

US Midterms Elections : 51 Percent Losers

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The midterms have given the Democratic Party a boost. But their professional-class politics are a cul de sac — we desperately need a political revolution driven by the needs and aspirations of the multiracial working class.

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The midterm elections produced a range of results as vast, gorgeous, and idiotic as America itself. A glance at the state ballot measures [1] alone suggests the warring impulses at work in our confused society: Idaho expanded Medicaid, Louisiana repealed its Jim Crow-era jury rules, and Missouri raised the minimum wage, but Washington rejected a carbon tax [2], Colorado declined to further regulate fracking [3]. Florida, meanwhile, voted to enfranchise ex-felons [4], but hobbled its already dysfunctional government by requiring a legislative supermajority to raise taxes [5].

The national political story was no different. Democrats won a narrow majority in the House and a handful of governorships, but Republicans strengthened their hold on the Senate. An exciting new crop of left-wing legislators won office [6], but some of the country's most dynamic candidates were (probably) defeated by Trumpist lapdogs [7], industry tools [8], and neoliberal flunkies [9]. Scott Walker lost, but Ted Cruz won: it was that kind of night.

The media reaction to this mixed fruit revealed the Janus face of contemporary liberalism. One cluster of pundits arraigned ordinary Americans for failing to "repudiate" Donald Trump with sufficient gusto. "If the midterms were a test of the country's character," pronounced Sarah Kendzior, "Americans failed." [10] Democrats may have scraped back a few seats in Congress, but the nightmare of Trump remains, and with it the frenzy of shame, disgust, and hostility toward popular government that has saturated liberal commentary since November 2016 [11].

At the same time, a parallel brigade of liberal analysts arrived to claim a triumphant victory for the electoral process. "Make no mistake," declared the *New Yorker* [12], "the midterm elections were a Democratic victory." By reclaiming some of the Midwestern states Hillary Clinton lost, while also making inroads into the New South [13], Democrats showed they could be trusted to build an effective resistance to Trump's "populist" demagoguery [14]. Taking back the House, said Nancy Pelosi on election night [15], meant "restoring the Constitution's checks and balances to the Trump administration."

Together, these reactions amount to a peculiar style of discourse you might call apocalyptic institutionalism. The chilling march of fascism, from this angle, may only be halted by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the US counterintelligence apparatus, and, perhaps, a thunderous condemnation of nonvoters on social media. The Sunday before the election, on a handsome brownstone block in Brooklyn, I watched an adult man scurry up and down the

street, urging New York City Marathon runners to rescue the republic by casting a ballot for Andrew Cuomo.

But when it comes to understanding the election, both faces of liberal punditry are wrong: in the language of this increasingly evangelical liberalism, the midterms were neither a confirmation of the apocalypse nor a sign of our coming Democratic salvation.

Elite hysteria about the depravity of the American people makes even less sense in 2018 than it did in 2016. This election was, absolutely, a mass repudiation of Trump and his foul agenda [16]. Republicans lost the popular contest for Congress by millions of votes and over seven percentage points [17]. The true power behind Trump's throne, we should know by now, is not an irresistible army of zombie racists in the heartland, but the historical structures [18] and top-down tactics that sustain Republican minority rule [19].

Yet neither did last Tuesday's results mark the way toward anything like a constructive political realignment. In numerical terms, national Democratic gains were utterly, predictably normal [20]: in midterm elections since the New Deal, the president's party loses on average about thirty seats in Congress, four seats in the Senate, and 350 seats in statehouses [21]. The Democrats, it turns out, are almost as average as it gets.

This was not a blue wave [22], but a deepening of the familiar twenty-first century partisan trench. The metaphors for today's Democratic Party should not be liquid or mobile, since its dominant impulse remains both concrete and conservative [23]: protecting American institutions, restoring "balance" to government, and defending the Barack Obama-era status quo against the invading armies of the Right.

Freed from the burden of Hillary Clinton at the top of the ballot, and boosted by the midterm cycle, Democrats did make raw gains [24] in nearly every part of the country [25]. But the congressional districts where they concentrated their resources [26] and won decisive victories — from New Jersey to Minnesota to Texas — were almost exclusively the same affluent, educated suburbs that Clinton sought to woo in 2016.

