Extreme Referendum: Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Elections

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LONG-TERM POLITICAL TRENDS and the public's reaction to Donald Trump's surreal presidency converged to make the 2018 midterm elections the most sweeping and discordant national referendum on any administration at least since the Great Depression. Midterms have grown increasingly nationalized, partisan, and president centered over recent decades, but Trump's persona, rhetoric, and policies extended all of these trends into uncharted territory. Trump's polarizing performance and electoral salience cost Republicans control of the House of Representatives but strengthened their grip on the Senate (Table 1), setting the stage for fierce partisan battles within and between the branches during the 116th Congress. In this article, I place the 2018 referendum in historical context; examine the extraordinary influence Trump exerted on the electoral environment, strategic political choices, and voting decisions; and consider the referendum's implications for the new Congress and the future of the two parties.

THE REFERENDUM

In its basic outline, the 2018 midterm referendum replicated past patterns quite faithfully. Since the pioneering work of Gerald Kramer and Edward Tufte, the idea that voters in aggregate treat the midterm elections as a referendum on the administration, rewarding or punishing its party's congressional candidates for its perceived successes or failures, has been

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TABLE 1
Membership Changes in the House and Senate, 2016–2018

	Republicans	*Democrats*	*Independents*
House of Representatives			
Elected in 2016	241	194	
Prior to the 2018 election	240	195	
Elected in 2018	199[a]	235	
Incumbents reelected	168	173[b]	
Incumbents defeated	30[b]	0	
Open seats retained	29	20	
Open seats lost	13	3	
Senate			
After the 2016 election	52	46	2[c]
Prior to the 2018 election	51	47	2[c]
Elected in 2018	53	45	2[c]
Incumbents reelected	5	23	
Incumbents defeated	1	4	
Open seats retained	2	0	
Open seats lost	1	0	

Source: Compiled by the author.
[a]The results in NC-9, where the Republican led narrowly after the initial vote count in November, are under review because of possible election fraud; the seat remained unfilled as of the beginning of the 116th Congress in January.
[b]A Democrat won PA-17 in a contest between two incumbents forced by redistricting.
[c]The independents caucus with the Democrats.

well documented and widely accepted by the research community.[1] In typical referendum models, the president's current approval ratings and economic conditions are the prime movers, although the number of House seats held by the president's party also matters (all else being equal, the more seats it holds, the more it has to lose). Recent iterations of a basic model in which the independent variables predicting midterm seat swings are the percentage approving of the president's performance in the Gallup Poll closest to Election Day, the change in real disposable income per capita over the election year, and the deficit or surplus of House seats currently held by the president's party compared with its eight-election moving average (its "exposure") have been quite accurate.[2] Updated and applied

[1]Gerald H. Kramer, "Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964," *American Political Science Review* 65 (March 1971): 131-143; Edward R. Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 69 (September 1975): 812–826; for citations from this extensive literature, see Gary C. Jacobson and Jamie L. Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections,* 9th ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 184–189.
[2]For 2002, the predicted and actual net swings in House seats held by the president's party were 9 and 6, respectively; for 2006, −26 and −31; for 2010, −56 and −64; and for 2014, −13 and −12. See Gary C. Jacobson, "Terror, Terrain, and Turnout: The 2002 Midterm Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Spring 2003): 1–22; Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (Spring 2007): 1–24; Gary C. Jacobson, "The Republican Resurgence in 2010," *Political Science Quarterly* 126 (Spring 2011): 27–52; and Gary C. Jacobson, "Obama and Nationalized Electoral Politics in the 2014 Midterm," *Political Science Quarterly* 130 (Spring 2015): 1–26.

to 2018, with Trump's approval in the last Gallup Poll before the election at 40 percent and real income growth at 2.1 percent, this model predicted that Republicans would end up with 41 fewer House seats than they held after the 2016 election, 40 seats fewer than they held on Election Day—improbably, the precise outcome in 2018 (Table 1).[3]

THE TRUMP EFFECT

In its particulars, however, the 2018 referendum was anything but ordinary. A crucial oddity was the disjunction between presidential approval and the economy. Ordinarily, a president enjoying very good economic numbers (solid economic growth, very low unemployment, low inflation, a strong stock market, and the rosiest public views of the economy in more than two decades[4]) during a time when few Americans are dying overseas would be expected to have much higher overall approval ratings than Trump was receiving.[5] In 1997, the last time Americans looked as favorably on the economy as they did in the fall of 2018, Bill Clinton's approval rating was 56 percent, both on the economy and overall.[6] Trump's average approval rating on the economy in October and November was lower, at 51 percent, but still 10 points better than his overall approval, averaging 41 percent. Had the public's view of Trump's job performance reflected the economy more conventionally, Republican prospects would have been much brighter: at 52 percent approving, the model predicts a Republican House majority.

The threat that Trump's low ratings posed for his party's House candidates was compounded by a second peculiarity of the 2018 midterms: the extraordinary centrality of Trump to the voters' decisions. Stumping for Republican candidates in 2018, Donald Trump encouraged supporters to

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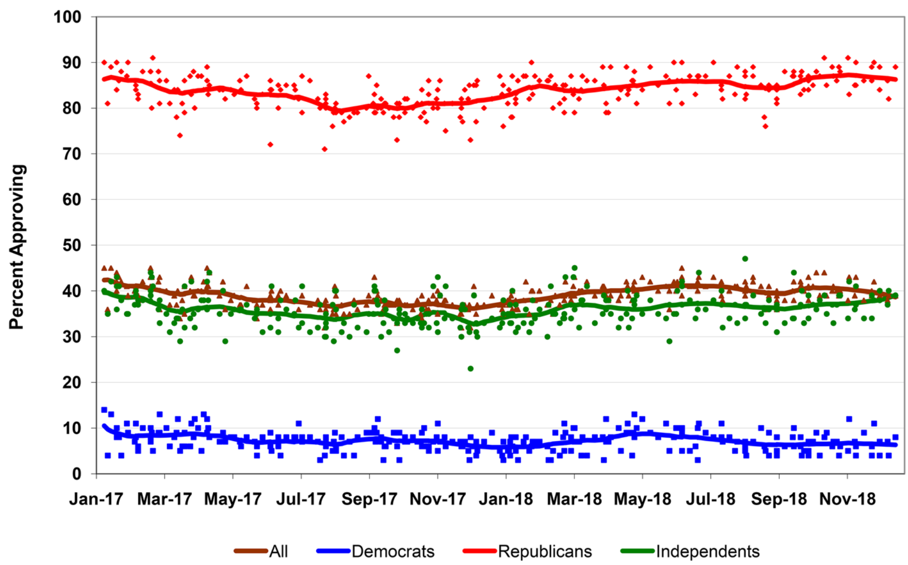
[3]The equation is $-99.34\ (15.4) + [1.50 * \text{Presidential Approval}\ (0.32)] + [3.38 * \text{Percent Real Income Change}\ (0.16)] - [.51 * \text{Exposure}\ (0.16)]$, adjusted $R^2 = .65$, $N = 18$ (standard errors in parentheses). Plug in the values for approval (40 percent), real income growth (2.1 percent) and exposure (18), and the model forecasts Democrats to gain 41 seats; the precision is improbable because the equation has a root mean square error of 13.1.

[4]In a July 2018 CBS News poll, 67 percent of respondents rated the economy as "very" or "fairly" good, near the highest proportion since 2001.

[5]Henry Enten, "Trump Is Far Less Popular than the Economy Suggests He Should Be," FiveThirtyEight, 13 October 2017, accessed at https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/trump-is-far-less-popular-than-the-economy-suggests-he-should-be/, 2 January 2019; Lydia Saad, "Trump Approval Lower than U.S. Mood Might Predict," Gallup, 16 January 2018, accessed at https://news.gallup.com/poll/225467/trump-approval-lower-mood-predict.aspx, 2 January 2019; and Mark Barabak, "Trump's Approval Rating Is in the Dumps, Even Though the Economy Is Soaring. One Reason Is Trump Himself," *Los Angeles Times,* 15 October 2018.

[6]In an October 2018 CBS News/*New York Times* poll, 70 percent of respondents rated the economy as "very" or "fairly" good; this was the average in the same poll during 1997.

FIGURE 1
Approval of Trump's Job Performance, 2017–2018



Source: 273 ABC News/Washington Post, CBS News/*New York Times*, CNN, Gallup, IBD-TIPP, Marist, Monmouth, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, Pew, Democracy Corps, and Quinnipiac polls.

think the election was about him: "I want you to vote. Pretend I'm on the ballot."[7] Trump's embrace of the election as a referendum on his presidency, while a reflexive appropriation of center stage, also acknowledged a reality that his person and conduct had created. From the beginning of his campaign for the White House and throughout his first two years in office, Trump's words and actions provoked the most intense and divergent responses to a president yet measured. Trump entered the White House after a bitter and polarizing campaign with a record partisan gap in his initial approval ratings, a product of record lows among rival partisans; he also received the lowest initial ratings of any newly elected president from independents and from all respondents combined.[8] Opinions of him and his performance remained unusually stable for the next two years (Figure 1). By November of the election year, his popular standing was about where it had been during his first few months in the White House: comparatively low and extremely polarized, with approval ratings from

[7]Tessa Berenson, "President Trump Turned the Midterms into a Referendum on Himself," *Time,* 7 November 2018, accessed at http://time.com/5446188/donald-trump-midterms-results-reaction/, 2 January 2019.
[8]Gary C. Jacobson, "The Effects of the Early Trump Presidency on Public Attitudes toward the Republican Party," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48 (September 2018): 1–32.

