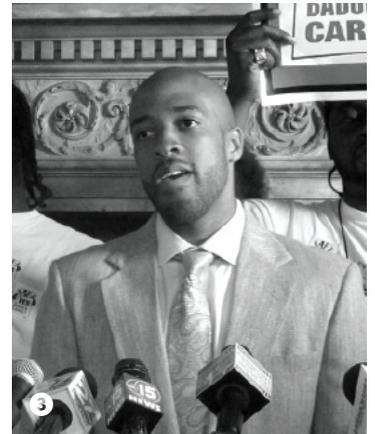
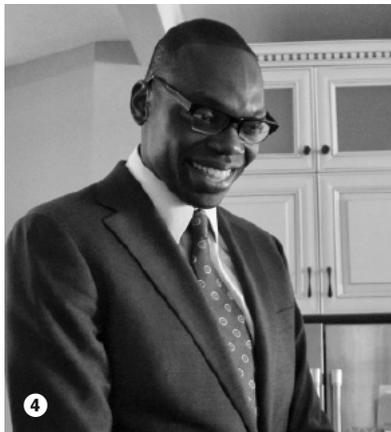


# THE DOWN-BALLOT DEMOCRATIC TRIUMPHS OF 2018

by JOHN NICHOLS



**THE MEDIA MISSED THE BIG STORY OF THIS YEAR'S MIDTERMS.**



**W**HEN THE 31-YEAR-OLD COMMUNITY organizer took the stage in Madison, Wisconsin, around 2 AM on election night, the moment was electric. A crowd of millennials, many drawn into urgent political activism via protests against Donald Trump's assaults on women's rights, immigrants, science, and access to health care, exploded with such energy that the historic theater in which they'd gathered shook with excitement. A final surge of votes from Milwaukee, the state's largest urban center—where turnout had been boosted by a campaign that borrowed from the civil-

**"You know what happened in November? We got a bench."**

—Rebecca Katz,  
Democratic  
communications  
specialist

rights and voting-rights legacies that the young African-American contender so ardently embraced—had just swept this first-time candidate for statewide office to a historic victory. "They said this day would never come," he shouted above the wild applause, "but we all knew that it was time for a change in Wisconsin."

Meet Mandela Barnes, the new lieutenant governor of the Badger State, a passionate progressive who has steeped himself in the new politics of going big on the issues and even bigger on the mobilization of an expanded electorate. He's a rising star who is already being talked up as a contender for higher office. And meet Juliana Stratton, the criminal-justice reformer who will be the first black wom-

an to serve as lieutenant governor of Illinois. And meet Garlin Gilchrist II, the 36-year-old former national campaign director for MoveOn, who celebrated his election as the first black lieutenant governor of Michigan by announcing: “We stand on this stage upon the shoulders of giants who had a vision that went beyond generations. And it’s our generation’s responsibility to live up to that responsibility by having our imaginations exceed our expectations.”

They were not the big names of the 2018 elections, but a cadre of down-ballot candidates—people of color, women, and millennial newcomers—brought bold policies, genuine diversity, and essential energy to state tickets and stirred a blue wave that swept the nation this year. In Wisconsin, where the Democratic candidates for governor and lieutenant governor defeated Scott Walker’s GOP ticket by just 30,000 votes (out of almost 2.7 million cast), Governor-elect Tony Evers will be the first to tell you that Barnes played a crucial role in generating a voting spike in college towns and communities with large minority populations. Yet because the media tend to focus on a handful of high-profile races rather than the full picture, few Americans are aware of the extent to which these next-generation candidates and a rising electorate prevailed on November 6.

**F**OR THOSE WHO FOCUSED ON EARLY ELECTION reports, it was easy to imagine 2018 as another year of dashed hopes, given the frustrating results for candidates who had brought an intersectional and inspirational politics to some of the hardest races in the country, especially Beto O’Rourke’s challenge to Republican Senator Ted Cruz in Texas and the gubernatorial candidacies of Stacey Abrams in Georgia and Andrew Gillum in Florida. But the closeness of those contests argues for the opposite conclusion. O’Rourke and Abrams brought red states that had been dismissed as unwinnable into play, while Gillum came closer to winning Florida’s governorship than any Democrat has in 24 years. These campaigns proved that a new politics that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional campaigning and generates energy to expand the electorate can remake the political landscape. The electoral map is in a constant process of evolution—just 30 years ago, GOP presidential nominee George H.W. Bush won California and lost West Virginia—and the O’Rourke, Abrams, and Gillum campaigns have sped up the evolution of their states. At the same time, other states were turning the page.

The potency of the new politics was most evident in the so-called swing states, especially in the Great Lakes region, where Democrats roared back after years of losing statehouses. In many of these states, the political landscape was transformed on November 6—and many of the candidates who made the change were themselves transformational.

