FINAL WORD ❧ BY TIM ROWLAND

Joe Manchin Nation?

Now that all the votes have been counted and all the results over-analyzed, we can safely make some important conclusions about November's elections: Democracy has been saved. A stake has been driven through the heart of MAGA. And Ron DeSantis will be president in 2025. The big unknown is whether Kevin McCarthy will outlast the pickleball obsession.

OK, maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves. But for once, most doomsayers across the political spectrum could find something to smile about.

Democracy is no utopia, as has been noted many times in these pages. Majorities can do terrible things. But, as also noted, democracy has the virtue of letting the majority toss out rulers they've grown tired of and block would-be rulers that worry them. This fall, American voters acted like Archie Manning when he quarterbacked the hapless New Orleans Saints in the 1970s: make the best of what they had on hand.

We're not in a Golden Age of Leadership, either here or abroad. From Vladimir Putin to Xi Jinping to Jair Bolsonaro to Ali Khamenei to whoever is in charge of the UK and Israel this week, the bar for competence may be at a historical low. Next to them, Joe, Nancy, Chuck, Mitch, and Kevin seem Solomonic.

Lacking much better, American voters wisely trimmed the edges.

Republicans who campaigned on Stopping the Steal, elementary school furries, and frazzledrip pizzerias were largely turned away. Likewise Democrats who wanted to defund the police and discounted inflation in general and energy prices in particular.

The result is that Americans as a group, at least for one day in November, looked a whole lot closer to Joe Manchin than any other member of the U.S. political class. An antichrist to the left, West Virginia's senior senator may have saved the Democrats from themselves by keeping them from passing every leftist scheme that has been hatched since Thomas Spence wore short pants.

None of this is to say that the 118th Congress will be a model of sage leadership. There are more than enough red hats and wokes to keep things interesting But there's reason to think those folks won't be able to put the full faith and credit of the American financial system at risk.

Not that they won't try. That brings us to the second virtue of November's results: both the Senate and House majorities now teeter on razor-thin margins, within the normal flow of resignations and untimely passings. And no one should be measuring the drapes in the Oval Office. Washington is on notice against acting like the Mayhem guy in the Allstate ads. And though that reality is probably too nuanced for *all* 537 federal elected officials to noodle through, there are enough old-fashioned self-preservationists in the group to understand that chaos will reflect poorly on each party in 2024.

Another thing that's been noted in these pages: divided government isn't the worst thing in the world. It cools the jets on tril-

lion-dollar boondoggles, budgetary hostage-taking, and repealing-and-replacing Social Security and Medicare with something TBD. And if the Gazpacho Police in the House spend the next two years investigating Hunter Biden's laptop, what's the harm?

What is too bad is that some of those folks actually *could* do some good. Buried amidst the red hats are issues deserving of serious conversation, like entitlement sustainability, government spending, bureaucratic overreach, and the virtues of freedom to be—to put it clinically—a little off your rocker so long as you're not hurting anyone. Talk about a golden moment for a more traditional Republicanism. But all that will get lost in the tempest now brewing between the two biggest-name politicians in Florida.

Still, long journeys begin with single steps, and the midterms felt like a good one. In the hours and days after the polls closed, concession speeches were given complete with calls for coming together as Americans. Eyes turned to future elections, not court filings. For the most part, tall tales of election fraud were limited to

VP-auditioning Kari Lake in Arizona. But the object of her flirtations, the decrier of the Greatest Fraud in American History, seemed more worried about his having endorsed a slew of high-profile candidates who flopped in winnable races.

Concerning one in particular, Pennsylvania Senate candidate Mehmet Oz, Donald Trump blamed his wife Melania and Fox News's Sean Hannity for falling for a TV charlatan.

American voters, it seems, are overcoming that affliction. **R**

TIM ROWLAND is the author of *Politics Weird-o-Pedia: The Ultimate Book of Surprising, Strange, and Incredibly Bizarre Facts about Politics* **(Racehorse Publishing, 2019).**