Midterm madness

Increasing voter turnout may be the only winning strategy for Democrats in the midterm elections

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There is a comforting narrative American Democrats can tell themselves when confronted with President Donald Trump's unrelenting bigotry, petty meanness, and xenophobia. It goes something like this:

2016 was a fluke. Trump was extremely lucky in how his votes were distributed. Hillary Clinton, after all, won the popular vote. Trump simply got the votes where he needed them most. Then-FBI director James Comey's eve-of-the-election revelation that the FBI was investigating more Hillary Clinton emails, following an earlier probe that recommended no charged be laid against her, tilted the election in Trump's favour. And Russian meddling sealed Clinton's fate. Rerun the election ten times, the thinking goes, and Clinton would win nine.

Democrats who are more reflective and self-critical might also concede that Hillary Clinton blundered badly during the campaign. Some might admit she was a poor choice to lead the party in the first place.

Both these explanations are soothing because they imply there is no deep-set rot in the party, or indeed in America: the party can recover; the country is not sliding into racist populism; Trump will not win a second term; the ship of state will right itself.

This may be true, but until now the theory hasn't been tested. It will be this November during the congressional midterm elections.

A referendum on Trump?

Trump, of course, is not contesting these midterms. But midterm elections are always coloured by voters' perceptions of the president, and these will be even more than most. They come as Trump reels from two potentially damaging blows: a guilty plea by his former personal attorney,

Michael Cohen, to charges including that he violated campaign finance laws at Trump's behest, and the conviction of his campaign chair, Paul Manafort, for bank and tax fraud. Neither are related to the ongoing investigation into alleged Russian interference during the 2016 campaign, which will also suggest to voters that Trump's conduct and character deserve scrutiny and perhaps new judgment.

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Trump himself has made these elections about him by stressing the high stakes involved. In a closed-door session with evangelical leaders, Trump, according to reporting by NBC News and The New York Times, warned of violence from the left should the Democrats retake control of Congress. 'They will overturn everything that we've done, and they'll do it quickly and violently,' he reportedly said.

It is true that Trump's ability to legislate will be restricted if the Republicans lose their majority in Congress. But what's at issue is more fundamental than that. America needs to decide what kind of country it is, and these elections will go a long way toward revealing that. It's one thing if Trump got lucky. It's another if, two years later, American voters don't want to rectify their mistake.

Democrats may find it difficult to win over Trump voters

Much of this isn't fair to the Republican candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives who will be on front lines of this proxy fight. They are not Trump, and if too few of them have shown the courage to speak against him, Senator John McCain's recent death is a reminder of the decency within the Republican party.

The Democrats, for their part, are well-positioned, largely due to Trump's self-inflicted wounds. Hillary Clinton famously said half of Trump's supporters could be placed in a 'basket of deplorables' — 'racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic — Islamophobic — you name it.' These remarks no doubt overestimated the number of Americans drawn to Trump for malignant reasons. Less well-remembered is what Clinton said immediately afterwards — that there is another 'basket' full of people who support Trump because they have been let down by government and are desperate for change.

'Those are people we have to understand and empathise with as well,' she

said, never quite managing to jettison the condescension that surely also drove Americans from her to Trump. She was right. She still is. Americans who voted for Barack Obama in 2012 voted for Trump in 2016. They can flip again.

Democratic hopes in these midterms may rest on convincing Americans who don't like Trump to do something consequential about it.

It may be difficult to persuade voters motivated primarily by traditional economic factors to do so; unemployment rates in the United States are lower today than they were under Obama. But Trump has made politics particularly visceral and values-based, which may cause voters to make decisions based on what they believe to be the core identities of the two main parties at this moment.

Get out the vote, Democrats!

The clearer path to victory for the Democrats, however, may lie less in winning over Trump voters than in simply getting out the vote.

Voting rates are consistently low during midterm elections, when the stakes are perceived to be lower than in presidential races. Only 35.9 per cent of eligible voters cast votes in 2014, the lowest midterm turnout rate since 1942. Party strategists therefore usually focus more on their core supporters during midterms than on expanding their reach.

But these elections are different. The stakes are correctly understood to be higher, which suggests an opportunity for Democratic candidates who put effort into getting more people to the polls.

There is a clear precedent — albeit a presidential one. The voting rate for African-Americans, who are more likely to vote Democrat, rose from 60.3 per cent in 2004 to 65.2 in 2008, contributing to Obama's victory. It remained high, at 66.6 per cent, in 2012, when Obama was re-elected, and dropped back down to 59.6 in 2016, when Trump won.

Young people are also more likely to vote Democrat, but they are less likely to vote, period. Only 16 per cent of eligible voters aged 18–29 voted in the 2014 midterms, the lowest rate for midterms in at least 25 years. Young people have been among the most active opponents to Trump and to Republican policies, rallying to causes such as gun control in the wake of a mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida high school in February.

But walkouts and other forms of activism accomplish little compared to changing the composition of legislatures. Democratic hopes in these midterms may rest on convincing Americans who don't like Trump to do something consequential about it.



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