Democrats in single digits, from independents in the high 30s, and from Republicans in the high 80s.[9]

The stability in popular opinions of Trump is no mystery, for his conduct as president has given most people no reason to revise what they thought of him as a candidate. Democrats and others appalled by his character and objectives before the election have seen their worst expectations confirmed. Trump has mounted a root-and-branch assault on Barack Obama's entire legacy (on health care, environmental protection, financial regulation, taxes, fiscal policy, immigration, and foreign trade). The trafficking in white identity politics, xenophobia, racism, and misogyny that characterized Trump's campaign has continued unabated, even escalating as he campaigned for Republican candidates in 2018. He continues to launch crude tirades against his opponents and critics in politics and the media and to attack Hillary Clinton as if the election were not history. Trolling Democrats by blaming them for his own policy disasters (for example, separating young children from immigrant parents at the border) is standard practice. Any institution that declines to do Trump's bidding—the judiciary, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Justice, the intelligence services, at times the congressional Republican Party, and always the news media—finds its legitimacy under attack. And all of this accompanied by an unending stream of transparent, self-serving lies.[10]

It is no mystery, then, why Democrats not only disapprove of Trump's job performance in overwhelming numbers but do so "strongly" when given the option. For example, in the 17 Quinnipiac University polls of registered voters taken in 2018, an average of 93 percent of Democrats said they disapproved of Trump's performance, with 86 percent strongly disapproving.[11] Trump's campaign rhetoric leading up to the midterms, featuring a litany of mendacious attacks on Democrats and appeals to xenophobia and racism, thus served to remind ordinary Democrats why they found him so objectionable and why it was important to register their opinion at the polls.

Trump has also largely met the expectations of the Republicans who voted for him, and they, like Democrats, also continue to regard him pretty

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[9]Here and elsewhere in this article, partisan leaners are treated as independents because many of the surveys examined do not measure leaned partisanship.

[10]By the end of his second year in office, the count of Trump's false or misleading statements compiled by the *Washington Post* had risen above 7,600, an average of more than 10 per day over all and more and 15 per day in 2018; see Glenn Kessler, "A Year of Unprecedented Deception: Trump Averaged 15 False Claims a Day in 2018," *Washington Post*, 31 December 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/12/30/year-unprecedented-deception-trump-averaged-false-claims-day/?utm_term=.6dc9ff6abc3a, 2 January 2019.

[11]The Quinnipiac data can be found at https://poll.qu.edu/; data are through the mid-November 2018 poll.

much as they did before he was elected. Virtually everything he has said or done as president has catered exclusively to the coalition that elected him, its white nationalist segment in particular, but also small-government and religious conservatives. Most of his supporters share his opinions and sensibilities, enjoy his in-your-face responses to critics and disdain for "political correctness," concur with his hostility to the mainstream news media, and cheer his anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant projects and "America First" rhetoric and policy initiatives. Conservative Christians appreciate his Supreme Court nominations and defense of "religious freedom" as well as the transfer of the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Conventional small-government and corporate Republicans, if less comfortable with Trump's rhetoric and style than his blue-collar enthusiasts and more doubtful about his protectionist moves, nonetheless appreciate his assaults on Obama's regulatory legacy and success in cutting taxes on corporations and the wealthy. Just as doubts about Trump's suitability for the office did not prevent them from voting for him in 2016,[12] many ordinary Republicans, like most of their elected leaders, have accepted Trump's sometimes cringeworthy behavior as a tolerable price for his support of their policy goals. Republicans are not quite as unanimous as Democrats in their opinions of Trump (an average of 84 percent in the Quinnipiac polls approved of his performance), but large majorities of them approve strongly (an average of 69 percent), contributing to an unprecedented level of polarization on this dimension, with more than three-quarters of respondents expressing strong opinions, pro or con, of the president.

Trump's words and deeds easily explain why ordinary Democrats were eager to use their midterm votes to punish him at the polls, although their attitudes also echo the overwhelmingly anti-Trump consensus expressed by Democratic leaders and the mainstream and left-leaning commentariat. Ordinary Republicans, in contrast, have stuck with Trump despite earnest criticism from prominent figures in their own camp who have denounced him variously for dishonesty, incompetence, instability, ignorance, bigotry, scorn for allies, and affinity for dictators.[13] Just as the denunciations of Trump by Republican leaders and conservative pundits before the 2016 election did nothing to deter Republicans from voting for him,

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[12]Gary C. Jacobson, "The Triumph of Polarized Partisanship: Donald Trump's Improbable Victory in 2016," *Political Science Quarterly* 132 (Spring 2017): 1–34; and Gary C. Jacobson, "Donald Trump, the Public, and Congress: The First Seven Months," *The Forum* 15 (October 2017): 525–545.

[13]His detractors have included such conservative luminaries as Erick Erickson, George Will, Jonah Goldberg, the late Charles Krauthammer, Jennifer Rubin, Ross Douthat, David Brooks, John Podhoretz, Peggy Noonan, William Kristol, and Max Boot.

post-election criticism from the same quarter has done nothing to dampen Trump's popularity among ordinary Republicans—who in any case can readily find reassurance, if needed, in the unfailing support for Trump delivered by his admirers on their preferred media outlet, Fox News. If asked to choose, most Republicans put Trump ahead of his party. They invariably rate his favorability higher than that of the Republican Party generally or of its congressional wing and its leaders in particular, and a solid majority side with Trump when conflicts with other Republican politicians arise.[14] Asked in an October 2018 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey, "Do you consider yourself to be more of a supporter of Donald Trump or more of a supporter of the Republican Party?," 59 percent of Republicans chose Trump, 35 percent, the party; these results are typical.[15]

THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The extremely polarized responses to Trump and his presidency gave rise to the most partisan, nationalized, and president-centered midterm elections on record. Polarized partisanship is not a new phenomenon, to be sure, but it reached new extremes in 2018, and the party alignments revealed by the 2018 vote suggest that it will not lessen any time soon. Partisan divisions in the United States have been widening for decades, most notably within the political class,[16] but also, albeit to a lesser extent, among ordinary citizens. As partisan identities, ideological leanings, and issues preferences have moved into closer alignment, individuals' political attitudes have become more internally consistent and more distinct from those of partisans on the other side.[17] Affective reactions to parties and

[14] Jacobson, "The Effects of the Early Trump Presidency."

[15] This survey has asked the question a dozen times, with an average of 56 percent choosing Trump and 38 percent the Republican Party; accessed at http://media1.s-nbcnews.com/i/today/z_creative/181259%20NBCWSJ%20October%20Poll%20Final.pdf, 9 November 2018.

[16] Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized American: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and Sean Theriault, *Party Polarization in Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[17] Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel Adams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009); Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divide America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Joseph Bafumi and Robert Y. Shapiro, "A New Partisan Voter," *Journal of Politics* 71 (January 2009):1-24; Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," 5 October 2017, accessed at http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/, 2 January 2019; Gary C. Jacobson, "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection," in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000), 9–30; and Larry Bartels, "Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions," *Political Behavior* 24 (March 2002): 117–150.

TABLE 2
Presidential Approval in Midterm Election Years, 1946–2018

	President's Partisans	*Rival Partisans*	*Difference*	*Number of Polls*
1946	46.7	24.1	22.6	3
1950	57.7	17.6	40.1	13
1954	88.1	55.7	32.4	16
1958	82.1	36.7	45.4	16
1962	86.0	48.7	37.3	13
1966	66.5	32.2	34.3	17
1970	82.1	41.3	40.8	18
1974	70.5	46.0	24.5	8
1978	57.1	28.3	28.8	25
1982	79.2	23.3	55.9	19
1986	86.8	41.6	45.2	13
1990	85.4	54.2	31.2	29
1994	74.3	19.5	54.8	37
1998	87.8	36.3	51.5	41
2002	94.9	53.1	41.8	45
2006	79.9	9.4	70.5	30
2010	81.7	12.4	69.3	50
2014	79.0	9.1	69.9	38
2018	86.9	7.8	79.1	45

Source: Gallup Polls.
Note: The data for 1974 include only Gerald Ford's presidency.

candidates have diverged, largely because of partisans' growing antipathy toward the other party's adherents and leaders.[18] Widening demographic differences between the parties' identifiers—differences in race, age, sex, religiosity, education, and marital status—have also contributed to partisan "tribalism," as has the increasing partisan homogeneity of the states and districts.[19] The first two years of the Trump presidency reinforced all of these trends.

