

9 Lessons From the 2018 Midterms

by D.D. GUTTENPLAN

Progressives made some real inroads—now they need to organize better, smarter, and bigger.

LONG BEFORE THE FIRST VOTES WERE EVEN COUNTED IN THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS, THE MERRY MORTICIANS OF MODERATION were already declaring the results a defeat for the left. Back in August, after a wave of progressive candidates led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, Andrew Gillum in Florida, and Ayanna Pressley in Massachusetts scored a series of upset victories over establishment Democrats, *Politico* gleefully informed readers that “Bernie and his army are losing 2018.” In September, the Democratic centrist think tank Third Way contrasted the 95 percent win rate for candidates endorsed by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee with the far less impressive ratio achieved by Our Revolution (37 percent) or Justice Democrats (31 percent)—without ever mentioning how many of the DCCC-backed candidates were incumbents. On the day before the midterms, *Vox* claimed that “Democrats are relying on moderate candidates to carry them to victory.” Ken Harbaugh, the Democratic challenger in Ohio’s Seventh Congressional District (reassuringly described as “far from a lefty”), was drafted as the poster boy for the argument that “Democrats are trading ideological purity for electoral viability.”

The only problem is that when the votes were counted, the centrist Harbaugh, a former Navy pilot whose ads promised to “put country over party,” finished nearly 20 points behind Republican incumbent Bob Gibbs—a poorer showing by far than J.D. Scholten’s three-point loss to Iowa Republican Steve King, even though Scholten ran an unabashedly progressive campaign against an incumbent who had won by more than 20 points in all but one of his seven reelection bids. There will never be a shortage of voices in the media ready to bury the left.

Yet a sober assessment of the midterm results shows cause for concern as well as celebration. In the days leading up to the election, I asked a number of progressive activists about the races they were paying close attention to, both in their own states and nationally. The three names that recurred again and again were Gillum, Georgia’s Stacey Abrams, and Texas’s Beto O’Rourke, followed by Jess King running for Congress in Pennsylvania, Kara Eastman in Nebraska, and Randy Bryce in Wisconsin. A win in any of those races would have been a political earthquake, but as we go to press, the earth still hasn’t moved.

So if the results are genuinely mixed, what conclusions can be drawn about the political terrain as we move

into 2019 and beyond? In reading what follows, bear in mind that election returns are like tea leaves—you can probably find any pattern you want if you look hard enough. However, in my exchanges with activists and organizers both before and after the election, a few common themes emerged.

1 The center of the Democratic party has moved left.

When Gretchen Whitmer defeated Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan’s Democratic gubernatorial primary, the result was seen as a defeat for Bernie Sanders, who headlined a pair of events for El-Sayed, as well as for Our Revolution, which had endorsed him. And when Whitmer claimed victory in the general election, *The New York Times* assured readers she was not a “fiery leftist” but rather a “shrewd politician” with a “pragmatic approach to policymaking.” All of which is true—but only if you allow for a pragmatism that embraces Medicaid expansion (Whitmer’s signal achievement as a state senator), the legalization of recreational marijuana, a \$15 minimum

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—Charles Chamberlain



wage, support for same-sex adoptive parents, universal preschool, and a rock-solid commitment to reproductive choice. (By the way, Sanders campaigned for Whitmer in the general election, too.)

“Voters have sent the most progressive Democratic caucus to Washington in a generation,” said Charles Chamberlain, executive director of Democracy for America. “Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and Veronica Escobar from Texas ran against the Democratic establishment and won. Many of the other Democratic newcomers ran on multiracial, inclusive populism.”

Chamberlain’s excitement was echoed by Joe Dinkin of the Working Families Party. “In the primaries, progressives won a whole bunch of incredible victories, many on safe Democratic turf. But even many Democrats who won in competitive races are much more progressive than the normal Democratic baseline,” Dinkin said. “For a long time, Keith Ellison and Maxine Waters were some of the most progressive members of Congress. Now there are at least five new members more radical than that.”

2 Progressive ideas are popular, even in places where Democratic candidates are not.

When he wasn’t celebrating the election of Colin Allred, the former NFL player and civil-rights lawyer who upset Pete Sessions in Texas’s 32nd Congressional District, progressive activist Jim Hightower reminded me not to overlook the fate of “20 to 30 important ballot initiatives.” In addition to Florida’s historic Amendment 4, which will restore voting rights to more than 1 million people who have served their time for felony convictions, voters in Utah, Nebraska, and Idaho expanded Medicaid coverage. In Arkansas, a measure to raise the minimum wage passed by more than 2 to 1; in Missouri, the margin in favor of raising the minimum wage was 30 points. Utah voted to legalize medical marijuana. None of these states are blue-wave territory.

Meanwhile, polling data indicate that even ideas long deemed too radical to be taken seriously by the mainstream media—ending cash bail; having the government produce inexpensive generic drugs or guarantee employment for anyone genuinely unable to find work; and treating the Internet as a public utility, with publicly owned providers replacing private corporations—are actually favored by a majority of Americans.

