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The diversity of the Democratic Party

American history demonstrates that party conflict does not necessarily hurt electoral success

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Will Democratic gains in the November midterm elections be squandered by an inopportune bout of party infighting? The upset by the first-time candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez over the 10-term incumbent and House Democratic Caucus chairman Joseph Crowley in New York's 14th Congressional District primary has reinvigorated this debate.

Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and an alumna of Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign, ran on an ambitious left-wing platform while attacking 'establishment incumbents' and 'the institutional Democratic Party' for their supposed ideological timidity.

Nancy Pelosi, the House Democratic leader, appeared to minimise Ocasio-Cortez's victory by describing it as 'just one district'; some political analysts warned that the popularity of such appeals in the blue precincts of Queens and the Bronx is unlikely to be equaled in the places elsewhere in the country where federal elections are usually decided.

Top Democratic officials — and their sympathisers in the pundit class — are evidently concerned that the surge in liberal activism provoked by the Trump presidency may pose a threat to the party's fortunes in 2018 by exacerbating what a recent New York Times article described as 'a moment of extraordinary conflict' and 'turmoil on the left.'

Democrats need diverse messages

But they needn't worry too much: American history demonstrates that party unity is not a necessary condition for electoral success. Democrats repeatedly won presidential and congressional elections by landslide margins in the decades between the 1930s and 1960s even as the national

party was deeply split between Northern and Southern wings that disagreed on issues ranging from civil rights to the Vietnam War — much more fundamental rifts than any current divide within the party.

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More recently, the growth of the tea party movement during the presidency of Barack Obama produced notably sharp fractures among Republicans that ended the careers of several leading politicians, but it did not prevent Republican candidates from netting 70 House seats and 14 Senate seats between 2010 and 2014.

Political commentators often suggest that national parties maximise their electoral effectiveness when they push a single policy program or message. But the Democratic Party is organised as a coalition of social groups and best served when candidates are free to shape individual campaign appeals tailored to the interests of their own constituencies. Rather than acting as a single party 'base' with a common set of policy goals or ideological commitments, Democratic supporters are made up of a diverse array of social groups strewn across state and district boundaries, each with its own agenda of political concerns and quest for representation among the party leadership. Mobilising the collective Democratic faithful from coast to coast therefore requires a variety of distinct campaign messages — and messengers.

A record number of women candidates

The differing complexion of the Democratic electorate from one place to another also helps to explain why pressure from party liberals for greater ideological purity (and a more confrontational approach toward the Trump administration) is not evenly distributed across the nation. While veteran blue-state officeholders like Crowley, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York and Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California face intraparty challengers from the left, moderate Senate Democrats facing re-election in red states have all either won their primaries or appear on the way to renomination without fear of serious contestation.

As a result, the widespread surge of anti-Trump activism over the past two years has not endangered Democratic electoral prospects by producing a raft of candidates who are poor fits for the broader voting public in their home seats. Special-election nominees like Doug Jones and Conor Lamb have received enthusiastic support from liberal activists despite keeping their distance from the left wing of the party.

If the Democratic Party is undergoing a transformation in the Trump era, it is less ideological than compositional. The party has already nominated a record number of women for Congress in 2018, many of whom are running for competitive seats now held by Republicans. At least three Hispanic Democrats (including Ocasio-Cortez) are poised to succeed white incumbents in majority-minority House districts. And the November election is also likely to produce the first Eritrean-American and female Native-American members of the legislative branch.

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These demographic changes will have substantive implications as well. Research has shown that female and nonwhite representatives tend to concentrate on different issues than white men of the same party. Although the next opportunity to regain control of the elected branches in Washington is still at least two years away, an internal Democratic debate has already begun over how to prioritise initiatives championed by different elements of the party.

Intraparty agreements vital in the future

The renewed energy on the American left and the evolution of the party's chief sources of mass support have added a number of new concerns to an already long wish list of policy changes.

But while the 2018 midterms have produced a diverse cast of Democratic candidates running on a mix of issues all over the country, the presence of Trump in the White House and the procedural rules in the Senate ensure that the actual policy effects of this year's election are likely to be minor even if the party succeeds in capturing control of Congress.

The full consequences of the debates that have separated Democrats along racial, gender and generational lines in the current campaign will emerge only once the party returns to power in future years. Is health care affordability the most critical problem that the government should address, or is it gun violence, or child care, or immigration reform?

To achieve legislative success, future Democratic leaders will need to broker agreements among party factions over policy priorities as well as policy details. Party unity may not help win elections, but it becomes quite valuable once the time to govern has arrived.

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