Presidential job performance ratings provide one familiar gauge of the widening party divide.[20] Table 2 displays the partisan trends in Gallup's

[18]Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. House Elections," *Electoral Studies* 41 (March 2016): 12–22; Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (July 2015): 690–707; Lilliana Mason, "'I Disrespectfully Agree': The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (January 2015): 128-145 and Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," 12 June 2014, accessed at http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/, 2 January 2019.
[19]Daniel M. Shea, "Our Tribal Nature and the Rise of Nasty Politics," in Daniel Shea and Morris Fiorina, eds., *Can We Talk? The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics* (New York: Pearson, 2013), 82–98; Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).
[20]Gary C. Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties in the Public Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), Figure 9.1.

presidential approval series during midterm election years. The gap between Republicans and Democrats has varied over time, but the long-term trend is clearly upward. It reached a record level of around 70 percentage points during the 2006–2014 midterm years but rose another 9 points in 2018. The gap derives from opinions offered by both the president's and rival partisans, but the latter have contributed more to its recent growth. Opposition partisans have rated the president much lower since 2006, with Trump's ratings among Democrats in 2018 the lowest ever for a president in a midterm year. Republicans, in stark contrast, approved of Trump's performance at a very high rate, exceeded among a president's partisans by only three previous presidents. The 2018 midterm electorate thus featured the most polarized views of a president ever documented.

Increasing Party Loyalty

The growing influence of partisanship observed in the presidential approval data also shows up in data on party loyalty in congressional elections. Since bottoming out in the mid-70 percent range in the 1970s and 1980s, party-line voting in House, Senate, and presidential elections has grown steadily, reaching postwar record highs of about 90 percent during the past decade according to American National Election Studies (ANES) data.[21] Pre-election polls show a parallel decline and then steady rise in party loyalty in responses to the generic preference question asking which party's candidate the respondent would vote for or would prefer to win if the election were held today (Figure 2).[22] Generic polls naturally elicit high levels of expressed party loyalty; without reference to actual candidates, the default option is one's own declared side.[23] Generic polls therefore always report higher rates of party loyalty than the ANES and other post-election surveys, but they show the same pattern of decline and then revival of party loyalty over the postwar period.

The differing rates of loyalty among partisans in the generic polls anticipate party fortunes in November quite accurately. Democrats enjoyed a substantial loyalty advantage in their best postwar midterms,

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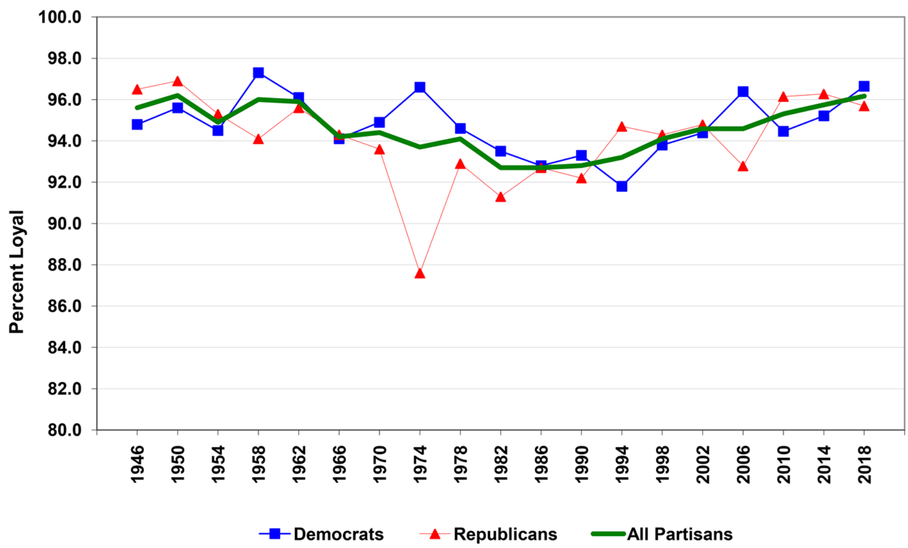
[21]Jacobson and Carson, *Politics of Congressional Elections,* 151; and Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties,* Figures 8.5 and 8.6.

[22]The question wording of these surveys varies (some ask about the vote, some ask which party the respondent wants to win in the congressional election in the district or state, some ask which party the respondent wants to control Congress); for this figure, I combine them all. The number of available surveys ranges from 24 (1946) to 197 (2018).

[23]The data in Figure 1 are for respondents who expressed a choice; omitting the undecideds provides a cleaner comparison because of the substantial house effects in their treatment and proportions in the samples.

FIGURE 2
Party Loyalty in Midterm Generic House Election Polls, 1946–2018



Source: Data are from Gallup, CBS News/*New York Times*, ABC News/*Washington Post*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, CNN, Marist, Quinnipiac, *Newsweek*, Pew, Fox News, GW Battleground, Monmouth, *Time, Los Angeles Times*, and *Economist*/YouGov polls, acquired from the Roper Center, PollingReport.com, and the sponsors' websites.

1958, 1974, and 2006 (when they gained 48, 48, and 30 seats, respectively), while Republicans held the advantage in 1946, 1950, 1994, and 2010 (gaining 55, 28, 54, and 63 seats, respectively).[24] The numbers for 2018 showed only a small Democratic advantage, with more than 96 percent of all partisans who stated a choice favoring their own party's candidate. This average exceeded (by a tiny margin) the high levels of party loyalty expressed in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the earlier levels are almost certainly inflated by the survey instrument.[25] In any case, the level of party loyalty exhibited in generic polls in 2018 is extraordinarily high by historical standards, reflecting the reluctance of voters to consider crossing party lines at a time of deep partisan division. Democrats displayed the very high level of party loyalty we would expect in a Democratic "wave" year, but

[24]The only midterm with a large partisan swing not anticipated by the generic polls was 1966, when Republicans were recovering from their disastrous 1964 performance.

[25]All of the data from this period are from Gallup Polls, which at the time routinely asked the party identification and congressional preference questions in very close proximity, maximizing the influence of one response on the other. The order of the two questions varied; during this period, Gallup also usually asked whom the respondent wanted to win in his or her state or district rather than who the respondents planned to support; the pattern of responses indicates that variations in question wording made no significant difference.

Republicans were nearly as loyal in generic polls as they were in 2010 and 2014 and much more so than in earlier Democratic wave years.

Republican loyalty was an important constraint on the size of the "blue wave" in 2018. The Election Day exit poll reiterated the pre-election pattern of extreme party loyalty combined with a slight Democratic advantage: 95 percent of Democrats voted for their party's candidate, 4 percent for the Republican candidate. The comparable figures for Republicans were 94 percent and 6 percent.[26] The 95 percent combined loyalty rate was the highest in any exit poll going back to the first in 1982. The wave was as large as it was because there were more Democrats than Republicans in the electorate and independents preferred Democrats, 54–42, the exact inverse of the 2014 exit poll and exceeding the Democrats' margin in any midterm exit poll except 2006. Trump's comparatively low standing among independents (Figure 1) thus contributed importantly to Democratic gains.

The Congruence of Presidential Approval with Vote Choice

Echoing the widening partisan differences in both presidential approval and generic House vote, the congruence between evaluations of the president and the generic vote—for the president's party's candidate if approving, for the other party's if disapproving—has also been growing (Figure 3).[27] Congruence in pre-election polls averaged about 70 percent from the 1940s through the 1970s, 74 percent in the 1980s and 1990s, and 82 percent in the first four midterms of this century (86 percent of the anomalous 2002 case is omitted[28]). In 2018, the average reached an all-time high of 93 percent. This extraordinary level of congruence was consistent across time and polling organizations in 2018 the standard deviation for the 74 pre-election surveys examined was only 1.5 percent, and in only one survey was congruence less than 90 percent (89.2 percent in a January poll). In contrast, congruence exceeded 90 percent in only one

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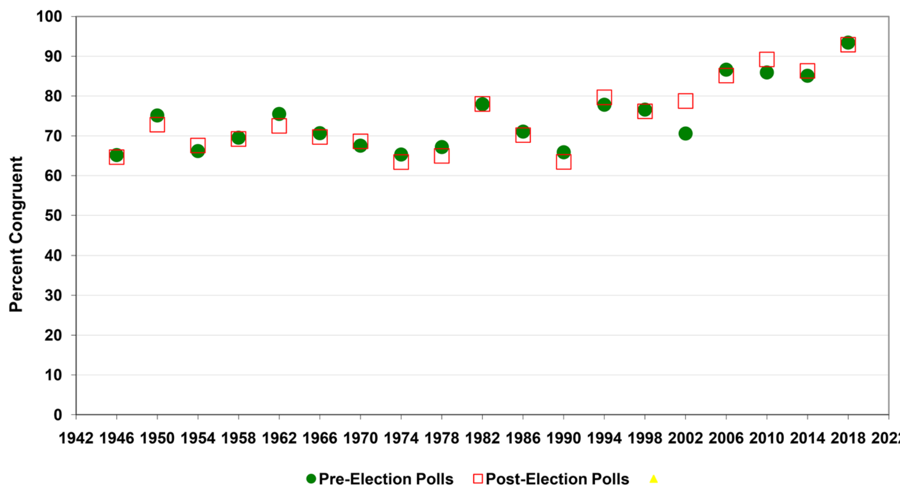
[26]Exit poll results accessed at https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls, 9 November 2018.