3 Democrats now need to deliver results—including on the economy.

The outcome in New York’s 19th Congressional District, where Antonio Delgado defeated Republican incumbent John Faso, shows that health care remains a winning issue. Faso, a former lobbyist, tried to brand Delgado as a carpetbagger—a strategy that he used to devastating effect against Zephyr Teachout in 2016. But Delgado fought back with a laser-like focus on Faso’s vote to repeal the



Whitmer wins: Michigan’s incoming governor ran on a pragmatic—and progressive—platform.

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—Ethan Todras-Whitehill



Texas swings left: Former NFL player Colin Allred picked up a House seat.

Affordable Care Act, contrasting that with his own support for allowing people to opt into Medicare. In view of Faso’s racist campaign, which described Delgado—a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former Rhodes scholar—as a “big-city rapper,” a friend who lives in the district said she thought health care might have “occupied the same position for the Delgado campaign as the economy did for the Obama 2008 campaign—i.e., white people were more concerned about losing access to health care than they were about the candidate’s race.”

But now that Democrats control the House, they will need to do much more than merely prevent the repeal of Obamacare or accuse the Republicans of planning to privatize Social Security. “Now we need elected officials to deliver,” said Derrick Osobase, the Texas political director for the Communications Workers of America, in a postelection conference call.

Democrats have countered President Trump’s claim that he’s brought about the “greatest economy” ever by pointing out that the current record-low unemployment rate and surging job growth doesn’t reflect the whole picture—and that it really began under Barack Obama anyway. That might work for economics nerds, especially since it’s true, but if you’re a steelworker watching local plants gear up thanks to Trump’s tariffs on foreign competition, or an unemployed miner hoping for a job in coal or fracking, those arguments won’t cut it. Nor will a return to the “America is already great” neoliberal globalism offered by Hillary Clinton—and still embraced by the Wall Street wing of the Democratic Party.

In the long term, Trump’s economic nationalism may well prove disastrous. But to have a hope of winning in 2020, Democrats need to see and then raise the Republicans on the economy—by making sure that wages outpace inflation, and by providing good, well-paying green jobs to replace those currently choking our cities and fouling our groundwater, as well as economic security through the kind of bold government action once associated with the party of the New Deal.

4 Information matters.

In the explosion of creative revulsion that greeted Trump’s inauguration, two very different kinds of groups emerged or gained traction. One was ideologically driven, policy-oriented, and focused on promoting either specific candidates (Our Revolution, Justice Democrats) or specific policies (Democratic Socialists of America, the Working Families Party, People’s Action). All of these groups can point to successes in the midterms, but none of them can plausibly claim to have come close to achieving their goals.

Swing Left can. Founded by three political amateurs in November 2016, Swing Left eschews taking policy positions or engaging in ideological battle, instead pointing progressives who want to “do something” in the direction

of their nearest flippable congressional district. “We raised \$10 million from 70,000 donors,” said Ethan Todras-Whitehill, a former SAT-prep coach and freelance writer who co-founded the group. Swing Left started with districts where a Republican had won by 15 points or less. Then it added some Democratic incumbents, but “took them out when we realized they didn’t need our help.”

In addition to money, Swing Left also sent volunteers, making 2.5 million phone calls and knocking on 5 million doors. “I was surprised by how much everyone seems to love canvassing. It’s sort of retro-cool,” Todras-Whitehill observed. Adding districts that had been carried by Clinton got the attention of her Onward Together PAC, which made Swing Left one of its five partners. But as Todras-Whitehill noted, ideology isn’t their thing. “We’re kind of an apolitical political organization. It’s Swing *relative* Left, not Swing *absolute* Left. [It’s] left of where we were.”

“We don’t take positions in primaries,” he added—a stance that gives Swing Left a unique kind of authority. Its Texas branch used that cachet to hold a unity fundraiser before the primary that all seven Democratic contenders attended, raising a war chest that was then turned over to the winner, Colin Allred.

Now that the House has flipped, Swing Left has announced that it will “focus its efforts on winning an expanded slate of competitive races where grassroots volunteers can make the difference”—including for Congress, state offices, and the presidency. “Politics evolve,” said Todras-Whitehill. “We feel like we’re the home for people who just want to win.”

5 Candidate recruitment and training matter.

For Amanda Litman, the shock of Election Day 2016 hit especially hard. As the e-mail director of Clinton’s campaign, she went through all the phases of grief before founding Run for Something, a group that helps recruit and support young progressives running mostly in down-ballot races. “When we put out the call for candidates, 20,000 people raised their hands,” she told me. In the end, 1,500 candidates applied for the group’s endorsement. “You had to be pro-choice, pro-equality, and willing to work hard,” Litman said. “But one of the benefits of federalism is that a Democrat in Georgia or California is going to be different from a Democrat in New York.”

Out of 418 first-time candidates that the group guided onto the ballot, 150 won. “We flipped state-legislature seats in more than a dozen states,” Litman said. “And we won some long-shot races—defeating [Republican state senator and eight-term incumbent] Marty Golden in Brooklyn. We flipped a congressional seat in Oklahoma [Kendra Horn in the Fifth District]. That’s bananas! That race wasn’t on *anyone’s* pickup list.”