“It’s happening, people,” says Rebecca Katz, a former adviser to New York Mayor Bill de Blasio who has championed efforts to diversify and embolden the Democratic Party by nominating and electing women and people of color. “The big story of November 6 is of all these remarkable people who no one was watching who got elected in the states. You know what happened on November 6? We got a bench.”

Katz is right: Down-ballot winners in the states from 2018 will be the big names of our future national politics. That can certainly be said of newly elected Minnesota Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, a 39-year-old member of the White Earth Nation of Ojibwe, who is the first Native American elected to statewide office in Minnesota. And of John Fetterman, the fierce 49-year-

old advocate for working-class solidarity, racial and environmental justice, and the renewal of forgotten communities, who beat Pennsylvania’s incumbent lieutenant governor in this year’s Democratic primary and will take office in January. Fetterman will join Vermont Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman—a 47-year-old organic farmer who was reelected by an 18-point margin this year with support from the state’s Democratic and Progressive parties—as part of a rising generation of statewide officials who will be able to use their bully pulpits to force debates on criminal-justice reform, economic inequality, climate justice, and immigrant rights.

This big-idea, big-issue politics was front and center in the races run by a quartet of dynamic African-American lawyers who won some of the most powerful attorney-general posts in the country: Tish James in New York, Kwame Raoul in Illinois, Keith Ellison in Minnesota, and Aaron Ford in Nevada. These new AGs will not only boldly challenge the excesses of the Trump administration; some will eventually emerge as gubernatorial and senatorial prospects. And they are not the only barrier breakers. Xavier Becerra, who was appointed last year as California’s first Latino attorney general, secured a full term with 62 percent of the vote. LGBTQ advocate and civil-rights champion Dana Nessel was the first Democrat elected as Michigan’s attorney general since 1998. And Josh Kaul, who left a position as a federal prosecutor to fight for voting rights, was elected Wisconsin’s attorney general at the age of 37.

The individual stories of these down-ballot successes are compelling. As Katz says, “The most interesting winners on Election Day are the people you never heard of.” So why isn’t this story more central to the mainstream analysis of what happened on November 6? The answer has everything to do with the political moment.

The Trump era has created such a sense of urgency in our politics that people are desperate for instant analysis. Unfortunately, the quick takes rarely go deep or wide. Only by expanding our perspective do we get a full sense of the blue wave that swept across America on November 6. Federal politics should not be neglected, of course; there’s every reason to be excited that voters flipped control of the US House of Representatives from red to blue and swept in a new generation of progressive leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib. There will be new congressional checks and balances on an out-of-control president who waded into the 2018 midterms as an avowed nationalist. But there will also be checks and balances on Trump and Trumpism by the states, where governors can expand access to Medicaid, where attorneys general can join lawsuits to block the president’s assaults on immigrants, where secretaries of state can expand voting rights, and where legislators can upend gerrymandering abuses.

The blue wave of 2018 changed the political map radically. Democrats have elected seven new governors and replaced nefarious right-wing Republicans like Walker in Wisconsin, Rick Snyder in Michigan, and Paul LePage in Maine. Democratic Governors Association chair Jay Inslee noted on the day after the election: “After last night’s results, 38 million more Americans will have a

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—Rebecca Katz

### THE NEW GENERATION

and the offices they won (facing page):

1. Kwame Raoul, Illinois attorney general;
2. Juliana Stratton, Illinois lieutenant governor (with Governor-elect J.B. Pritzker);
3. Mandela Barnes, Wisconsin lieutenant governor;
4. Garlin Gilchrist II, Michigan lieutenant governor;
5. Peggy Flanagan, Minnesota lieutenant governor;
6. Dana Nessel, Michigan attorney general (with her wife, Alanna Maguire).

Democratic governor. That means that Democratic governors now represent a majority of Americans—more than 175 million people.” The governors will have an easier time managing because Democrats overcame big gerrymandering and big money to finish the 2018 election cycle with an overall gain of some 380 state legislative seats (for more, see Joan Walsh on page 18).

The swing to the Democrats was particularly pronounced in the Great Lakes states, where it can be argued that Trump won the White House in 2016. Although he lost the popular vote by almost 3 million ballots, Trump took the Electoral College on the basis of narrow victories in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. On November 6, Democrats won every important statewide constitutional and US Senate contest in every one of those states.

It is understandable that, to the extent that states get attention in the Trump era, the focus will be on governors. But if Democrats want to figure out how to win in 2020 and beyond, they also need to pay attention to how contests were won for positions like secretary of state (Michigan just elected 41-year-old voting-rights advocate Jocelyn Benson to the post), state treasurer (Wisconsin’s 37-year-old Sarah Godlewski is preparing to address everything from student debt to climate change), and lieutenant governor.