[27]The number of observations averaged for each year's entry in Figure 3 ranges from 7 (1946) to 74 (2018), with an average of 27 per year; data include questions about which party's candidate the respondent would vote for and which party he or she wants to win either nationally or in the respondent's state or district.

[28]In 2002, George W. Bush continued to enjoy the huge rally in popular approval that followed September 11 and his forceful response to the crisis, with Democrats giving him very high marks early in the year without necessarily transferring that affection to other Republicans; as Democrats' approval of Bush fell from about 71 percent in January to about 40 percent in November, congruence increased. The entry for 1974 combines data from both Richard Nixon prior to his resignation in August and Gerald Ford thereafter. Congruence was much higher for Nixon (79 percent) than Ford (51 percent); Ford enjoyed very high approval ratings among Democrats (and everyone else) after becoming president, but most Democrats who approved of Ford had no intention of forgetting Nixon and Watergate on Election Day (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 3
Congruence between Presidential Approval and the House Vote in Midterm Election Polls, 1946–2018



Source: Gallup, ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times*, CCES, ANES, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, Pew, Quinnipiac, *Time*, USC Dornsife, Suffolk, Roper, *Newsweek*, Marist, CNN, and *Economist*/YouGov polls.

of the 366 surveys examined from previous election years (in 2006). Pre-election congruence predicts post-election congruence with great accuracy (r = .95), and 2018 was no exception, with the highest level of congruence ever observed in post election polls (92.9 percent[29]). Not surprisingly, congruence is strongly related to polarization in presidential evaluations; the partisan approval gap listed in Table 2 is correlated with the pre-election congruence level displayed in Figure 3 at .92.

Poll questions regarding generic Senate preference are asked much less frequently, but, when available, they match the House results quite closely. In 2018, in the 12 Quinnipiac polls that asked which party respondents wanted to control the Senate after the election, an average of 94.1 percent offered responses consistent with their opinion of Trump's performance. The comparable figure for control of the House in the 10 Quinnipiac polls that asked the question was 94.9 percent.[30]

Trump's unusually powerful effect on voting decisions in the 2018 midterm elections is borne out by other data. Aggregate vote intentions as measured by generic polls varied with opinions of the president's job

[29]Congruence was at 90.5 percent in the national exit poll and at 94.0, 93.6, and 93.7 percent, respectively, in the three post-election *Economist*/YouGov surveys that asked the vote and approval questions; I am obliged to Joe Williams of YouGov for these data.
[30]Polls asking about preference for party control produce, on average, a level of congruence about 1 percentage point higher than those asking about the intended vote.

TABLE 3

Net Generic Preference for the President's Party or Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval

	Constant	*S.E.*	*Coefficient*	*S.E.*	*Adjusted R^2*	*N*
Truman	−13.8*	5.2	.46**	.14	.24	32
Eisenhower	−54.4***	6.1	.62***	.09	.30	97
Kennedy	−7.8	8.7	.42**	.13	.33	21
Johnson	−7.4	4.4	.48***	.08	.52	35
Nixon[a]	−42.1***	2.3	.48***	.05	.85	21
Carter	11.8*	4.7	.22*	.11	.38	31
Reagan	−42.3***	3.2	.56***	.06	.70	51
G.H.W. Bush	−18.4***	2.3	.21***	.04	.48	46
Clinton	−11.6***	2.4	.27***	.04	.29	209
G.W. Bush	−21.1***	1.0	.29***	.02	.56	222
Obama	−23.0***	2.9	.50***	.06	.29	302
Trump	−35.2***	4.4	.65***	.11	.35	145

Sources: Gallup Polls through 1974; thereafter, Gallup, ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, CNN, Fox News, Marist, Quinnipiac, Monmouth University, Battleground, *Time*, PRRI, and Democracy Corps polls; data are from the Roper Center, PollingReport.com, and the poll sponsors' websites.

[a]There are too few surveys for 1974 after Ford became president for analysis ($N = 5$).

Notes: The dependent variable is the percentage of respondents with a preference who would vote for the president's party's candidate or want the party to win either nationally or in the respondent's state or district, minus the percentage favoring the rival party; the independent variable is the proportion of approving of the president's job performance. Estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.

*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

performance across multiple surveys more steeply for Trump than for any previous president. Table 3 reports coefficients estimated by regressing the net generic House preferences (president's party's share minus the rival party's share, using all available measures) on presidential approval in polls taken during postwar administrations.[31] According to these equations, presidential approval always exerts a significant influence on net congressional preferences, but variations in Trump's ratings had a stronger influence than those of any predecessor, with Dwight D. Eisenhower as a rather surprising runner-up. In the past four decades, only Ronald Reagan (1982) approached the influence of Trump in this regard.

More precise comparisons with Trump's three most recent predecessors, focusing exclusively on the vote choice question and incorporating data from the weekly *Economist*/YouGov polls appear, with partisan breakdowns, in Table 4.[32] Trump's ratings had the largest impact on

[31]To account for House effects that arise from using data from a variety of survey organizations, readily apparent in the data, the models are estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.

[32]I did not use the YouGov data from the analyses in Table 3 to maximize comparability across time (YouGov data are from internet surveys; the earlier data are exclusively from personal and telephone interviews); I am obliged to Doug Rivers for making these surveys available to me.

TABLE 4
Net Generic Vote for President's Party's Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval

	Constant	*S.E.*	*Coefficient*	*S.E.*	*Adjusted R^2*	*N*
Clinton	6.4	3.3	.20***	.06	.18	91
Democrats	45.1***	5.6	.39***	.07	.38	89
Independents	0.1	4.7	.01	.09	.02	89
Republicans	–80.5***	1.7	.04	.06	.10	89
G.W. Bush	–19.7***	1.0	.26***	.02	.52	230
Democrats	–86.2***	0.4	.14***	.01	.56	183
Independents	–22.0***	1.4	.25***	.03	.33	183
Republicans	68.8***	2.9	.12***	.04	.30	183
Obama	–23.6***	3.0	.52***	.06	.29	297
Democrats	68.7***	5.5	.17*	.07	.39	169
Independents	–18.8***	2.9	.30***	.07	.19	169
Republicans	–88.9***	0.8	.30***	.06	.29	169
Trump	–31.0***	3.7	.59***	.09	.45	185
Democrats	–93.8***	1.0	.64***	.11	.55	165
Independents	–34.3***	4.1	.86***	.11	.70	162
Republicans	35.8***	6.5	.59***	.08	.46	165

Sources: Fox News, Marist, CNN, ABC News/*Washington Post*, Monmouth University, *Economist*/YouGov, and Battleground polls (Trump) and Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties*, Table 8.2 (other administrations).
Notes: The dependent variable is the percentage of respondents with a preference who would vote for the president's party's candidate, minus the percentage who would vote for the rival party's candidate; the independent variable is the proportion of approving of the president's job performance. Estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

the candidate preference of each partisan subgroup as well as on the electorate as a whole. The steeper slopes for Trump in Tables 3 and 4 may be partly an artifact of his comparatively narrow approval range, so we cannot be sure they would not be flatter if that range were broader.[33] Still, the results indicate that reactions to Trump had an unusually potent influence on voters' preferences in 2018, with a particularly large effect among independents.

A Nationalized, President-Centered Midterm

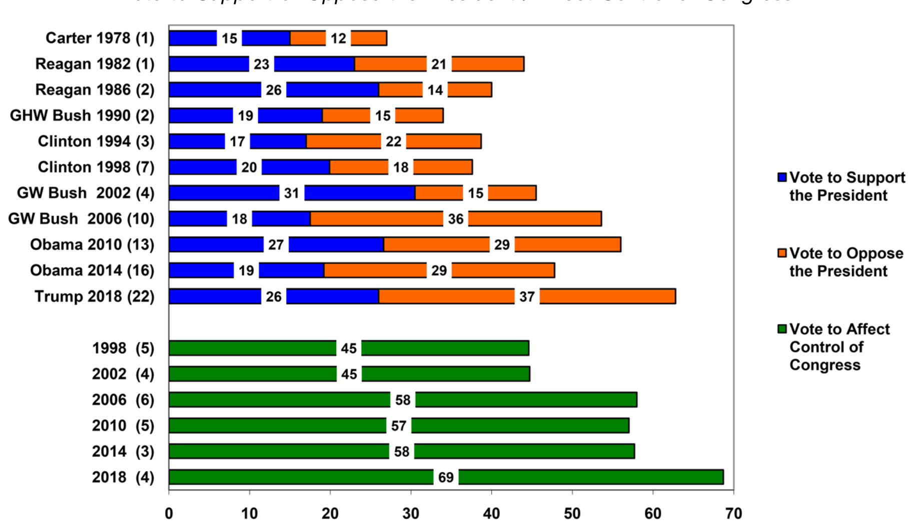
Responses to two other sets of survey questions provide further evidence that the 2018 midterm was in a class by itself in the extent to which it was president centered and nationalized. The proportion of survey respondents saying that their House vote would signify support for or opposition to the

[33]Trump's approval rating has so far varied over a range of only 15 points, with a standard deviation of 2.7 points. The comparable numbers for Clinton were 26 and 6.2; for Bush, 67 and 16.3; and for Obama, 30 and 4.8.

president in 2018 was greater than in any election since the question has been asked; on average, 63 percent of prospective voters said their vote would be about Trump, 7 points higher than the previous record set in 2010. The proportion saying their vote would be to oppose Trump, 37 percent, was slightly larger than the previous record (George W. Bush in 2006); the 26 percent saying their vote would be to support Trump was about 6 points above the average as well. The proportion of prospective voters who said that their choice would be shaped by their preference for control of Congress also reached a high point in 2018 at an average of 69 percent, 11 points higher than the previous record set in 2006 (Figure 4).

