‘The many v the money’ should frame the next US Congress

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To see the battle lines of the post-midterm era in sharp relief, look to Texas. Just two days after her earthquake victory as the governor-elect, Gina Hinojosa informed reporters that she had already asked the parks and wildlife department to freeze a proposal to sell 1,300 acres (525 hectares) in a state park to SpaceX until she is sworn into her new office. The department complied with her request.

The Boca Chica state park is next door to Starbase, Elon Musk’s rocket launch facility and company town. That makes the park’s beaches and protected lands – a refuge for shore birds and sea turtles – the ideal location for SpaceX to expand. “These are our beaches we’re talking about. I mean, selling our beach to Elon Musk is just something that is almost unimaginable,” Hinojosa told CNN’s Jake Tapper. “It’s unacceptable. Our beaches are enshrined in our Texas constitution as being free and open to the people of Texas.”

This was not about shutting down “Elon Musk and his companies”, she went on, “but it has to be on our terms. It cannot be just running over the people of Texas. And that’s what changes now that I will be governor.”

When Hinojosa’s clips circulated on X, she was roundly mocked by Musk’s many fans: imagine valuing some “empty beaches” more than the need for ocean-front launchpads to the stars! Imagine caring more about some lowly birds than Musk’s hulking, phallic, silver rockets! She must be a [insert vomitorium of misogynistic, racist and ableist slurs here]. Musk, his boys and bots predicted, will just pick up his expensive toys and move them to still-Republican Louisiana or Florida, leaving economic carnage in his wake.

So far, Hinojosa seems unmoved. In Texas, she and Senator-elect James Talarico shaped their campaigns as battles of the many v the money, a vertical struggle pitting the vast majority of Texans, struggling to get by, against the increasingly concentrated wealth at the top – perfectly embodied by the man flooding their democracy with cash. As Talarico reminded an audience of supporters in Austin last month: “Elon Musk wants our land. He wants our water. He wants our tax dollars. He wants his very own personal United States senator.”

The richest man in the world didn’t get his senator, or his governor, as the early clash over Boca Chica state park makes clear. What he did get – or rather, help produce – is an America polarized around a new political axis. On one side are ultrarich tech oligarchs, whose wealth is tethered to dreams of merging with machines and becoming multiplanetary, no matter the cost to our multispecies planet. On the other side are regular people, with human needs for things such as clean air, fresh water and healthcare – maybe even a day off at a public park – and who increasingly find themselves competing over these basics with sprawling datacentres and rocket launchers. The oligarchs in this battle seem to have no loyalty to the nations, states and cities that helped them grow their enormous wealth.

In sharp contrast, the masses of people in this battle, regardless of their political leanings, tend to be attached to where they live – to its cities, towns, public lands and to the only planet that we know of suited to human life.

By picking an early fight pitting public beaches against Musk’s private rockets, Gina Hinojosa is telling voters which side she is on – the side of life, not machines; the side of staying, not leaving. That is how the Democrats just won, and it is their path to continue winning.

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