Policy shaping daily life in the US is less about who’s president than who controls the government of each of its 50 states. Their laws are as important as federal law.

Richard Keiser | Original text in English

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L A S T N O V E M B E R , t h e w o r l d was focused on the race between Joe Biden and Donald Trump for the US presidency. Yet Americans knew that elections for Congress, and county elections and referendums in each of the 50 states, would produce far more real policy. Federal legislation from Washington on issues on which Democrats and Republicans diverge has become difficult to pass because of the deadlock of divided government, where the Presidency, House and Senate are divided between the parties, which is impossible in parliamentary democracies. The power vacuum left by Washington – at least on questions unrelated to defence or foreign policy – has been filled by the states, and it is the states, and not just California or Texas, which deserve our attention.

In the states that produce the most policy experiments, one party controls the governor’s office and a majority in both the state House and Senate; this is known as a trifecta. Current there are 23 states in which Republicans have captured this trifecta, in the majority in both houses of the legislature and the governor is a Republican. For, Democrats, if they are in a majority of these tricrafts of unified government. In the remaining 12 states, there is a risk of policy paralysis, as in the federal government.

This is a sharp shift. In 1992 there were only 19 trifecta states. In the other 31 states the governor faced at least one legislature controlled by the other party. States in which voters leaned toward the Democrats have become even more Democrat and the same is true for Republican states, and this has often paralysed national government.

Legislative ideas, lobbying dollars

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Above Photo: At a Covid-19 lockdown protest in Lansing, Michigan, May 2020

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