In this sense, the midterms represented a victorious Democratic effort to capture Fortress Fairfax County [27]. This strategy, as its fans and critics alike have long understood, can produce a limited kind of electoral success. With unwonted generosity, we might even grant that it made tactical sense in the very specific circumstances of the 2018 midterms.

The defeat of Republican reaction, red in tooth and claw [28], is worth celebrating. Yet on its own terms, the Democrats' return to government offers little to cheer about. The only Americans who adore "checks and balances" more than liberal pundits are the owners of capital. The day after the election, the Dow Jones rose 550 points, the strongest post-midterm stock rally in thirty years [29]. A divided Congress, declared JP Morgan's Marko Kolanovic, speaking for the investor class as a whole, "is the best outcome for US and global equity markets."

On Wall Street, healthcare stocks led the way [30], with UnitedHealth and Anthem, Inc. both spiking to record highs last week. When Michigan governor-elect Gretchen Whitmer attracted criticism for putting a Blue Cross Blue Shield executive on her transition team [31], she only made literal what Wall Street already understood: a resurgent Democratic Party, in its current formation, only strengthens the stability of the for-profit health insurance system.

And in the long run, the Democrats' 51 percent solution, depending crucially on the votes of wealthy suburbanites, is a formula for disaster. It cannot repair our broken politics, much less transform our

savagely unequal society. In fact, even in its short-term triumphs, it obscures (when it does not outright scorn) the one mode of struggle that can break the cycle: a political revolution driven by the needs and aspirations of the broader working class.

Fortress Fairfax

The 2018 elections produced the highest midterm turnout in a century [32]. Yet this welcome expansion of mass politics was nothing like an expansion of class politics: compared to the electorate in 2014 or 2016, by far the most striking increase [33] in participation came from white college graduates in the suburbs [34].

Last Tuesday, Democrats' key victories owed to these same voters. In Fairfax County itself, Democrats easily won Virginia's 10th, the single richest district in the country by median income [35]. But the blue cul-de-sac took in affluent suburbs in every region of the country: Democrats also flipped the richest districts in the states of New Jersey, Illinois, Georgia, Minnesota, Michigan, Colorado, Kansas, and South Carolina. From the lawyer foyers of metro Denver to the garage mahals of exurban Chicago, the Democrats hoisted their banner high above the triangular ramparts of McMansionland.

In Orange County, California, a hundred-year-old bastion of white-bread conservatism, Republicans were wiped off the map. Over the last few decades, Latino and Asian voters have transformed southern California's political landscape, but given the shape of the overall electorate, we can be sure that the decisive shift from 2016 to 2018 — which netted four Democratic seats in Congress — was driven by white college grads [36].

The geographic diversity of these victories should not disguise their economic homogeneity. Among the nearly forty House districts where Democrats took control in 2018, about thirty are rated "prosperous" or "comfortable" by the Economic Innovation Group, a bipartisan think tank. Of the forty-three "distressed" districts held by Republicans [37], Democrats flipped just two (NJ-2 and NM-2).

In other words, the midterms confirmed that the Democrats have become — perhaps more than ever before in their two-hundred-year history — a party of the prosperous [38]. The millionaire and billionaire governors, like Phil Murphy in New Jersey and J.B. Pritzker in Illinois, are only the gaudiest new constructions on the Democratic block.

Cast your eye across a list of the twenty richest House districts in the United States https://public.tableau.com/views/U_S_Congressionaldistrictsbyincomefor2018/DistrictsDash?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&publish=yes&:showVizHome=no, measured by median income: every single one of them now has a Democratic representative. Of the wealthiest forty districts, thirty-five of them just elected a Democrat; of the wealthiest fifty, that number is forty-two.

According to exit polls, Republicans still maintain a slim advantage among all voters making six-figure incomes, but that margin has shrunk considerably since the 1980s and 1990s. With Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco (the twenty-fourth richest district in the country) and Steny Hoyer of suburban Maryland (the eighteenth richest) poised to take charge of the House, it's worth considering what kind of politics are possible under the current party configuration.

In policy terms, as Lily Geismer and Matthew Lassiter have argued, a Democratic pivot to the suburbs risks producing a party unwilling or unable to challenge entrenched inequalities [39]. "The political culture of upscale suburbs," they write, "revolves around resource hoarding of children's

educational advantages, pervasive opposition to economic integration and affordable housing, and the consistent defense of homeowner privileges and taxpayer rights.”