There really are new ways to win, as the stunning turnaround in Wisconsin illustrates. For eight long years, progressives there sought to displace Walker, the anti-labor zealot who became a poster boy for the extreme right-wing politics that overtook the state following the Republican wave election of 2010. When Trump won there in 2016, commentators peddled the idea that Wisconsin had abandoned its progressive heritage and swung into the Republican column. As a result, conservatives were quick to dismiss Democratic gubernatorial nominee Tony Evers, a 67-year-old educator and administrator who acknowledged that he might not be the party’s most dynamic speaker. Nothing about Evers shouted “new politics”—yet he embraced it with an enthusiasm that other senior Democrats would be wise to emulate. Instead of demanding the spotlight, as gubernatorial candidates frequently do, Evers shared it with Mandela Barnes, his millennial running mate. Yard signs highlighted the names of both nominees; the two appeared at campaign rallies together; and the notion that this was a genuine ticket took hold.

A social-media whiz—his Twitter handle is @TheOtherMandela—Barnes made the ticket edgier, poking at Walker, defending progressive policies, and reimagining the state’s No. 2 job as a link between grassroots activists and government. As the election approached, Evers and Barnes toured campuses and communities across the state on a school bus with Senator Tammy Baldwin, along with Josh Kaul and Sarah Godlewski, the party’s millennial candidates for attorney general and state treasurer. At every stop, they encouraged voters to think not just of electing a governor but of electing a full slate that included two women and an African American, and gave young down-ballot candidates not just attention but a promise of power. Baldwin, the first out LGBTQ senator in the country’s history, was a strong contender on her own. But the rest of the candidates needed one another, and Evers addressed that need by embracing Barnes and the next-generation politics he represented. There’s a lesson here for the Democratic Party: Embracing the new politics and welcoming candidates who embody it, as Tony Evers welcomed Mandela Barnes, is a winning strategy. ■

**“Democratic governors now represent a majority of Americans.”**

—Jay Inslee, chair, Democratic Governors Association

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But amid this flurry of wins were some big disappointments. Chief among them was Ohio, where Democrats were thrilled to field a full slate of candidates for the legislature for the first time since 2000. But the same rural red tide that defeated gubernatorial candidate Richard Cordray doomed most Ohio Democrats.

**V**IRTUALLY ALL OF THE NEW GROUPS SAY THAT NOT ENOUGH Democratic donors invested in this crucial effort. “Democrats outraised Republicans two-to-one in congressional races, but were outraised up to five-to-one in state races,” says Flippable co-founder Catherine Vaughan, citing research by Forward Majority. One major player in the field told me that she approached several top Democratic donors, but couldn’t get much investment in the state races.

Forward Majority’s Ben Wexler-Waite notes that Democrats failed to pick up a single chamber that could have an impact on redistricting. But one big win on that front was defeating Scott Walker in Wisconsin; Governor-elect Tony Evers can now veto bad redistricting plans. GOP gerrymandering is part of the reason that Wisconsin Democrats couldn’t take the state House or Senate: They won a majority of the vote for the legislature, but roughly 40 percent of the seats. In Ohio, the GOP kept its statehouse supermajorities despite winning only 50.3 percent of the vote.

The 2018 gains in Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, Michigan, and North Carolina, however, will help lay the foundation for more 2020 wins in these crucial redistricting states. Flipping the Texas House, for instance, could force Republicans to develop fairer redistricting maps, which is crucial, since the state’s rapid population growth means it will add as many as three US House seats after the 2020 Census. But in some state races with similar concerns, Democrats couldn’t do much to move the needle.

The National Democratic Redistricting Committee also wants to see Democrats focus more on the states that matter in 2020. But the NDRC’s Patrick Rodenbush points out that Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, and possibly Utah (where votes are still being counted) passed redistricting reform measures that will create “a more fair process.” SisterDistrict just announced a new 2020 push focused on redistricting states, as did Run for Something. “We’re going to hustle hard to recruit candidates to run against every incumbent Republican, but especially in states where redistricting is a priority,” says co-founder Amanda Litman.

Despite the disappointments, *DailyKos*’s Carolyn Fiddler emphasizes that the 2018 statehouse gains will make life better for millions of people. “By flipping key state legislatures and governorships and stripping Republicans of total government control in key swing states, Democrats are rebuilding real power at all levels of the ballot,” she says.

Right now, many of these groups are gearing up again for the 2019 elections in Virginia, where Democrats need only one seat to flip the House of Delegates, while defending 16 brand-new incumbents. But will they have the resources in 2020 to complete the job? Presidential-year turnout is always higher for the party, but so is competition for funding.

The People PAC’s Chris Bachman notes that GOP-controlled statehouses can still thwart Democrats’ presidential hopes in crucial swing states like Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Florida, where new voter-ID and other laws no doubt suppressed turnout for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Here’s hoping the bad news of 2018 convinces more donors and Democratic leaders that even more resources must flow toward ousting the vote-suppressing Republican lawmakers who made victory in those states impossible. ■

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