



The Blue Wave: Illusion, Dream or Reality? The stakes of the 2018 U.S. Congressional Mid-Term Election

The U.S. 2018 Congressional mid-terms will be a crucial test for the Republican agenda and will personally test President Trump. European leaders must understand that this will be a defining point of Trump's presidency and will lay the roadmap for US policy (both domestic and international) up to the 2020 elections. Furthermore, the severity of partisan politics since Trump took office means that Democrats will be looking to go onto the offensive if they manage to unseat Republicans in the House of Representatives or Senate. Democrats will likely target international leaders who have praised Trump and shared his views if they take one of these Chambers. Situations like the recent meeting between Secretary of State Pompeo and Hungary's Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Peter Szijjártó would have been heavily scrutinized and denounced.

November is a long way off, and both parties face challenges before realizing their respective goals. Democrats will be aiming to achieve a majority in one chamber and stall the Republican agenda until the 2020 election, but they have a highly unpopular leader- former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. Meanwhile, Republicans will aspire to retain control of both chambers to prevent investigations, complete partisan deadlock and protect Trump from impeachment proceedings, yet high-level retirements and a highly fractured party over Trump's unorthodox governing style imperils their narrow majorities. Republicans must immediately begin to unite and take measures to stop a Democrat blue wave, but it may be too late. Given this, if Democrats flip the House, what will this mean for Congressional Republicans, the President and the party as a whole?

The Senate and House of Representatives are two very different entities. The Senate is a rigid institution with engrained procedures to ensure it slowly, pensively considers significant legislation. Furthermore, Senators are only up for re-election every six years providing that they will be less focused on immediate re-election while the full 435 members of the House are elected every two years. The Senate attempts to steer clear of radical shifts in US public opinions (unsuccessfully at times) while the House embraces and thrives on partisan issues.

The fundamental question is, can the Democrats flip the House, Senate or both to stall the Republican agenda until the presidential elections in 2020? The House consists of 435 elected seats, but, according to an average of several different polling organizations, only around 48 seats are considered competitive with the possibility of going either Republican or Democrat¹. The Democrats will need to secure 24 seats of these 'toss up' elections to unseat the Republican majority and take control of the House. Meanwhile, in the Senate, Democrats hold 49 out of the 100 seats. U.S. Senators are up for re-election every six-years, and the terms are staggered so not all 100 seats are up for re-election every cycle. During the 2018 mid-terms, only 35 seats out of the total 100 will be up for re-election; however, Democrats will be defending 26 of these seats. Furthermore, 10 of these 26 Democratic-held seats were won by Trump during the 2016 election, in some cases by a significant margin. For example, Democratic Senator Joe Manchin

¹Lee, Jasmine (2018, March 26) To Reclaim the House, Democrats Need to Flip 24 G.O.P. Seats. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/26/us/elections/house-races-midterms.html>

is up for re-election in West Virginia, a State that Trump beat Hilary by over 42%. The Democrats will need to spend more defending these high-risk seats than using their resources towards picking up the two crucial selections to win a majority.

The grand dream of Speaker Paul Ryan (R-W.Y.) and Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell (R-K.Y.) was for a Republican led Congress and White House that would push a traditional Conservative agenda. This legislative agenda included tax cuts, repealing the Affordable Health Care Act (ACA) an Obama era universal health care law, infrastructure development, workforce expansion, stricter immigration, enhanced US prestige worldwide and cementing a more stringent budget process. Out of all of these legislative priorities, only tax reform was successful. So who is to blame for this shattered dream? While there are many factors, the largest is Donald Trump and his endless controversies, scandals, and ineffective negotiating style². While embracing the identity of an anti-establishment, political outsider was instrumental in his 2016 election win; he has failed to adopt the necessary responsibilities associated with crafting domestic and international US policy that is capable of unifying moderate and hard-line Republicans. Trump has repeatedly kneecapped his ‘allies’ in Congress and opened the door for a ‘blue wave’ that can flip the House.

The Republican dream of a policy producing White House, Senate and House of Representatives remained just a dream, but now it is slowly turning into a nightmare foreshadowing a Democrat-led House with revenge on its mind. What would this mean? First, it would instigate a general deadlock without any substantial policy, but, more importantly, it will allow the most vocal anti-Trump and anti-Republican voices in the House to use every tool at their disposal to trash the Republican agenda. It will undoubtedly mean impeachment proceedings and new investigations into the Administration from the House Oversight Committee, Intelligence Committee and others depending on the specific issue (Republicans have controlled all Congressional investigations so far). In the past year and a half, pro-Trump supporters in the House have opened doors that they cannot shut if they lose control. Republicans have repeatedly entered the grey area of using official Congressional work to advance Trump inspired political agendas. For example, Republican Representative Devin Nunes the Chairman of the previously bi-partisan and media recluse House Intelligence Committee has politicized the committees work to an unprecedented level. If the Democrats take the House, this committee will begin pouring out anti-Trump rhetoric just as Nunes used it to defend him. If this nightmare comes to fruition, Republicans will be more concerned with fighting off investigations and attacks than attempting any major policy initiatives.