The ideological agonies of this suburban straitjacket were easy to spot in several governor’s races this fall. In Massachusetts and Maryland, the two bluest states on the East Coast, Republican incumbents with upscale suburban politics bulldozed their Democratic challengers. In Connecticut, meanwhile, one-time progressive hero Ned Lamont fended off his Republican opponent only by pledging not to raise taxes [40].

It’s one thing for Democrats from upscale districts, like the newly elected Harley Rouda in Orange County, to signal their support for Medicare for All [41]: it’s an extremely popular idea [42], and a good national fundraising tactic besides. But it’s another thing to imagine such Democrats, and the affluent voters they represent, leading a serious challenge to the healthcare industry.

As the humiliating Amazon HQ2 sweepstakes has revealed, elite Democrats are far more comfortable abasing themselves before corporate power [43] than confronting it. At least Obama’s former press secretary Jay Carney, now a senior vice president at Amazon, demands a fat company paycheck in exchange for his labor. Elected Democrats with a wide range of ideological personas — showy “progressives” like Bill de Blasio [44], bland liberals like Tim Kaine [45], power-hungry predators like Andrew Cuomo — have all shown themselves quite willing to do Jeff Bezos’s work for free.

Democrats Against Workers

In the long run, the fight against the tyranny of capital and for universal social goods [46] — health care, housing, child care, education, jobs — cannot depend on upper-middle-class noblesse oblige. It must harness the energy and the solidarity of the working people who stand most to benefit from a transformed economy.

And here the *political* consequences of the Democrats’ flight to Fortress Fairfax may be even more dangerous than their policy implications. Last Tuesday, even as the party made nationwide gains at Republican expense, the midterm results revealed a multiracial working class that is more divided than ever.

A closer look at the upper Midwest — where Democrats performed well overall — makes it clear that the party has not yet found a way to win back the allegiance of white working-class voters.

In Minnesota, Democrats flipped two districts in the comfortable Twin Cities suburbs (MN-2 and MN-3), where median incomes are around \$80,000 and median property values approach \$300,000. But they lost control of two much less affluent, educated districts: MN-1 in the rural south, and MN-8 in the northern Iron Range, the historic stronghold of Minnesota’s organized working class. In both of these districts, incomes hover near \$55,000, with property values around \$170,000. After the midterms, the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party is stronger than before, but also more estranged from the bulk of the state’s farmers and laborers.

In Wisconsin’s gubernatorial race, Tony Evers finally slew the reactionary demon we call “Scott Walker.” Yet once again, the decisive votes came from college graduates, most of them in metropolitan Milwaukee or Madison. In many of the poorer counties of north and west Wisconsin, Evers actually ran behind the Democrats who lost to Walker four and eight years ago. The Democratic margin of victory among union households, too, dropped from thirty-one points in 2014 to just fourteen points last Tuesday.

Liberals, of course, have an easy explanation for why so many white workers have rejected the Democrats: activated by Trump's racism, they have chosen ethnic identity over class interest. This is surely part of the story. Yet as Geismer and Lassiter point out [\[47\]](#), the standard liberal argument intentionally obscures the flip side of Republican race-baiting: "the deliberate, long-term strategy by the Democratic Party to favor the financial interests and social values of affluent white suburban families and high-tech corporations over the priorities of unions and the economic needs of middle-income and poor residents of all races."

Nothing in American politics since 2016 has altered this equation. For the most part, Democrats continue to reject the political racism of Trump's Republican Party, earning them the loyal if seldom enthusiastic [\[48\]](#) support of the nonwhite working class. But as a national party, the Democrats stand as firmly as ever behind the "progressive neoliberalism" of Barack Obama [\[49\]](#): an unholy "alliance of emancipation and financialization," as Nancy Fraser has called it [\[50\]](#), that channels political energy into moral outrage rather than anything like class struggle.

In its leadership and cultural style, the Democratic Party has already become a party of the professional class, with little interest in challenging the plutocracy [\[51\]](#) and little capacity to deliver material benefits to workers of any race. If the shareholders of Amazon, Pfizer, and Goldman Sachs all understand this, why shouldn't the iron miners of northern Minnesota?

