



Midterm momentum

Protest dynamics serve as a powerful indicator of the national mood, offering a lens to predict electoral outcomes.

Midterm elections in the U.S. often hinge on the national mood, with the party out of power typically gaining momentum. Protest activity—whether left- or right-leaning—provides a real-time pulse of this sentiment. In 2018, a surge in anti-Trump protests foreshadowed a Democratic wave. By 2022, however, the expected Republican advantage was upended by a seismic shift in mobilization patterns.

Historical trends suggested a GOP landslide in 2022, fueled by economic discontent and Biden's low approval ratings. Yet, it is widely regarded that the Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade* disrupted this trajectory. Abortion rights protests erupted nationwide, with left-leaning mobilization dwarfing right-leaning activity. The data reveals a stark contrast: while 2018 protests were diffuse (targeting im-

migration, healthcare, and race), 2022's movement was laser-focused, galvanizing women and young voters.

The 2018 midterms demonstrated how protest energy translates into electoral gains. Districts with high protest activity saw elevated Democratic turnout, flipping 41 House seats. In 2022, despite lower overall protest volume post-COVID, abortion-related protests became the critical mobilizing force. Swing states like Michigan and Pennsylvania recorded record midterm turnout, with abortion-related ballot proposals concerning sleeper laws driving engagement.

The GOP's anticipated "red wave" collapsed under the weight of abortion backlash. Protest data from 2022 shows a large spike in demonstrations regarding "abortion", "healthcare", and "women's rights" after the Dobbs decision—a surge that correlated with Democratic overperformance. In fact, most of these issues were not even close to the top 10 protest issues of 2018, with any attributions to attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act subsiding after the

failed 2017 repeal. Right-leaning mobilization, which was largely missing in 2018, was present in 2022, but was not as large as the amount of left-leaning mobilization, which could be predictive of the impending dampening effect on the incoming GOP wave that upended senate races completely and dulled the House majority to one of the narrowest since 2000. The margins of victory in the elections are also visible in the number of protests in favor of the views of either side of the aisle: a blowout victory for the left and progressives in 2018, and divided government with ungovernable majorities in 2022.

The 2018 and 2022 cycles reveal a consistent pattern: mass mobilization reflects—and may even shape—electoral outcomes. While the out-party typically benefits from midterm discontent, ideological mobilization can override historical trends. As protests grow increasingly issue-specific, their predictive power sharpens. For analysts, tracking protest valence and volume may offer a clearer window into the national mood than polls alone. 🌱