While the Republicans are nervously eyeing a ‘blue wave’ in November, Democrats also have several issues that will hamper their ability to win back the House. Most notably, the minority leader of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. Pelosi is one of the most controversial politicians in D.C. and achieved the highest elected rank of any woman in the U.S. (Speaker of the House from 2007-2011). For over a decade Republicans have been branding her as an establishment, big city favouring politician (she represents a district in wealthy San Francisco,

². The two failures to repeal the ACA is a perfect example when Trump hurt rather than helped push the GOP agenda. Frum, David (2017, August 1) The Real Reason Trump’s Obamacare Repeal Push Failed. Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/the-real-reason-trumps-obamacare-repeal-push-failed/535500/>

California) who fails to understand the millions of Americans living in central, often rural and working-class parts of America. Regardless of the validity of this label, past campaigns show that Republicans are exceptional at tying candidates to Pelosi and the wealthy establishment of liberal politics. This will undoubtedly hurt certain candidates, but Pelosi is also by far one of the best fundraisers in political history raising \$66.7 million during the last cycle³, which just ended in March 2018 giving Democrats a sizable war chest⁴. Notwithstanding if she is the best face for Democrats in 2018 or not, she will be the leader and candidates must emphasize their individuality and policies platforms tailored to the Congressional district's constituents.

One other fear for Democrats in 2018 is the possibility of a schism between traditional Democrats and left-wing progressives running in the image of Bernie Sanders. This rising wing is repeatedly shunning the party and rejecting any financing from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). It is clear that the DCCC leadership is trying to influence the selection of candidates in November. For example, the DCCC administration privately requested that one candidate drop out of the race and in an extreme case even published damaging information against a Texas progressive⁵. However, for the most part, progressive, anti-establishment Democrats are mainly running in districts where there are Republican incumbents or open seats. Only eight progressive challengers have run against a sitting Democratic incumbent, compared to over sixty who have entered a primary for the opportunity to take on a Republican representative this fall.

So what does all of this mean? The Democrats remain organized and threatening while the GOP remains fractured, leaderless and without any substantial legislative victories. Their only major success of tax reform is in the background of campaign messaging since average working people do not see any changes (the wealthiest fifth of households will receive 71% of the tax cuts). Republicans have been successful before by merely attacking the 'establishment' of liberal politics; however, they're the governing party now – this tactic won't work. Furthermore, they will have to defend a questionable record of supporting the least popular president in modern history. Trump sits at an estimated 41.5% approval rating, the lowest of any President at this point in their presidency since the end of the Second World War⁶. Regardless of what Republicans say, this will be a test for an unpopular president who has achieved historically little yet faced or personally created crisis after crisis.

The elections will be a test for Republicans, and at this time, it looks like they will fail. If they lose the House, it will be the beginning of the end for what was the GOP as it morphs into a new identity. The midterms will depict an exciting transformation for the GOP. Will it move back towards traditional Republicans or continue towards radical die-hard Trump supporters?

³ In comparison Speaker Paul Ryan raised \$54 million in the same period. Hagen, Lisa (2018, April 20) Pelosi Raised \$16.1 Million in First Quarter of 2018. Retrieved from:

<http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/385491-pelosi-raised-161-million-in-first-quarter-of-2018>

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⁵ Gaudiano, Nicole (2018, March 2) Progressives to Democratic campaign committee: Stop attacking us. Retrieved from: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/03/02/progressives-democratic-campaign-committee-stop-attacking-us/390757002/>

⁶ Bycoffe, Aaron & Mehta, Dhruvil (2018, June 18) How unpopular is Donald Trump? Retrieved from: <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/>

Given the current climate and taking into account the unprecedented high number of retirements by more moderate Republicans, the party is destined, at least in the short term, to conform closer to the Trump ideology and push further radical and irrational⁷. The Trump model of attacking the establishment (and anyone else who doesn't agree with him) is useful during an election but completely erodes any standing for governing. No one wants to work with an elected official whose ideology is a zero-sum negotiation style. Although all of the mentioned factors project a win for the Democrats, it is not a guaranteed success, and they should not sit back. Instead, they must keep up the momentum if this dream is to become a reality. The one certainty for post-election politics is increased partisan deadlock and rhetoric coming from the left, centre and far-right- essentially a complete stall in government.

It is crucial that European leaders pay attention to the elections and if Democrats do take a chamber, they must be prepared to walk a very delicate path between Trump and the Democrats. Central Europe will be a particular focus for Democrat rhetoric. Central Europe has followed a careful plan of appeasing Trump and averting US criticism levelled against its domestic policies seen as eroding traditional forms of liberal democracy. The US military remains the most popular US institution, and Democrats will not risk jeopardizing recent large military deals with Poland, so the hammer will inevitably fall on Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Specifically, the Democrats and encouraged moderate Republicans will target the Stop Soros Law and Hungary's softening stance towards Russia arguing that Trump's ally in Europe stands against US values and commitments to the international community. Condemning Orbán and his self-titled 'illiberal democracy' is not new, and Democrats will again use non-binding resolutions and hearings to discredit Orbán in the media. Furthermore, by attacking Orbán, Democrats will attempt to present themselves as the choice for renewing transatlantic relations, supporting liberal democracies in Europe and stopping the looming trade war. However, these policies will remain symbolic since the Executive branch has taken nearly all responsibility for foreign affairs from the Legislative Branch. Europeans should be looking towards constructing as many bridges with the Democrats with the expectation that they will be in some capacity of governing and aiming at restraining Trump and those leaders echoing his rhetoric.

⁷Berman, Russell (2018, June 5) The 2018 Congressional Retirement Tracker. Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/the-2018-congressional-retirement-tracker/545723/>