The pre-election signs of a highly nationalized, president-centered election were fully borne out by the results (Table 5). One simple measure of electoral nationalization is the standard deviation of the change in major-party vote share from the previous election across stable, contested districts; the smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across districts, and thus the more nationalized the election. The 2014 midterm swing had been the most uniform for the entire postwar period, with a standard deviation (4.3 points) less than half the size of its average for the 1970s and 1980s; in 2018, it was also 4.3 percentage points. A second indicator of nationalization, which also points to the growing centrality of the president to this trend, is the correlation between the

FIGURE 4
Vote to Support or Oppose the President / Affect Control of Congress



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.
Sources: Pew, Gallup, CBS News/*New York Times*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, AP-GfK, Quinnipiac, and ABC News/*Washington Post*, USC Dornsife, AP Votecast, and national exit polls.

TABLE 5
The Nationalization of Midterm Elections, 1970–2018

	House of Representatives				*Senate*
Election Year	*Standard Deviation of Swing*	*Presidential Vote Correlation*	*% Winners Correctly Predicted*	*Vote Value of Incumbency (%)*	*Presidential Vote Correlation*
1970	7.3	.63	76.6	8.8	.33
1974	9.5	.51	63.6	7.4	−.10
1978	10.0	.63	73.3	9.5	.53
1982		.69	76.3	6.6	.20
1986	7.9	.63	74.7	12.1	.33
1990	9.0	.62	73.7	6.1	.33
1994	7.8	.75	80.0	9.3	.33
1998	6.8	.82	80.9	8.0	.61
2002		.81	86.2	8.5	.69
2006	6.0	.84	83.5	6.5	.45
2010	6.3	.92	91.3	4.8	.84
2014	4.3	.94	94.3	3.7	.88
2018	4.3	.97	96.1	1.3	.87

Source: Compiled by the author.
Note: The swing cannot be calculated for years following redistricting.

state or district presidential vote two years prior and the midterm vote. This correlation has increased steeply since the 1970s, reaching record levels of .94 and .88, respectively, in the 2014 House and Senate elections; the comparable correlations for 2018 were .97 and .87 (without Joe Manchin's trend-defying performance in West Virginia, the Senate correlation would have been .92). A third indicator is the accuracy with which the presidential vote in the district two years prior predicts the midterm winner; growing for decades, accuracy reached an all-time high of 96.1 percent in 2018.[34] A fourth indicator is the House incumbency advantage; the more nationalized and party centered the election, the smaller the incumbency advantage.[35] Between 1966 and 2002, the advantage in vote shares enjoyed by House incumbents averaged 8 percentage points. This advantage has since declined steadily and in 2018 reached its lowest level since the 1950s, less than 2 points. By virtually every measure, then, the 2018 referendum on the Trump presidency resulted in the most

[34]Accuracy is estimated from a logit equation predicting the dichotomous outcome (Democratic or Republican victory) from the major-party presidential vote share in the district two years earlier.
[35]The incumbency advantage here is computed from a variant of the Gelman-King method that substitutes the lagged presidential vote for the lagged House vote in the district and so can include years following redistricting; for details, see Gary C. Jacobson, "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections," *Journal of Politics* 77 (July 2015): 861–873; estimated with the original Gelman-King formula, the incumbency advantage was 2.0 percentage points in 2018.

partisan, nationalized, and president-centered midterm elections yet observed.

ANTICIPATING THE REFERENDUM: STRATEGIC POLITICIANS IN 2018

In addition to influencing the vote choice directly,[36] presidents also affect midterm elections by helping shape the strategic environment, which affects the relative quality and resources of the congressional candidates who take the field and thereby the share of votes and seats won by each side, because the party with superior candidates and more resources tends to win more votes and seats. Potential candidates and contributors in the opposing party regard an unpopular president as an opportunity to take seats from the president's party, and the enhanced recruitment, finances, and motivation that follow help shift the competitive balance in the out-party's favor. So, too, does the strategic exit of incumbents in the president's party, who, sensing an incipient wave against their side, retire preemptively, thereby forfeiting the local incumbency advantage.[37]

Insofar as strategic political choices both reflect and contribute to a midterm wave, Republicans and Democrats did their assigned parts in 2018. Forty Republican representatives declined to run for reelection, the highest number and percentage of Republican departures in the postwar period. Only 12 sought higher office. Seven of the retirees represented districts won by Hillary Clinton in 2016, and several more were from districts Trump won only narrowly. Overall, House Republicans were twice as likely to retire from one of their 36 districts where Trump's 2016 margin was less than 5 percentage points than from one of the 201 districts where Trump won by more than 5 points (31 percent compared with 14 percent, $p = .017$),[38] clear evidence of strategic exit in the face of a difficult reelection environment. Democrats won every one of the 11 open Republican seats in districts where Trump's margin was less than 5 points.

Only 20 Democrats retired, nine of them to pursue higher office. Democrats also held a clear lead in the proportion of challengers with previous experience in elective office—a common measure of candidate quality—but that proportion was comparatively low for a party favored by

[36]Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties,* chap. 8.
[37]Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections,* 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983); and Jacobson and Carson, *Politics of Congressional Elections,* 197–205.
[38]The presidential vote has been recomputed for the new Pennsylvania districts drawn in early 2018.

national conditions. Their advantage stemmed, rather, from an exceptional crop of first-time candidates, half of them women, and the extensive grassroots activism and astonishing sums of money that supported their campaigns. Energized by and united against Trump since his inauguration, Democrats saw the midterms as their first chance to mitigate the catastrophe they experienced in 2016. Regarding Trump as someone who disrespects women and threatens their rights,[39] Democratic women led the way. Trump's rhetoric and actions on health care, immigration, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and the environment provoked not only a steady stream of protests, frequently organized and led by women,[40] but also a remarkable upsurge in their electoral involvement. Of the 254 nonincumbent Democrats winning House nominations, 128 (50 percent) were women; counting incumbent Democrats, 181 of the party's 427 nominees (42 percent) were women. About half of them won, and 35 of the 60 newly elected Democrats are women. Their success derived from landing nominations in winnable districts rather than from their gender per se; with district characteristics (partisan leanings and incumbency status) controlled, they did no better or worse than Democratic men.[41]

Equally remarkable, and equally attributable to revulsion toward Trump, Democratic candidates pursuing Republican House seats in potentially winnable districts raised and spent record sums of money and then saw that total increased by more than 70 percent by outside spending on their behalf by party and independent groups. In the 36 districts held by Republicans where Trump's margin had been less than 5 percentage points in 2016, the Democratic candidate had spent an average of $5.5 million according to incomplete Federal Election Commission data through January 11, 2019, with a median of $5.2 million. On top of this was an average of $3.7 million spent independently to support their campaigns (median $2.6 million). Total spending for these candidates ranged from $1.8 million to $20.1 million, with a median of $9.5 million. All but two had more than $3.5 million devoted to their election. If the analysis is confined to the 24 such districts defended by Republican

[39]In a June 2018 Pew survey, only 16 percent of Democratic women said that Trump respected women; 79 percent of Republicans said he did, as did 43 percent of all respondents. In the 24 YouGov surveys taken during the first half of 2018, 81 percent of Democratic women disapproved of how Trump was handling "women's rights," while 9 percent approved and 70 percent disapproved "strongly."

[40]Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, "Middle America Reboots Democracy," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas,* 20 August 2018, accessed at https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/middle-america-reboots-democracy/, 2 January 2019.

[41]In equations estimating either vote share or victories, controlling for district partisanship and incumbency status, the coefficient on gender was tiny and never reached statistical significance.

incumbents, the averages are $5.6 million in challenger spending, $4.3 million in independent spending, and $10.0 million in total spending. These totals will rise when the final numbers are in.

Every competitive Democratic challenger had more than $2.8 million in support; on average, they were backed by 17 percent more campaign money than the incumbent, although endangered Republican incumbents were also generously supported, with an average of $8.5 million. It is unusual for incumbents to be outspent in competitive races; in elections since 2002, even successful challengers have been outspent by the losing incumbent 79 percent of the time. In 2018, Democrats enjoyed a financial advantage in 15 of the 24 races against incumbents in winnable districts and in 10 of 11 competitive open seats.[42] The Democrats' ample finances were strongly associated with success in these districts; they ousted 20 of the 24 incumbents and won all 11 open seats. Democratic money also flowed into a number of the less promising districts (defined as those where Trump's margin exceeded 5 points); total spending by and for the Democrat exceeded $5 million in 26 such districts and exceeded $3 million in 48 of them. Between $2.6 million and $17.0 million (average, $10.1 million) was spent to elect the eleven Democrats who made these speculative investments pay off; 10 of the 11 outspent their Republican opponent.