6 Good candidates matter—even when they lose.

Beto O’Rourke’s this-close defeat was heartbreaking, but without his charisma at the top of the ticket and the volunteers he mobilized campaigning in every one of Texas’s 254 counties, would Colin Allred or Lizzie Pannill Fletcher have won their congressional seats? Would Democrats have also flipped 12 seats in the Texas House?

In Florida, Andrew Gillum ultimately fell short, but the

enthusiasm generated by his historic challenge carried Bill Nelson—who phoned in his own campaign (and has since conceded)—to a recount. And when I criticized progressives for overselling Randy Bryce’s chances in Wisconsin, the Working Families Party’s Joe Dinkin pushed back: “Scott Walker would still be governor if Randy hadn’t run. He stepped up to do something hard—and way outperformed the Democrats who ran in that district previously.”

7 Organization matters.

The ongoing resurrection of Texas populism is one of the great untold stories of American politics. O’Rourke’s campaign was smart enough to build on the work of the Texas Organizing Project, Our Revolution Texas, and the other groups who have spent years developing a “cities out” operation centered primarily on communities of color. Instead of chasing white, centrist swing voters, these organizers targeted the 3 million registered voters of color who rarely go to the polls. Using the “big data” techniques developed by Becky Bond and Zack Exley for Bernie Sanders’s 2016 presidential run, O’Rourke’s campaign focused on identifying and staying in touch with so-called “low propensity,” low-income voters and giving them concrete reasons to turn out.

It wasn’t enough to elect O’Rourke—this time. But Republican Senator John Cornyn’s seat comes up in 2020. A similarly focused effort going by the name Black Girl Magic just elected 17 African-American women as judges in Houston and surrounding Harris County. And while Stacey Abrams waged a brilliant campaign in Georgia, her battle might have been a little less uneven had the state party bothered to put up candidates for the dozens of seats in the state legislature where Republicans ran unopposed. As my colleague Joan Walsh points out, coattails can work both ways.

8 Politics matter.

As long as our politics relies on wealthy donors and a professional consultant class that makes its real money representing corporations and lobbying former colleagues, there will always be loud voices urging Democrats to downplay racial or economic justice and tack toward the dead center. Which is why those of us who care about

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—Joe Dinkin

Winning issue: Antonio Delgado beat incumbent John Faso in New York by focusing on his opponent’s vote to gut the ACA.



more than just electing Democrats have to stay alert and engaged—especially now that the midterms are over.

One way to do that is to find a local group whose concerns align with your own, whether that's a chapter of the Working Families Party or the Democratic Socialists of America, a union political-action committee, or groups organizing around immigrant rights, public-school funding, climate justice, access to health care, or ending police violence. Another is to pay attention to—and get involved in—the ongoing battle to make the Democratic Party more democratic and less in hock to corporate interests.

That also means building our own infrastructure (in some cases from the ground up), and realizing that relying on volunteers to do the work—and make the decisions—for state and local Democratic organizations means shutting out precisely those low-income voters whose interests the party is supposed to defend. Maybe if some of the celebrities who gave so generously of their time and money to groups like Swing Left diverted a small fraction to local parties, they could put the state chairs on salary—most serve without pay—and recruit full-time organizing staffs that better reflect the Democrats' target electorate. (The Texas Organizing Project, for example, employs hundreds of paid organizers, most of them people of color.)

9 Because in the end, democracy matters.

Despite what we might prefer to believe, Donald Trump remains extremely popular—especially with his base. Simply wringing our hands, or dismissing him and his supporters as he turns the Republican Party into the engine

of white-nationalist belligerence, is a recipe for disaster. As Cindy Axne showed in Iowa, where Trump campaigned hard for GOP incumbent David Young, he can be beaten.

The midterms weren't all good news for progressives. But for every Lizzie Pannill Fletcher, a moderate who flipped Texas's Seventh Congressional District after a hard-fought primary victory over a more progressive opponent, there was a Lucy McBath, an African-American progressive who flipped the Georgia Sixth seat that Jon Ossoff, the previous "pragmatist" pinup, couldn't. McBath, a member of the Mothers of the Movement whose son, Jordan Davis, was murdered for playing loud music in a car in 2012, ran on a platform of gun control, Medicare for everyone over 55, and public funding for contraception and abortion.

Maybe the defeat of Joe Donnelly in Indiana and Claire McCaskill in Missouri will lead Democrats to stop backing candidates who run away from their party. Meanwhile, the elections of McBath, Delgado, Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, and Axne, as well as Abby Finkenauer in Iowa, Sharice Davids in Kansas, Ilhan Omar in Minnesota, Chuy García in Illinois, and Jahana Hayes in Connecticut, means this new class of Democrats is the most diverse and the most progressive in the party's history. "The idea that Democrats can't compete anywhere, or that people of color can't compete, is absolutely shattered," said Democracy for America's Charles Chamberlain.

"What happened on November 6 was not a fluke—it's a trend," said Jose Garza of the Workers Defense Project in Texas. That may not be the case yet. But it isn't a pipe dream either. ■

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—Jose Garza



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