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Crawling from the wreckage: the Republicans left standing after the midterm collapse



Of all the Republicans who had a bad time of it last week as the U.S. midterm votes were tallied, Vice President JD Vance arguably had it the worst.

And Vance in fact might be the only one to argue with that. Otherwise, it would appear to be a consensus.

Vance's stock may have dropped more sharply than Nvidia's. He had long been viewed as the successor to President Donald Trump and the MAGA movement and the favorite to be the Republican presidential nominee in 2028.

That movement, however, was thoroughly rebuked by a grouchy American public that ended up electing Democrats across the country to offices they haven't held in decades and in states that were once considered cherry-red.

For Vance, it was like inheriting a condemned building while having to pay the taxes and the demolition costs.

His misfortune has opened the door to other Republicans who may be reconsidering whether to mount a presidential run next year, such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and former Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin.

Beyond the Republican ticket at large taking a beating, Vance wedded himself to deeply unpopular candidates such as Ken Paxton, who ran for the U.S. Senate in Texas, and Vivek Ramaswamy, the nominee for Ohio governor. Both were trounced.

It may be his support for Ramaswamy that clouds Vance's prospects the most.

Vance stood behind what was widely considered to be the most loathsome campaign ad of the cycle, one that featured the estranged, elderly mother of his Democratic opponent, Amy Acton. As a child, Acton was removed from her mother's home after her stepfather was indicted for sexually abusing her.

While other Republicans blasted the ad, Vance embraced it, telling critics to "stop whining."

Acton outpaced Ramaswamy by eight percentage points, becoming the first Democratic governor of Ohio in a generation. Democrats also won the U.S. Senate race in what became a twin-cam humiliation for the vice president in his home state.

Chris Christie, the former Republican governor of New Jersey and failed presidential candidate, told ABC News that while Ramaswamy is "going to be sent to the dustbin of history. . . J.D. Vance is gonna be remembered, I think, from this campaign, more than anything else."

Blaming the Iran War

And it's not like Vance had a ton of political goodwill to burn in the first place. Opinion polls consistently show him at around 40% approval, so he had some work to do even before the midterm carnage.

Now? It's more than just work; it's a boulder he has to roll uphill with his bare hands. To that end, a story in the Wall Street Journal over the weekend suggested Vance could sit out 2028 in the belief that no Republican stands a chance given the country's mood.

But he is also already taking steps to distance himself from Trump. Following the election results, Vance issued his own post-mortem on social media, blaming the Iran war for the drubbing without mentioning that he – the vice president – was part of the braintrust that launched it. (Trump, for his part, said he wouldn't have done anything differently.)

> You are a coward who has decided that whatever Donald Trump says should go until, of course, Donald Trump is now a loser at the ballot box - Abdul El-Sayed

That post earned Vance more brickbats from critics on the right, who said he was being disloyal, and on the left, who claimed he was trying to dodge blame for starting the war.

"You should have spoken up. But you never will, because you are a coward who has decided that whatever Donald Trump says should go until, of course, Donald Trump is now a loser at the ballot box," said Democratic Senator-elect Abdul El-Sayed of Michigan, whom Vance actively campaigned against and whom he called "very evil." (El-Sayed won his race by seven points.)

Inching toward MAGAism

But the question already hanging over the 2028 presidential race is whether the Republican Party is more than just a Trump vassal state at this point, whether there is room for a different kind of candidate.

If he chooses to run, Vance ostensibly would be filling the MAGA lane and would likely (although not for certain) have Trump's donor base to call upon. But there are others who could be interested in taking on that mantle, from Donald Trump Jr. to former TV provocateur Tucker Carlson.

Florida's DeSantis, who challenged Trump for the nomination in 2024, has emerged as perhaps the most strident critic of the Republican brand since the election. He has blamed the war, corruption within the administration, and inaction by Congress as the reasons for the drubbing.

"This is close to an extinction-level event for Republicans in many parts of the country, as we have seen, probably in the last 100 years," he said last week.

Republican voters took a hard look at DeSantis in '24 and largely passed. He finished 30 percentage points behind Trump in the Iowa caucuses – the first nominating contest of the year – and left the race.

Rubio has said he won't run if Vance does, but don't rely on that when you throw your money down on Kalshi

DeSantis, who has degrees from Harvard and Yale universities, ran as a hard-right culture warrior his first time around, centering issues such as trans rights in a bid to court voters who viewed Trump as insufficiently conservative.

He would likely have to reframe his approach this time around in order to attract mainstream support.

Vance's faceplant also would seem to be good news for Rubio, Trump's secretary of state. Long ago in the Before Times, Rubio, with his Cuban heritage, his conventional conservative politics, and positive, it's-morning-in-America message, looked like the future of the party.

But when he tried to run for president in 2016, Trump left him gasping in the dust. So Rubio initiated a survival strategy of sorts, inching down the spectrum toward MAGAism.

Now it's unclear which Rubio will emerge from the rubble of the administration. He also, like Vance, owns the Iran war and has to hope that he and Trump figure out a way to wind it down in the coming months. (Or he could resign first.)

Rubio has said he won't run if Vance does, but don't rely on that when you throw your money down on Kalshi.

An entirely new playbook

Then there are potential candidates who appear to have been waiting for MAGA to self-immolate.

Those would include former Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin, who, although not widely known outside the party, has managed to keep himself out of Trump's orbit.

Youngkin might be best viewed as a new iteration of Mitt Romney, the kind of fleece-vested Republican who not long ago was considered persona non grata but who could find new life as the party looks for the next generation of leaders. He's also wealthy, which always helps.



Nikki Haley said she's not running, but that didn't keep her from appearing in a nationally televised interview the day after the election and then sending out a text to her supporters about it

Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor who also challenged Trump in 2024, sits in that camp, as well. She said she's not running, but that didn't keep her from appearing in a nationally televised interview the day after the election and then sending out a text to her supporters about it.

Trump's former vice president, Mike Pence, who was excommunicated from the movement for not supporting the president's claims of election fraud, could also mount another run – although right now he says he's not interested.

Then there's Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who has basically been Ted Cruzing it since he last ran in 2016.

Given that his state has turned blue beneath his feet, he may be motivated to try and make another grab for higher office. Cruz finished a distant second to Trump a decade ago and would likely frame his campaign as a return to a kind of conservatism that Trump has at times eschewed.

This kind of parlor game is always played after a midterm election, particularly one as consequential as last week's. But it's crucial to keep in mind that there's a decent chance the GOP nominee will be none of the politicians cited here.

Americans are clearly in the mood for something new – and perhaps that extends to the Republican side. After all, in 2014, nobody saw Donald Trump coming. The same was largely true in 2006, when Barack Obama was just another rising Democratic star.

Whoever emerges from the scrum in two years will signify whether the Republican Party wants to simply turn the page or find an entirely new playbook. That fight begins early next year. Cue the popcorn meme.