NORTH AMERICA 09.11.2018 | Josef Braml

Trump's 'New Deal'?

Why the Democrats' majority in the House could benefit Trump's infrastructure plans - and his bid to get re-elected in 2020

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Contrary to what many headlines are suggesting, the bottom line is that Trump has not really emerged from the midterm elections in a weakened position. Thanks to the new distribution of power, he could make even further inroads into the Democrats' working-class electorate at the presidential elections in two years' time.

The results of the elections held few surprises, but confirmed a historically established pattern: Bar a handful of exceptions in the history of US elections, the president's party has lost seats in Congress in the first midterms – and the lower the president's approval rating, the more seats it has lost. Given his low approval ratings, the fact that Trump did not suffer a major reverse and only lost the House of Representatives can definitely be seen as a victory for him.

Trump and the Republicans' core voters of the religious right were able to defend their Senate majority, which is the more important bulwark for them. If Trump had also lost the Senate majority in addition to his majority in the House, they would have lost everything again – as Trump warned urgently during the election campaign. The worst case could even have seen the president impeached. This opinion was also shared by Trump's former campaign manager Stephen Bannon, who once again helped mobilise donors and voters.

A conservative 'revolution'

An overwhelming majority of voters on the Christian right already voted quite pragmatically for the less than pious and hardly chaste Trump. This is because he chose a vice-presidential running mate from their ranks, Mike Pence, and at the same time assured them that as president he would nominate only judges for the Supreme Court that they approved

of. The aim of changing the majority on the nine-justice Supreme Court is primarily to re-examine the abortion ruling from 1973.

A large number of believers were politicised by the Supreme Court's decision in the case of Roe v. Wade in 1973. The liberalisation of abortion laws marked the birth of the right-wing political movement of conservative, evangelical and Catholic advocacy groups and their voters, who have increasingly committed themselves to the Republicans in the sense of a 'moral majority' ever since. 'Moral issues' such as abortion not only divide the population into advocates and opponents, but have kept politicians and the various courts in the American judicial system busy for decades.

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The Roe v. Wade ruling on abortion, the questioning of the tax-exempt status of Christian schools in 1978 and the political engagement of feminists and the gay liberation movement triggered a call to arms among all those on the religious right who saw traditional values under threat.

Over the past few decades, the Republic Party has been able to register heavy gains in the Bible Belt. The heartlands of the evangelicals are today located in rural areas in the South and parts of the Midwest. The pragmatic understanding of their cooperation forms the basis for the symbiosis of power between the Republican Party and the organisational network of the religious right.

A rule of thumb has now become established: The more often Americans attend church, the more likely they are to vote for a Republican candidate. Although Hillary Clinton did not miss any opportunity during the last presidential elections to proclaim her religious convictions, standing up for the right to an abortion made her the perfect threat to the 'life of unborn children'. And so she helped Trump win the loyalty of conservative voters.

The midterms as a 'culture war'

Rarely before has the political mood in the US been as charged as it was in the run-up to the Congressional elections on 6 November. The bitterly contested nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the highest court in the US during the critical phase of the election campaign further fanned the flames of the culture war between anti-abortionists on the religious right and liberal pro-choicers.

Because of this, the Democrats had to master an even more difficult balancing act. This was especially true for those senators who were up for re-election in the states where Trump won in the presidential election.

On the one hand, liberal voters demand from the Democrats in the culture war that they campaign for the 'right to reproductive self-determination'. On the other, the representatives are called upon, primarily by evangelical and Catholic churches, to defend the 'right to life'.

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The Democratic senator Heidi Heitkamp was one who failed to master this balancing act: She voted against Trump's candidate for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh, and paid for it with her defeat in the elections.

The intense dispute over the judicial nomination now also mobilised Republican donors and voters to catch up on the mobilisation advantage enjoyed by the Democrats to prevent what was the worst-case scenario for them. Democratic voters were already highly motivated anyway because they saw in the elections an opportunity to put a check on the domestic and foreign policy powers of Donald Trump, and perhaps even to remove him from office.

With the Republicans able to defend their majority in the Senate, the loss of the House of Representatives is not a major problem for Trump and his backers. If Robert Mueller's special counsel investigation into the Russia case were also to incriminate him personally, the new Democratic majority in the House of Representatives may herald impeachment proceedings against Trump. But in the absence of a two-thirds majority in the Senate, the chamber that has the critical vote, it would be possible to avert impeachment, as was the case with Bill Clinton in his day.

A 'New Deal'?

A Democratic majority in the House of Representatives might even turn out to be useful for Trump's infrastructure plans and his possible re-election in two years' time. Trump cannot count on the support of Republicans in Congress, who are critical of the state, to achieve his second major economic policy objective after the tax reform, namely an infrastructure programme financed by credit.

Given this, a Democratic majority in the House would be more helpful for Trump's infrastructure plans: When it comes to expenditure that benefits the voters in their constituencies and individual states,

Democrats who are close to the trade unions, known as 'Old Liberals', will definitely be prepared to vote with the president and also to position themselves against their fiscally conservative colleagues in the party, the 'Blue Dogs'.

It is possible that Trump will get a 'New Deal' done with the self-proclaimed socialist and labour leader Bernie Sanders. These two free trade critics agree that the number one priority is to provide American workers with steady jobs again: 'America first', whatever the cost.

Given that interest rates are still low, there is a perfect opportunity to rebuild the country for the good of the 'working class' and to forge new electoral coalitions, Trump's former campaign manager Stephen Bannon stated. He predicted times as exciting as those in the 1930s for his president. He envisioned 'bold, persistent experimentation', similar to the New Deal under President Roosevelt's leadership. This was something much greater than the 'Reagan revolution': an alliance of conservatives and populists in an economic nationalist movement.

Perhaps, Trump does have a 'New Deal' up his sleeve after the Congressional elections. He can now carry out his expensive and credit-financed infrastructure programme more easily in close alliance with the less fiscally conservative Democrats on the one hand and, on the other, also make them responsible for failures in other areas. Looking forward to his possible re-election in two years' time, a 'New Deal' involving infrastructure projects might even enable Trump to make inroads into the Democrats' voter base.

As the system of checks and balances in the US will not be able to put a brake on Trump's radical 'America First' course in the foreseeable future, political and economic decision-makers here in Europe should no longer have any excuse not to think more confidently and establish a better position for Europe in a world of ever-tougher geopolitical competition. When it comes to responding to 'America First', the order of the day has to be 'Europe United'.



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