back to the U.S., requiring corporations to pay their fair share of taxes, and making prescription drugs more affordable. While Republicans still outperformed Democrats among midterm voters on the economy, these policies gave Democrats real economic accomplishments to run on, which helped make the debate over the economy more competitive.

- **Democrats overperformed because voters *disliked* Republican candidates more, not because voters liked Democrats more than we thought.** While Democrats are understandably encouraged by the results of the 2022 midterms, they should be careful not to interpret the results as evidence that voters liked the party more than pre-election polls suggested. The passage of the IRA may have helped improve views of the Democratic Party, but on election day, it was still viewed just as negatively (53% unfavorable) as the Republican Party (52% unfavorable).

Democrats were able to outperform their negative party brand because Republican candidates in most key races were seen as more extreme than their Democratic opponents. In the AARP poll, among the 70% of voters who said they voted *more for* the congressional candidate they chose rather than *more against* the candidate they did not, Republicans actually won by 1 point. But among the 25% who voted more *against* the other candidate, Democrats won by 12 points. Democrats' success in 2022 was therefore not due to voters liking the party more than polls suggested but instead due to voters disliking Republican candidates even more.