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Polls find most Americans think the conflict with Iran was justified. The only way to help the GOP is to win.



A lone protester in Washington in April. TOM WILLIAMS/ CQ ROLL CALL VIA ZUMA PRESS

It Was the Economy, Not the War

By Mark Penn And Andrew Stein

After the Republicans got trounced last week, JD Vance wasted no time in second-guessing one of Donald Trump's most consequential decisions: "The reason we lost is the war," the vice president tweeted Wednesday morning. "To the people who are pissed off and want to say, 'I told you so': you're right, you did tell us so." In reality, many factors contributed to the loss, and polls point to the economy as the biggest one.

Republicans could have expected to suffer setbacks, the norm for midterm elections. Bill Clinton wasn't fighting a war when his presidency was rocked in 1994 by

the losses of both houses of Congress. The last time the president's party gained seats in a midterm was in 2002. That was one of only two midterm elections since 1966 that left the president's party in control of the House. The other was 1978.

When wars cause major political shifts, as they did in 1952, 1968 and 2006-08, they usually involve ground combat leading to thousands or even tens of thousands of American casualties, not a temporary $1.50-a-gallon increase in the price of gasoline, which costs a typical household about $20 a week. If that's enough to bring about a political sea change, then the electorate has lost all rationality, and presidents will be constrained to wait for an attack on U.S. soil before taking military action to defend America.

So why did the GOP lose so badly? Voters have been unhappy about the economy since the Covid pandemic in 2020, and each party has faced a grumpy electorate as it has come into office since. American consumers haven't gotten over the shock of 22% cumulative inflation under Joe Biden. Since voters under 50 had no experience with inflation, they have unrealistic expectations that prices will reset downward. Instead, wages need to catch up—and that takes time.

According to the Harvard CAPS/Harris poll, 58% of voters were unhappy with the economy when they showed Democrats the door in 2024, compared with 64% late last month. They were happier with the economy when Donald Trump was elected, but that faded month after month, showing the biggest decline when tariffs were issued and then when Democratic campaign ads were in full swing. Among voters supporting Democrats, 86% said they were unhappy with the economy. Ahead of the midterms, only 5% of voters ranked foreign policy as the most important issue facing the country. To the extent that the war was a factor, it was in large part because of the spike in gasoline and diesel prices.

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True, when the Fox News Voter Poll asked if going to war with Iran was the right or wrong decision, roughly 6 in 10 voters said it was the wrong decision. But the Harvard CAPS/Harris polls asked follow-up questions that suggest voters don't want to abandon the war—they want to finish it the right way. Asked if the Iranians were negotiating in good faith, 65% of respondents said no. Should the Iranians be allowed to control the Strait of Hormuz? Sixtyseven percent said no, including a majority of both parties.

The poll also asked if Iran should be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon, and 85% said no. People agree with the objectives of the conflict, and those objectives may not be achievable without conflict. Asked whether the U.S. is justified in using force if the Iranians refuse to yield on these key issues, 63% said yes. The war has dragged on when voters wanted it to be won—and they still do.

The biggest 2024 swing in the electorate was among the newly minted Hispanic voters. While the black vote barely moved, the Pew Research Center found that the Democrats' margin among Latinos swung 12 points in 2024, from 15 points to 3. That was enough to flip most of the swing states. They swung dramatically back, giving Democrats a 30-point edge in House races, according to the Fox News Voter poll.

Did Hispanic border towns see protests against the war? No. Latinos had two problems with this administration— that prices remained high and that Immigration and Customs Enforcement overreached, conducting heavy-handed raids and removing not only criminals but otherwise law-abiding illegal aliens. The Harvard CAPS/Harris poll found that 68% of Hispanic voters had a negative view of ICE.

The Republicans did lose some of the young male vote, triggered by the constant and deliberate division created by the likes of Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens. They targeted millions of people, while left- wing bloggers worked to mobilize some of that vote against Republicans.

The Republican response should have been twofold: going after those bloggers directly to minimize their influence, and mounting an offense to get some of the Democratic women, like those who voted for Michigan Rep. Haley Stevens against Abdul El-Sayed, with a message geared toward helping today's soccer moms.

Instead of working on these swing groups, Republicans focused on turning out the base, which they did. But without outreach to Hispanics and women, they played defense, while Democrats spent more than $650 million on messages about affordability and healthcare costs. This drove up a month-aftermonth movement in the polls of people believing that their economic conditions were declining.

The Republicans lost arguments they should have been able to win. The economy had lower inflation (though not deflation), record growth, increased wages and the highest median wage in history, all to no electoral impact. Aid to Israel is $3.8 billion annually, almost all of which is spent here and supports jobs in the U.S. defense industry. Tariffs raised prices but also brought in about $170 billion in deficit-reducing revenue a year, a drop in the bucket for a $30 trillion economy. Mr. Biden's laughably named Inflation Reduction Act spent $2 trillion, much of it wastefully or fraudulently, enough to drive inflation— and it was aimed at raising gasoline prices, purportedly to prevent climate change. An administration's electoral success is determined not by whether it does what the polls say the people want, but by whether it convinces voters that what it is doing is right. This means that the president has three basic objectives in the next two years: to defeat Iran, to demonstrate that his economic plans are working, and to hit the dangers of Democratic ideas like the Green New Deal, which would drive up energy prices permanently, and Medicare for All, which would destroy Medicare and private insurance as we know it.

Mr. Trump and his administration need to explain to Americans the reason we took on the Iranian regime, which is the world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism and is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans over the past 47 years. If America wins the war, it will clear the way for peace and stability in the Mideast along with permanently lower energy prices.

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