

## **Trump confounds critics as Democrats take house**

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Losing control of the House of Representatives in the US mid-term elections will make life in the White House tougher for Donald Trump. But Democrats will be deluding themselves if they believe winning a majority in the house will inevitably derail the Trump presidency or lead to his impeachment. In the 2010 mid-terms Barack Obama suffered substantial Republican gains at the expense of the Democrats, with 63 house seats falling, along with six in the Senate, so that for six of Mr Obama's eight years in the White House Republicans controlled congress. So, too, with the George HW Bush, George W. Bush and Richard Nixon presidencies in the mid-term elections they faced: in 1994, with Bill Clinton in the White House, Republicans gained 54 house seats and eight in the Senate. As with Mr Obama, six of Mr Clinton's eight years as president were served with Republicans controlling congress. But he got through them.

While Mr Trump has lost control of the house, Republicans have bolstered their control of the Senate. Judged against the mid-term outcomes for Mr Obama and Mr Clinton, that shows he is travelling much better with voters after his first two years in office than many in the media have been prepared to concede. This is a remarkable achievement given the controversy and upheaval that constantly surrounds him, and the attacks directed at him.

That he is faced with potentially severe new challenges, however, is clear. The Democratic majority in the house, most likely led by Mr Trump's bitter adversary Nancy Pelosi, will have extensive powers to decide which legislation proposed by Mr Trump is discussed, or not. It will have control of committees with the power to launch aggressive investigations into the President's administration, including alleged Russian collusion, business dealings and sexual harassment claims. More than 60 house Democrats have longstanding "pledges" calling for "ethics" proceedings targeting Mr Trump, a euphemism for impeachment. But they would be wise to think long and hard before going ahead with them, even with their new majority. Ms Pelosi, 78, was a member of the house in the 1990s when its Republican majority impeached Mr Clinton. She knows about the intensity of the costly voter backlash against the Republicans that sparked. She won't want to repeat the mistake. Democrats would be wise to cool any impeachment fervour or risk a similar voter backlash.

Even though it may not be the “blue wave” they desired, there can be no denying the success of the Democrats in winning the house as well as many governorships across the US. But Mr Trump’s showing, after two turbulent years, in extending Republican control of the Senate with its important powers over all key appointments and other major aspects of his administration, should not be overlooked. Two years ago — and even just months ago — the wide expectation was for Mr Trump to be humbled in the mid-terms in a way similar to Mr Obama.

That he averted this owes much to his achievements, especially in relation to the soaring US economy, jobs growth and his canny exploitation of issues that matter to mainstream Americans, especially on border security and illegal immigration.

The usual Trump haters may find it unpalatable, but the reality is that Mr Trump is showing himself to be a far more substantial and politically savvy President than he seemed likely to be when he was inaugurated. He was always going to be unorthodox and at times bewildering. But amid the daily tumult and endless and frequently misguided tweeting, his achievements have been considerable and the mid-terms, despite the loss of the house, confirm that reality. Nowhere has his different style been more apparent than in foreign policy: who else would have had the chutzpah to wilfully embark on a tariff war with China? Yet early signs are that his strategy is working, with President Xi Jinping now talking about opening up to imports.

By contrast, the Democrats showed themselves to be still fighting on the same tired policy platforms, with the same tired leadership, that led to voters’ rejection of Hillary Clinton in 2016. Bringing Mr Obama and former vice-president Joe Biden back for the campaign indicated how desperately they are in need of new leadership. With a new policy agenda, the Democrats might conceivably have done as well as the Republicans did in Mr Obama’s first mid-terms by winning the Senate, too. Instead, they lost seats. The Democrats need to stop “resisting” the 2016 result and strike out anew, with an eye to the 2020 election. To be fair, winning the house may be a good starting point for that strategy, so long as they don’t overplay their hand in throwing up roadblocks aimed at destroying Mr Trump’s administration, including trying to impeach him.

Mr Trump also could learn from the mid-terms. There has been a backlash against him in the suburbs; perhaps he would do well to observe limits to voter tolerance for aggression in politics, with many Americans tiring of divisiveness.