The Wave Hits a Wall

Waking up this morning and looking at the midterm results, I kept returning to the British expression “a curate’s egg”—an object or turn of events described as “good in parts.” The end of Republican control of the House of Representatives is certainly good news. So too is the Democratic pickup of seven governors, with the ousters of union foe Scott Walker in Wisconsin and Kris Kobach, the Kansas poster boy for voter suppression, particularly worth savoring. Jared Polis’s victory in Colorado makes him the first openly gay governor in the country, which is especially sweet since he ran on universal health care, stricter gun laws, the expansion of public education, and an opposition to fracking.

The election of Alessandra Biaggi, Zellnor Myrie, Jessica Ramos, and other successful challengers to members of the misleadingly labeled Independent Democratic Conference means that New Yorkers will finally get the Democratic State Legislature they have long voted for, which in turn might increase the pressure on Governor Andrew Cuomo to make good on his progressive rhetoric. As a close observer of Zephyr Teachout’s 2016 loss in New York’s 19th Congressional District, I was pleased to see Antonio Delgado overcome John Faso’s race-baiting campaign (though Delgado’s ability to raise $7.8 million to Faso’s $3.6 million—not a feat most Democratic challengers can emulate—suggests that Teachout’s focus on the corrosive effects of money on our politics is more relevant than ever). And while Andrew Gillum’s narrow defeat in Florida by Trump sock puppet Ron DeSantis is a particularly bitter disappointment, the passage of Amendment 4, which restores the right to vote to convicted felons who have completed their sentences, is a huge win for progressives and, with 64 percent of Floridians voting in favor, an indication that, slowly, the state is changing.

So much for the good news. The Senate was always going to be tough for Democrats, who had to defend 26 seats—10 in states that voted for Trump in 2016—while the Republicans only had to defend nine. I’d argue that Claire McCaskill, who ran ads distancing herself from “crazy Democrats,” and Joe Donnelly, an abortion foe who was also bad on guns, immigrants, and the environment, are no great losses. But the battle for the Senate was never about individuals; it was about breaking Republican control—a rationale that might even justify the existence of Joe Manchin. Instead, the GOP has strengthened its grip on the upper house, making it even easier to confirm right-wing judges to the bench and corporate lackeys to the agencies that are supposed to protect us.

Meanwhile, anyone hoping to ride the once-promised blue wave has been left high and dry. Headline heartbreaks in Florida, Texas, and Georgia—where, as I write, Stacey Abrams has yet to concede—are the most stinging losses from a national Democratic strategy premised on the repudiation of that man in the White House. To be fair, Gillum, Abrams, and Beto O’Rourke all ran as progressives. But the wave that might have carried them to victory never materialized. Instead, yesterday’s results suggest a few sobering facts:

§ Donald Trump is extremely popular with his base. Although he may be anathema on the coasts, Trump’s support in flyover country remains a powerful asset.

§ With unemployment at a record low and wages apparently rising, Democrats are in danger of losing the economic argument. Yes, many workers have simply left the workforce, and wage gains haven’t kept up with inflation in the long run, but by ducking the issue and failing to offer their own economic plan, Democrats are fighting on Trump’s turf.

§ Immigration is the new abortion—a tool for demagogues and right-wing culture warriors to stir up fear and divert the argument away from health care, economic insecurity, climate change, and corporate corruption.

§ Even when Democrats have brilliant, charismat-
ic candidates like Abrams, Gillum, and O’Rourke, with progressive platforms and adequate funding, the system is still rigged against us. Still, not all of Tuesday’s lessons are bitter. Abrams and Gillum both exploded the myth that candidates of color can’t compete in the South. #MeToo remains a political force. The backlash against Brett Kavanaugh’s critics may have dominated the headlines, but the wave of Democratic women candidates—the real political wave of 2018—tells a different story. Not just Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, who ratified one of the biggest upsets in American political history, but Ayanna Pressley in Massachusetts, Veronica Escobar in Texas, Jahana Hayes in Connecticut, Abby Finkenauer and Cindy Axne in Iowa, Ilhan Omar in Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib in Michigan, Sharice Davids in Kansas, Deb Haaland in New Mexico, and, of course, Jacky Rosen in Nevada. Not to mention ballot measures like the one that passed in Long Beach, California, protecting hotel workers against sexual harassment by bosses and guests.

Organizations that oversold the chances of mediagenic long-shot candidates like Randy Bryce, who lost by more than 10 points, might want to reconsider their tactics. But groups that focused their efforts down ballot, like the Texas Organizing Project and the Working Families Party (whose co-founder, Daniel Cantor, told me that “the main event…is state legislatures”), reaped solid results, flipping state senates in Maine, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Colorado—where, with Polis in the governor’s mansion, Democrats won a trifecta.

Each of those wins gives progressives a chance to make the arguments, and develop the policies and the track record of solid accomplishment, that they will need to defeat the Republicans in 2020. Because the one thing that Hillary Clinton proved in 2016 is that not paying attention to the states—state politics, state legislatures, local chambers, a majority are women.

The feminist insurgency hits the polls—and Congress.

The feminist insurgency that first showed up in the 2017 Virginia House of Delegates races—when 15 Democrats, 11 of them women, won seats previously held by Republicans—continued to pay off for Democrats, electing three new women to the House of Representatives: Richmond’s Abigail Spanberger, Northern Virginia’s Jennifer Wexton, and Virginia Beach’s Elaine Luria. Spanberger’s communications director told The Nation that the State House victories of two female candidates in Spanberger’s congressional district “made a huge difference” in her upset victory of Tea Party darling Dave Brat. The three women join four male Virginia Democrats in flipping the state’s congressional delegation, which before last night had seven Republicans to four Democrats.

Those 2017 Virginia victories marked the beginning of a new Democratic commitment to state legislative races, after losing almost 1,000 seats during the Obama presidency. On November 6, Democrats picked up more than 350 seats—cutting the Obama-era losses by more than a third—and flipped seven state chambers. In North Carolina and Michigan, they broke Republican supermajorities. They also made huge gains in the Texas House of Representatives thanks both to O’Rourke’s campaign and to investment by Democratic groups like Forward Majority, as well as in the Pennsylvania State Legislature, where 12 Emily’s List–endorsed women won seats. Between the new governors and the newly won state chambers, Democrats are in good shape to control a significant number of statehouses when redistricting begins in 2021.

Redistricting matters. Democrats won the popular vote by more than nine points—a larger margin than the winning party has en-
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