In historical perspective, these are astonishing totals. For example, in 2006, the last Democratic wave election, the average Democrat competing for a winnable Republican House seat (by the same definition used here) spent an average of $1.5 million and enjoyed $0.7 million in outside spending help, for a total of $2.2 million, less than one-third as much as in 2018, even accounting for inflation. In 2010, the 60 Republican candidates who took seats from Democrats spent an average of $1.4 million and were supported by another $1.3 million, for a total of $2.7 million, again less than one-third of the total for the comparable set of winning Democrats in 2018 ($9.7 million).

The torrent of money flowing to Democratic candidates and their supportive outside groups in 2018 is eloquent testimony to the intensity of Democrats' desire to elect a Congress that would take on Trump. Most Democrats running for winnable Republican districts sought to stamp the Trump brand on their opponents, but this was not their only theme. They also attacked the Republican incumbents for legislative sins, most notably

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[42]The candidate spending totals will rise with the final reports to the Federal Election Commission (FEC); the independent spending totals are nearly complete. The financial data are from the FEC, accessed at https://www.fec.gov/data/advanced/?tab=candidates, and the Center for Responsive Politics, accessed at https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/summ.php?cycle=2018&disp=C&type=G.

their votes to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which would have deprived millions of Americans of their health insurance and eliminated the act's popular provisions, most notably the requirement that insurance companies cover preexisting conditions. Republican attacks on the ACA in 2018 had the ironic effect of generating consistent majority support for the program for the first time since its enactment in 2010.[43] The Republicans' signature legislative success, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, was also successfully portrayed as a giveaway to the rich[44] and proved an especially ripe target in high tax states such as California, New York, and New Jersey, where its limits on state tax deductions promised higher federal tax bills for many middle-class voters.

THE SENATE

The centrality of Trump to the voting decision clearly hurt Republicans in competitive House races but helped add two seats to their Senate majority. Any Democratic hopes of extending their blue wave to the Senate were thwarted by a combination of party loyalty and the most adverse array of Senate contests faced by any party since senators have been popularly elected. Of the 35 seats contested in 2018, Democrats held 26, 10 of them in states won by Trump in 2016, and five with more than 59 percent of the major-party vote. Republicans defended only nine seats and only one in a state won by Hillary Clinton, Nevada. In the end, Democrats took the Nevada seat plus one Trump state with an open seat, Arizona; they also came surprisingly close in Texas. Republicans took four seats in Trump states (Missouri, North Dakota, Indiana, and Florida), but the Democratic incumbents held on in West Virginia and Montana. Trump's late campaigning in Missouri, Florida, and Indiana aimed at bringing his supporters to the polls—using the battle over Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court to rally Christian conservatives and exciting white nationalists by whipping up hysteria about a convoy of Central Americans headed north—almost certainly helped boost Republican turnout and contributed to the Republican victories in these states, where, according to exit polls, Trump's approval ratings exceeded 50 percent.

Five of the six Senate seats that switched parties in 2018 went to the party that had won the state's 2016 presidential vote. As a result, the number of senators representing states won by their party in the most

[43]Jacobson, "The Effects of the Early Trump Presidency," 17.

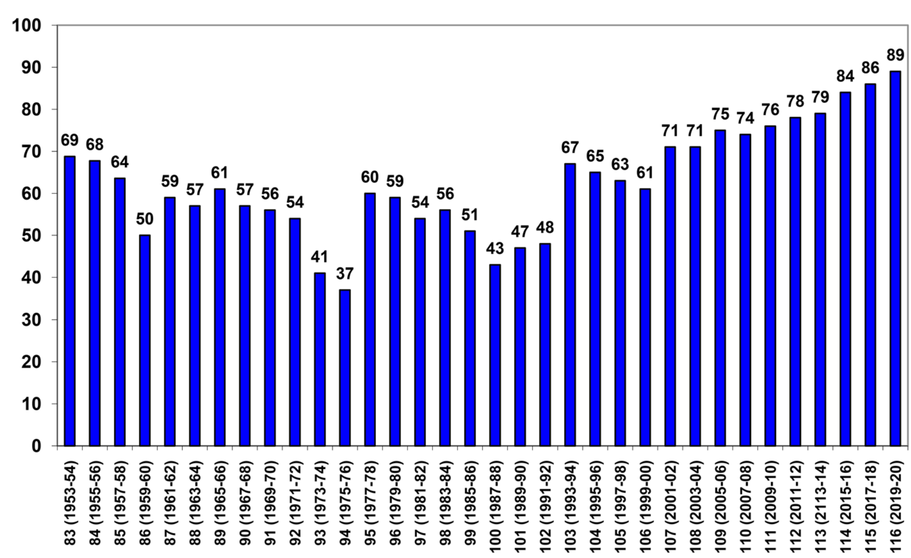
[44]The tax cut never enjoyed majority support, and typically more than 60 percent of Americans think the main beneficiaries are the wealthy; survey data accessed at http://www.pollingreport.com/budget.htm, 1 December 2018.

recent presidential election reached an all-time high of 89 for the 116th Congress, extending yet another gauge of increasingly nationalized, president-centered electoral politics (Figure 5). Party loyalty averaged 94.8 percent in the exit polls for these six states, and 90.4 percent of the voters cast votes consistent with their opinions of Trump. Loyalty and congruence were lowest, not surprisingly, in West Virginia, where Democratic incumbent Joe Manchin won 52 percent of the vote in a state where 63 percent of voters approved of Trump's performance. Trump's strategy was thus generally if not uniformly effective in rallying the Republican base in red states, where offending independents and Democrats was not a problem. But his rhetoric had spillover effects elsewhere, contributing to the extreme partisanship and close links between opinions of Trump and voting behavior observed in 2018.

As in the competitive House races, huge sums were invested in the competitive Senate contests—defined as the 10 rated "toss-up" by the Cook Political Report (Table 6). The two Democrats winning Republican seats were very generously funded, but so were their opponents. Three of the four incumbent Democrats who lost outspent their Republican challengers, but the challengers had more than enough to get their messages across, ranging from $15.1 million in North Dakota to $115.1 million in Florida. The nationalization of these contests is evident in the extraordinary levels

FIGURE 5

Senate Seats Held by the Party Winning the State in the Most Recent Presidential Election, 1952–2018



Source: Compiled by author

TABLE 6
Campaign Spending in Competitive Senate Races

			Spending by and for Candidates ($ Millions)		
State	*Candidate*		*Candidate $*	*Independent $*	*Total $*
AZ	Sinema (D)	W	24.0	31.9	55.9
	McSally (R)		20.6	27.7	48.3
NV	Rosen (D)	W	25.1	40.5	65.6
	Heller (R) (I)		15.1	25	40.1
IN	Donnelly (D)		17.0	38.3	55.3
	Braum (R)	W	18.3	28.1	46.4
FL	Nelson (D) (I)		31.5	53.2	84.7
	Scott (R)	W	82.8	32.3	115.1
MO	McCaskill (D) (I)		38.5	35.1	73.6
	Hawley (R)	W	11.2	41.2	52.4
ND	Heitkamp (D) (I)		24.4	8.5	32.9
	Cramer (R)	W	6.1	9.0	15.1
MT	Tester (D) (I)	W	20.3	19.5	39.8
	Rosendale (R)		5.4	22.2	27.6
WV	Manchin (D) (I)	W	8.8	18.5	27.3
	Morrissey (R)		5.6	14.3	19.9
TN	Bredeson (D)		18.9	23.1	42.0
	Blackburn (R)	W	16.1	29.6	45.7
TX	O'Rourke (D)		78.9	4.7	83.6
	Cruz (R) (I)	W	45.4	8.8	54.2

Source: Open Secrets, https://www.opensecrets.org/races/election.
Note: Totals as of January 11, 2019; final totals will be higher; D = Democrat, R = Republican, I = incumbent, W = winner.

of independent spending they attracted; more money was spent for the candidate than by the candidate in 14 of 20 campaigns; overall, outside spending totaled $511 million, candidate spending totaled $514 million in just these 10 elections. Democrats received more financial support, $560 million to $465 million, but the Republican won six of the 10 races, all in states won by Trump. Altogether, more than $1.5 billion was spent in 2018 Senate contests, and again, these numbers will be higher when final reports are published. With party loyalty so high and money for competitive challengers so abundant, there was no detectible incumbency advantage in the 2018 Senate elections.