The Democratic retreat to Fairfax accelerates this dynamic. While the party's deep-pocketed donors spend billions turning rich suburbia blue, feverish liberal elites brandish the map [\[52\]](#) and condemn half the American working class as white nationalist ideologues [\[53\]](#).

This too is a form of class politics: not the kind that threatens the economic order, but the kind that sustains it. In the age of Trump, the apocalyptic style of discourse provides ample cover for the return of anti-democratic ideas [\[54\]](#) to the liberal mainstream. Already these range from the banal [\[55\]](#) to the vicious: on the day after the election, even as it railed against Republican voter suppression in Georgia [\[56\]](#), Vox was politely amplifying the highbrow advocate of a new Jim Crow regime aimed at poor and working-class Americans [\[57\]](#).

Democrats may disdain, subordinate, or proscribe vast swathes of the working class, but socialists — if the idea of socialism means anything at all — never can. Nor can we give into liberal temptation [\[58\]](#) and surrender the possibility of class politics across racial lines.

Out of all 435 House elections, the single biggest swing toward the Democrats came in southern West Virginia, where Richard Ojeda built his campaign around the state's teacher strikes, fierce attacks on his "millionaire" opponent, and an unusually full-throated celebration of "the working class." [\[59\]](#) In the end, he was swamped by the terminal unpopularity of the national Democratic Party in coal country. But to look at Ojeda's thirty-six point gain and declare white workers immune to class politics is not just confused, it is almost criminal.

Of course the challenges are daunting. No single political stroke — not even the potent cry of Medicare for All — can unite America's working class, let alone organize it. Much of the critical work cannot take place through electoral politics at all. The struggle will last decades, not two-year election cycles.

But if you aspire to anything more than an endless rotation of divided governments — of checks, balances, and capital gains — of a politics that puts fascists on one side and UnitedHealth on the other — this must be your project, too.

The Hands of the Laboring Class

One hundred and fifty years ago, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the United States witnessed an equally significant political battle to determine the fate of the country. As liberal and left-wing commentators today increasingly look to Reconstruction for political enlightenment, it's worth borrowing a crucial lesson about race, class, and partisan realignment from W. E. B. Du Bois's Marxist classic, *Black Reconstruction* [60].

Contrary to much popular history, Du Bois argued, "Reconstruction was not simply a fight between the white and the black races in the South." It was a multipolar struggle that involved northern capitalists, southern planters, and "a vast movement of labor," white and black, in both regions.

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party had organized the suppression of the Confederate rebellion and the destruction of slavery. But in the late 1860s, as that party fell under the sway of the "monarchs of industry and finance," it increasingly came to blows with organized white workers in the North. On the other end of the political spectrum, meanwhile, President Andrew Johnson made naked appeals to racism, hoping to forge a pseudo-populist alliance of planters, farmers, and laborers on the basis of white supremacy.

The result of this double movement, by the late nineteenth century, was a party system that left the American working class hopelessly rent by race. Through the Gilded Age Republican party, Du Bois noted, the cause of "humanitarian radicalism" — and black civil rights — became "completely harnessed to capital and property in the North." The major opposition party, the Gilded Age Democrats, stood vaguely for northern white labor, and vigorously for "reaction and property in the South." The fruit of this divided working class was more than half a century of violent labor repression, harsh racial apartheid, and unfiltered capitalist profit.

Over the last two years, another clownish demagogue in the White House has made the same gambit as Andrew Johnson did a hundred fifty years ago: divide by race and rule by class, while capital laughs all the way to the bank.

Today's Democratic Party, to their credit, appears far more committed to preserving civil rights than the late-nineteenth-century Republicans. But as the party consolidates its strength around the wealthy suburbs, the dangers of a Gilded Age-style class division persist. A political coalition led by affluent metropolitans, armed with pietistic certainty about their moral cause, but almost physically allergic to huge chunks of the working-class population: this was the Republican Party of 1884. It does not offer us a roadmap to the future.

"The only power to curtail the rising empire of finance in the United States," Du Bois concluded, "was industrial democracy — votes and intelligence in the hands of the laboring class, black and white, North and South." The hands of the laboring class: in the struggle against capitalist power, they are the only thing that can save us. That was true in 1868, it was true in 1938, and it remains true in 2018.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 11.14.2018:

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