NORTH AMERICA 04.04.2018 | Thomas Greven

Democrats vs Democrats

Why the US Democrats are standing in their own way in the congressional elections, despite a good chance of success

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Democracies can do away with themselves when citizens vote into office people who gradually undermine the institutions that control and limit power. In parliamentary democracies, the main focus is on the independent judiciary and the media. In a presidential democracy like the US, there is also the independently elected Congress. In the best case, it should be relied on to achieve a majority.

The election of the US Congress – which is independent of the executive branch of government – and its political role offer the clearest way to contain the power of a president with authoritarian ambitions. Thus, the congressional elections in November are the most important arena for the dispute over American democracy, and are the Democratic Party's greatest hope of limiting Donald Trump's power before he stumbles over his scandals and the investigations into his campaign team's involvement with Russia.

After a series of victories in special elections – including electoral districts and states like Alabama that were dominated by Trump in 2016 – the Democrats' hope of achieving a majority in Congress has been on the upswing. One important factor is certainly Trump's growing unpopularity among so-called independent voters and certain demographic groups that were crucial to his election: in particular, white men and women with or without a college degree.

Freedom to criticise

If the 2018 Congressional election turns into a referendum against Trump, the Republicans may not benefit either from their immense financial advantage – in the March special election in Pennsylvania, won by Democrat Conor Lamb, the ratio was 8 to 1 – or from their supposed

guarantee of taking most electoral districts according to demographic data. In addition, Democrats are being helped by the fact that many Republican incumbents are not running for re-election, making their districts and states winnable. Some of the outgoing senators and congressmen are using their newfound freedom to criticise Trump, notably Arizona senator Jeff Flake, who is said to have presidential ambitions.

So, while Democrats are mobilising voters, in particular women, Republican voters are showing lower turnout. Despite basic satisfaction with some of Trump's policies – such as tax cuts, deregulation and the appointment of anti-abortion judges – the president is facing marked disapproval.

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In addition, the Supreme Court has ruled that Pennsylvania's electoral districts can be redrawn, giving Democrats the prospect of five extra seats. Behind this decision is a heated dispute over the practice of gerrymandering: where the dominant party in a state tailors electoral district boundaries for its own benefit, thereby guaranteeing majorities. This practice regularly results in a minority of voters being considerably underrepresented or, in extreme cases, a minority receiving the majority of seats.

The Supreme Court is examining whether this system needs to be fundamentally changed to make the districts more competitive, but so far there is no good idea how it could be brought about. In some states, the process has been handed over to expert commissions, but in principle it is politicised – it is the state legislatures that do the redistricting every 10 years when, based on census results, the 435 seats in the US House of Representatives are redistributed. For the Democrats' strategists, this year's elections are also relevant to the state legislatures, which are currently dominated by the Republicans.

Polarised and tribal culture

All in all, many more electoral districts and states are thought to be winnable for the Democrats in 2018 than they were just a few weeks ago. Does this mean bright prospects? There are definitely a few problems. The Republicans will undoubtedly continue their practice of restricting, along with administrative hurdles and harassment, in order to reduce turnout among minorities and young voters who generally vote for Democratic candidates.

Above all, the crucial question is: which candidates will the Democrats nominate? The issue of the party's programmatic orientation is not entirely clear, even though some of the positions of the progressive current around Bernie Sanders have gained ground. These include demands to raise the minimum wage, national health insurance for everyone, and tuition-free college education. Meanwhile, the Democrats who are friendlier to Wall Street are suffering, for example, from Hillary Clinton's rash comments about 'backward' Trump voters.

The debate over the party's programme doesn't take place in a vacuum but occurs in the context of the primary elections starting in May, in which the candidates are selected for the congressional elections. Primaries in demographically 'safe' districts are fuelling the United States' tribal, polarised political culture, because the candidates need to prevail over their fellow party members – meaning the outcome of the main election is already determined. This leads to primaries with huge ideological tension.

There are still many unanswered questions, especially the extent to which Russia is trying to influence the elections.

In the case of the Republicans, it is just this dynamic that led to a populist revolt against the party establishment and to the Tea Party. Meanwhile, a wing has established itself in the party that makes it difficult to run the country due to the inability to make ideological compromises, and Congress is increasingly rendered dysfunctional – think of the constant battles over the budget in the face of threats of government shutdown.

It is a paradox: because of the ideological battle in the primaries, the country's anti-Trump sentiment, which is useful to the Democrats, and the enthusiasm of their voters can even result in nominating candidates in uncontested electoral districts who for the majority of voters in the main election are not electable. A moderate candidate such as Conor Lamb in Pennsylvania could win a district that in 2016 elected Trump by a 20 per cent margin, because he distanced himself in crucial issues from the progressive agenda and the unpopular Democrat leader Nancy Pelosi.

Such an 'electable' candidate only needs to prevail in the ideologically charged primary. Of course, the Republicans have the same problem of ideological primaries that lead to unelectable candidates. In that sense, this dynamic may balance things out.

Balance and control

The biggest problem for the Democrats is in their stronghold, California, where primaries are structured in such a way that in the main election, the two candidates with the highest number of votes compete, regardless of which party they belong to (known as a 'jungle primary'). Here, the enthusiasm of the Democrats could lead to a large number of Democratic candidates who take so many votes away from each other that two Republicans win the primary, and then run against each other in the main election – meaning in the end a Republican represents an electoral district that is actually dominated by Democrats.

There are still many unanswered questions, especially the extent to which Russia is trying to influence the elections. Trump has done nothing to mount a defence. This is another reason why it is important to remember what the authors of the US Constitution envisaged: that there should be mutual balance and mutual control between the powers. One can only wish for the US that its voters will decide accordingly.



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