TURNOUT AND DEMOGRAPHY

Midterm referenda depend in part on systematic shifts in voting behavior between elections, but with so few voters willing to contemplate crossing party lines (Figure 2) and the proportion of swing voters declining,[45] the

[45]Corwin Schmidt, "Polarization and the Decline of the American Floating Voter," *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (October 2017): 365–381.

outcome depends increasingly on the capacity of each side to motivate and mobilize its core supporters. Both sides recognized this reality in 2018 and made extraordinary efforts to get their people to the polls. Both succeeded, but Democrats did so to a much greater extent than Republicans. These efforts produced the highest midterm voting participation in a century, with an estimated 50.3 percent of eligible citizens casting ballots, more than 13 percentage points higher than in 2014 and 11 points higher than the average for the last four decades.[46] In House elections, the total for Republican candidates nationally was about 10.9 million votes higher than in 2014, but the total for Democratic candidates was 25.1 million votes higher. In the 32 districts Democrats took from Republicans where comparisons with 2014 are possible,[47] the average Republican vote was up 21 percent over 2014, but the average Democratic vote was up more than 200 percent.

Voter participation was also sharply higher in Senate races, generally to the benefit of the locally dominant party. Turnout was up by an average of 46 percent compared with 2014 in the 10 most competitive states listed in Table 6; in the remaining states, it was up an average of 29 percent. Turnout increases of 61 percent in Indiana, 58 percent in Missouri, and 61 percent in Nevada helped turn these states over; the biggest increase, however, was 63 percent in Texas, putting that once reliably red state in play.

The steep increase in voter participation is yet another sign of Trump's capacity to incite political passions pro and con, though more on con than the pro side.[48] Trump's influence was both direct, motivating individuals to vote, and indirect, motivating people to staff phone banks, walk precincts, and contribute money to candidates and outside spending groups that then invested heavily in voter mobilization. Democrats needed high turnout rates to offset the problems posed by the composition of the party's coalition, which includes a relatively larger share of young and minority citizens who historically have been less likely to vote than the older whites who populate the Republican coalition, especially in midterm elections.

The demographic differences that now distinguish the parties were in full display in the 2018 pre- and post-election polls.[49] Some illustrative exit

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[46]Michael P. McDonald, "2018 November General Election Turnout Rates," United States Election Project, accessed at http://www.electproject.org/2018g, 2 January 2019.

[47]That is, excluding redrawn districts in Pennsylvania and those won by the Republican unopposed in 2014.

[48]On average, Democrats enjoyed about a 10-point advantage in voter enthusiasm in 2018 according to pre-election poll data from CNN (10 surveys) Fox News (3), Quinnipiac (3), Gallup, and YouGov (both 1).

[49]For pre-election demographics, see Gary C. Jacobson, "Donald Trump and the 2018 Election" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, 30 August–2 September 2018).

TABLE 7
Net Democratic Advantage/Disadvantage in the House Vote, by Demographics

Sex		*Age*	
Men	–4	18–29	35
Women	19	30–44	19
		45–64	–1
Education		65+	–2
College	20		
White college women	20	*Race*	
White college men	–4	White	–10
Non-college	0	Black	81
White non-college women	–14	Hispanic	40
White non-college men	–26	Asian	54

Source: Computed from the exit poll results at https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls, accessed 9 November 2018.

poll data appear in Table 7. Democrats held a wide advantage among women, voters under 45, racial minorities, and better-educated voters; Republicans won the larger share of older, white, and less-educated voters, particularly less-educated men. As always, turnout was highest among older whites, but younger, minority, and better-educated voters made up a larger proportion of the electorate than in 2014, while the share of non-college-educated whites was smaller.[50] By one estimate, the percentage of the youngest cohort (18–29) who voted was 31 percent, still comparatively low but 10 points higher than the 21 percent who voted in 2014.[51] The most important demographic contribution to the Democrats' gains in 2018, however, was that of well-educated women in suburban districts, whose reaction to Trump drove them to the polls and to vote Democratic in large numbers.[52]

Superior mobilization was essential to the Democrats' success, for they need to win a supermajority votes cast nationwide to overcome the Republican's formidable structural advantage in House elections. Democratic support is strongest in large urban areas, where the party wins large majorities in very safe districts, effectively "wasting" votes, while regular Republican voters are distributed more evenly across suburbs, small cities,

[50]Matthew Yglesias, "The 2018 Electorate Was Older, White, and Better Educated than in 2016, *Vox,* 12 November 2018, accessed at https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/12/18083014/2018-election-results-turnout, 24 November 2018.

[51]Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, "Young People Dramatically Increase Their Turnout to 31%, Shape 2018 Midterm Elections," 7 November 2018, accessed at https://civicyouth.org/young-people-dramatically-increase-their-turnout-31-percent-shape-2018-midterm-elections/, 24 November 2018.

[52]David Wasserman, "House Democrats' Keys to Victory: Suburbs, Money, and Fired-Up Women College Grads," NBC News, 8 November 2018, accessed at https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/house-democrats-keys-victory-hillary-fired-women-college-grads-n934101, 2 January 2019.

and rural areas.[53] The Democrats' problem is illustrated by the distribution of the 2016 presidential vote across House districts. Hillary Clinton won 2.86 million more votes than Trump, but Trump won the most votes in 228 districts and Clinton in 207 districts. There are currently 219 districts where Trump ran at least 2 percentage points ahead of his national major-party share (48.9 percent) and only 186 where Clinton ran more than 2 points ahead of her national share; the 30 remaining districts fall in between. This meant that even if Democrats were to win all of the Democratic-leaning districts and all of the balanced districts (by this measure), they would still be two seats short of a majority. They had to make inroads into Republican turf, and winning seats against the partisan grain (defined as districts with a presidential vote 2 or more points below the national vote) has become exceedingly difficult in recent years, as Figure 6 shows.

Democrats nonetheless succeeded in winning 23 of the Republican-leaning districts in 2018 (along with all but four of the 30 balanced and every one of the Democratic-leaning districts), which gave them their majority. Their national vote margin of 8.6 percentage points, a bit larger than in 2006, was enough, then, to overcome their structural disadvantage, delivering their biggest House seat gains since 1974. They might have done even better if Republican gerrymanders had not proven so effective in several states. In Ohio, the Democrats' share of House votes cast rose from 40 percent to 48 percent between 2014 and 2018, but they still won only the same four of the state's 16 seats; in North Carolina, their vote share rose from 44 percent to 49 percent, but their seat share remained unchanged at three of 13; in Wisconsin, the Democratic vote rose from 47 percent to 54 percent without reducing the Republicans' 5–3 seat advantage.[54] In this light, the blue wave of 2018 represents an even stronger repudiation of the Trump presidency than the raw House results would suggest.[55]

THE NEW CONGRESS

Not surprisingly, a midterm referendum focused on Donald Trump left the parties and their respective coalitions even more polarized than they were

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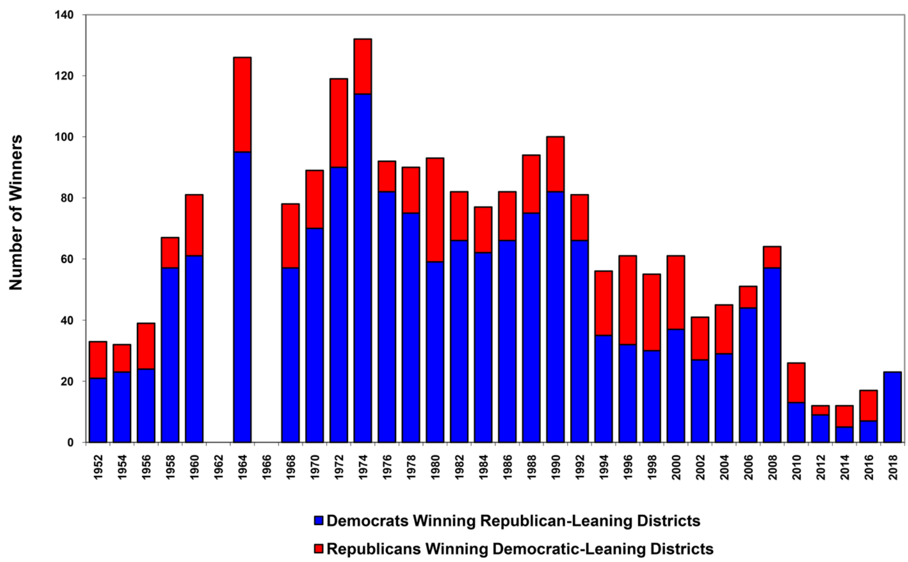
[53]Jacobson and Carson, *Politics of Congressional Elections,* 21–23.

[54]In Pennsylvania, by comparison, after the state supreme court determined that the Republicans had violated the state constitution and compelled new districts to be drawn, the Democrats ended up winning nine of the state's 18 seats, up from four in 2014, as their vote share rose from 44 percent to 55 percent. The North Carolina gerrymander was declared unconstitutional, but too late to redraw the districts for 2018; a different map will be in place in 2020.

[55]The Democrats' raw national vote advantage was even larger in the Senate elections—about 18 percentage points—partly but not entirely because there were no Republican votes from California, where the top-two primary system produced two Democratic nominees.

FIGURE 6
House Candidates Winning Against the Partisan Grain, 1952–2018



Source: Compiled by author.

before the elections. In addition to reinforcing party differences along the dimensions of sex, age, education, and ethnicity, it sharpened differences based on political geography. The Democrats, already overwhelmingly dominant in urban areas, gained strength in the suburbs, and blue or purple states became bluer. The Republicans' share of California's 53 House seats dropped from 14 to seven, and they no longer hold a single seat in Orange County, once a conservative bastion; Democrats won all 46 California districts won by Clinton in 2016, and Republicans won all seven won by Trump. Democrats also picked up multiple seats, nearly all in suburban districts, in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Michigan, and Texas. They made almost no inroads into rural areas and smaller cities, however, where voters helped Republicans defend and expand their Senate majority.

The demographic differences between the parties' electoral coalitions reappear, radically amplified, in the congressional parties of the 116th Congress. The Democrats, already comparatively diverse, became more so; 38 percent of House Democrats are women, 41 percent are ethnic or racial minorities, and only 39 percent are white men. Among the 35 newly elected Democratic women are two Muslims (a Somali American and a Palestinian American) and two Native Americans. In contrast, nearly 90 percent of House Republicans are white men; only 6.5 percent are women, and only 4.5 percent are nonwhite. Of the record 25 women senators, 17 are Democrats. Eight House and two Senate Democrats are from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community; no Republican member of Congress identifies as other than straight. Every Republican senator and all but two Republican representatives are Christians; about 20 percent of House Democrats and 30 percent of Senate Democrats are not. Descriptively, the congressional parties will represent starkly different Americas in the 116th Congress.

DEMOCRATS IN POWER

The 2018 referendum's most immediate result was to give House Democrats the means as well as the motivation to challenge, check, and investigate Trump and his administration for at least the next two years. Although their House takeover showed the Democrats' strength as an anti-Trump coalition, putting that coalition to work on other matters will be a daunting task. United against Trump, they remain divided on how the party should address the voters who supported him, what policies it should pursue or emphasize, and who should lead it. The will also have to worry about retaining the 18 seats they took from Republicans with less than 52 percent of the vote, for without them, their majority would vanish. House Democrats will also square off against an enlarged Republican Senate majority and more Trump-friendly Republican caucuses in both chambers (comparative moderates and Trump critics were overrepresented among the departing House and Senate Republicans[56]). Even congressional Republicans who might view Trump as a liability—a leader so off-putting to most Americans that even the best economy in at least two decades could not preserve their House majority—are likely to stick with him as long as his support among ordinary Republicans remains robust. The prospects for acrimonious stalemates between the two chambers and between the House and White House during the 116th Congress are very high, with tensions compounded by the legal cloud over the president arising from ongoing investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 elections on his behalf and other matters.

The election also has implications for the future of both parties. Insofar as Republican retention of the Senate is attributed to Trump's success in whipping up xenophobic fears about immigrants, appealing to white

[56]Geoffrey Skelley and Gus Wezerek, "Crossing the Aisle Didn't Save Republicans This Year," FiveThirtyEight, 7 December 2018, accessed at https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-bipartisanship-doesnt-always-pay-in-three-charts/, 2 January 2019; Bradley Jones, "House Republicans Who Lost Re-election Bids Were More Moderate than Those Who Won," Pew Research Center, 7 December 2018, accessed at http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/07/house-republicans-who-lost-re-election-bids-were-more-moderate-than-those-who-won/?, 2 January 2019.

nationalist sentiments, and rallying Christian conservatives behind Supreme Court nominees expected to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade,* it advances the party makeover sought by Trump's erstwhile adviser Steve Bannon, who envisioned a white populist Republican Party devoted to cultural conservatism, patriarchy, economic nationalism, and anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant xenophobia and the dismantling of the regulatory state.[57] But to the degree that Trump and congressional Republicans adopt and promote this vision going forward into 2020 and beyond, it seems a sure recipe for splitting and shrinking the Republican Party in the long run. Even a partial adoption bears risks, because the elements of Trump's agenda in accord with it are almost uniformly unpopular outside the Republican core of older white voters. This includes reducing legal immigration, restricting family reunification, and building a wall on the Mexican border[58]; disengaging from the global economy[59]; scrapping regulations designed to protect consumers and the environment[60]; "America First" isolationism[61]; and adopting the conservative Christian wish list (overturning *Roe* v. *Wade,* curbing LGBTQ rights, and defunding Planned Parenthood).[62]

The long-term danger to a Republican Party defined by this set of broadly unpopular objectives and commitments is evident in the House vote (especially that of educated suburban women) and is aggravated by their special unpopularity among younger Americans,[63] who also take a dim view of the president. Trump's approval in Gallup Polls through 2018

[57]John Thorsson, "The Essentials of Bannonism," *Eat, Pray, Vote,* 21 October 2017, accessed at https://www.eatprayvote.org/2017/10/21/the-essential-tenets-of-bannonism/.

[58]See the polling results reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm. Large majorities rejected Trump's rationales for these policies. In the 2–5 February 2018 Quinnipiac poll, only 17 percent agreed that undocumented immigrants committed more crimes than natives, while 72 percent disagreed. In the 15–18 September 2017 Monmouth University Poll, 23 percent said at immigrants took jobs from citizens, while 56 percent said they did not.

[59]See the polling results reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/trade.htm.

[60]Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord was supported by no more than one-third of the public in any of the five major polls that posed the question, and the idea of removing "specific regulations intended to combat climate change" was even less popular (28 percent versus 65 percent in the 9 May 2017 Quinnipiac poll); see http://www.pollingreport.com/enviro.htm.

[61]See http://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/Position-World.aspx.

[62]See the polling results for 2017–2018 reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/lgbt.htm and http://www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm.

[63]For example, only 36 percent of the public wants to encourage the use of coal despite its environmental costs, but among people under 30, the share falls to 23 percent (Quinnipiac poll, 30 March–3 April 2017, accessed at https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2449); the comparable numbers for defunding Planned Parenthood are 35 percent and 23 percent, respectively (Quinnipiac poll, 20–27 June 2017, accessed at https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2470). Only 33 percent said that the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement has been bad for the United States; among those under 30, its 15 percent (Tyson 2017).

has averaged 28 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds and 36 percent among 30- to 44-year-olds.[64] The electoral price exacted by these sentiments is evident in the post-election studies reporting large swings to the Democrats between 2014 and 2018 among voters under 45.[65]

These developments carry longer-term implications for the parties, for they suggest that the wide Democratic advantage among people first entering the electorate that appeared during the Bill Clinton administration and continued through the George W. Bush and Obama administrations will be at least as wide during the Trump administration. This poses a serious threat to the Republican Party's future vitality, for the political attitudes of people newly involved in politics often foreshadow their future political attachments. Partisan identities tend to be adopted early in adulthood, stabilize quickly, and thereafter become resistant to more than transient change. They are not immutable, to be sure; a substantial share of less-educated whites have shifted to a Republican identity over the last decade. But political events and personalities usually have their most lasting influence during the stage in life when partisan identities are being formed.[66] If this holds for the current generation of younger citizens and they continue to hold decisively negative opinions of Trump, time alone will continue to shift the partisan balance in the Democrats' favor, for it is doubtful that the Trump edition of the Republican Party can attract enough additional older and less-educated whites outside of metropolitan areas to offset demographic trends that would favor the Democratic Party even if Trump were not actively alienating groups already inclined to identify as Democrats.

Whatever its other consequences, the 2018 midterm elections did not diminish Trump's polarizing effect on the citizenry; the first Gallup Poll taken after the elections reported the widest partisan gap in presidential approval ever recorded in the long history of their time series, with 91 percent of Republicans but only 5 percent of Democrats approving Trump's job performance. Democrats who see Trump as an incompetent, mean-spirited, lying, ignorant, racist, misogynist, authoritarian narcissist

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[64]Compared with 65 percent and 54 percent, respectively, among these cohorts, for Obama during his last year in office.

[65]Catalist, a Democratic data firm, reported swings of 24 points among the 18–29 cohort and 30 points among the 30–44 cohort; only the 65+ cohort bucked the trend. See Yair Ghitza, "What Happened Last Tuesday: Part 2—Who Did They Vote For?," Medium, 14 November 2018, accessed at https://medium.com/@yghitza_48326/what-happened-last-tuesday-part-2-who-did-they-vote-for-e3a2a63a5ef2, 2 January 2019. Similarly, a comparison of exit polling data from 2018 and 2014 shows the largest swings to the Democrats occurred among the two youngest cohorts.

[66]For a full presentation of this argument, see Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties,* chap. 7.

pursuing policies threatening national and global health and welfare find it hard to resist feeling contempt for Trump supporters simply for being such: how could any sentient being not be appalled by what they see? Trump's Republican supporters, in return, view his detractors as elitist liberal snobs, sore losers who disdain as "deplorables" hardworking, God-fearing, patriotic Americans like them, people who appreciate a pugnacious president who promises to put America first and who will at least try to reverse the economic and social trends that have frayed their communities and made them feel like losers. As long as Trump is on the scene, the nation is bound to remain deeply divided, and to the extent that he reshapes the Republican Party in his white nationalist image, these divisions will deepen further and every election, like the 2018 midterms, will be fought with both sides convinced that nothing less than the future of American democracy is at stake.