

# Politics Against Trumpism

## The US Midterm Elections and What Comes Next

By John Nichols

Donald Trump has been framing the narrative of American politics since he launched his bid for the Republican presidential nomination in June 2015. A master of media manipulation who utilizes social media more skillfully than any political figure in the country—and perhaps the world—Trump has defined the American discourse by forcing the country to respond to his policy pronouncements and provocations. That does not mean that he has prevailed in every debate; indeed, the president has faced fierce and often effective resistance. Yet, because he and his partisan allies have so dominated the federal government and the media coverage of that government, it has been almost impossible to have a debate about anything other than Trump.

Now, with midterm election results that have upended the status quo at the federal and state levels of American politics, there is finally the prospect that this dysfunctional dynamic could change. Two years into Trump's presidency, the American electorate has given the opposition to that presidency a vital opportunity to frame an alternative politics. The opening is real. But there is no guarantee that it will be utilized as well or wisely as need be.

The question is whether the Democrats—who will take charge of the House of Representatives and many key states in January—will grab this opportunity and use it to upend Trump and the nationalistic variation on American conservatism that can reasonably be described as Trumpism. If the Democrats fail, due to a lack of ideological cohesion or an excess of caution, Trump will continue to dominate the discourse; the president and his Republican allies could retain and even extend their authority in the 2020 elections. However, if the Democrats succeed, it may rightly be said one day that the end of Trump's presidency began on the day of the midterm elections: November 6, 2018.

## Checks and Balances

The stakes are so high because of the complicated infrastructure of a political system where the powers of the branches of government are divided among—and against—one another. In addition, the voting processes of the United States have been warped by the efforts of Trump's allies, who have actively worked to suppress voting by racial and ethnic minorities and have skewed legislative-district lines via the process of gerrymandering. The point of voter suppression and gerrymandering—and of the Electoral College that allows losers of the popular vote, like Trump in 2016, to assume the presidency—is to thwart the will of the people. In closely contested American elections, that can happen. But the 2018 midterm voting was not close. Turning out at the highest level since 1914 (the last midterm before World War I), voters swept Republican incumbents out of supposedly safe sinecures in Washington and in state capitals and gave the resistance to Trump the ability to check and balance this presidency.

The results shook Trump, whose reaction to his new political circumstance has shown an even more erratic and irrational side of the commander-in-chief. Trump does not like losing, and he lost a lot on November 6. The president had hoped that, by capitalizing on structural advantages for the Republicans and by rallying a loyal, if dwindling, base of right-wing supporters, he might avert a result that would weaken his presidency. Until just hours before the polls closed, he campaigned more aggressively, and more crudely, than any president in modern American history because he recognized that his grip on power and his ability to spin a national narrative were threatened by the sort of popular discontent that can upend a presidency.

Since Trump took office on January 20, 2017, he has been possessed of not just a “bully pulpit” from which to advance his agenda but an “amen corner” to cheer it on. As president, he has been able to shape the debate on issue after issue—moving the discussion of what is possible far to the right on issues ranging from energy and the environment to taxation and immigration. His task was made easier by the fact that Republicans controlled both chambers of the Congress and by the absolute subservience of House speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin, and Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, not just to Trump but to the extreme agenda of the president and his inner circle of right-wing nationalist advisors.

The Republican president and his allies did not win every legislative battle in 2017 and 2018, because a handful of responsible Republicans broke with Trump, Ryan, and McConnell on issues such as health-care reform. But they succeeded in restructuring the nation’s tax code to benefit multinational corporations and the wealthy Americans who are prime supporters of Republican campaigns, and they packed the courts with jurists favored by the party’s socially conservative base. More importantly, they defined the policy debates in a way so focused on the issues Trump and his team raised that discussions about vital issues such as climate change and inequality were pushed to the margins.

## **The Bully Pulpit**

Now, after two years of responding to the president, Trump’s foes can force him to respond to them. The key result of the midterm elections was to hand a “bully pulpit” to the opposition, delivering control of the House to the Democrats with the most resounding swing toward the party since the “Watergate election” of 1974, which saw sweeping Democratic victories following the resignation of Republican president Richard Nixon.

This transfer of House control, which has been expanded and energized by young left-wing activists, came as part of a “blue wave” election. In this fractured period in American history, during which power has shifted frequently and radically from one party to another, campaign watchers have developed a new terminology for assessing the results of the country’s multijurisdictional voting for state and federal offices. There are still some elections that produce mixed results, where both parties can point to successes. But, increasingly, the numbers from midterm-election years are dramatically favorable to one party or the other. The voters can generate a “red wave” for the Republicans, as in the 2010 and 2014 midterms that took place during Barack Obama’s tenure. Or they can produce a “blue wave” favoring the Democrats, as happened in 2006, when the party capitalized on frustration with President George W. Bush’s domestic policies and the war in Iraq to win control of the House for the first time since the 1994 election and effective control of the Senate for the first time since the 2000 election.

The “blue wave” of 2018 was more than sufficient to justify a postelection declaration by Democratic National Committee (DNC) chairman Tom Perez that “the Democratic Party is back.” Perez is not prone to hyperbole. He was quite serious when he suggested that his party had come back from the political wilderness.

After devastating setbacks in 2014 and 2016, which culminated in the election of Trump as the nation’s 45th president, Democrats surveyed a political landscape that looked like scorched earth. Their party had not just lost the presidency; it had, over a period of several election cycles, lost just about everything. The Obama years created a false sense of security for Democrats, who focused too intently on the fact that they controlled the most powerful office in the land and expected to retain the top job with a ticket led by Obama’s secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, whose stature and experience exceeded that of any of her likely Republican challengers. On November 9, 2016, when Democrats woke up to the reality of President Donald Trump and a Republican Congress, they suddenly recognized the full extent of what the political analysis website *FiveThirtyEight* referred to as the “erosion of the Democratic Party’s political power in state legislatures, congressional districts and governor’s mansions.”

One election analysis explained, “At the beginning of Obama’s term, Democrats controlled 59 percent of state legislatures, while now they control only 31 percent, the lowest percentage for the party since the turn of the 20th century. They held 29 governor’s offices and now have only 16, the party’s lowest number since 1920.” Those numbers represented an existential crisis for the Democrats that extended beyond Trump’s presidency. If the party did not see a comeback in 2018, it faced the prospect of long-term marginalization—a circumstance similar to that experienced by the British Labour Party from 1979 to 1997 and by the German Social Democratic Party from 2005 to the present.

## **A Very Blue Wave**

The 2018 election gave the Democrats the results they needed. Indeed, CNN political analyst Chris Cillizza concluded that after most of the ballots were counted that “the facts make plain that 2018 was not only a Democratic wave, but a massive and historic one.” Here are the measures of the wave:

- ⇒ Democratic House candidates took forty seats from Republicans, giving the party an expected to have a 235 to 200 advantage in the chamber. The newly elected Democratic members will dramatically diversify the Congress, as women and people of color take seats historically occupied by white men. Among those joining the House Democratic Caucus will be next-generation progressive leaders such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts—both of whom defeated senior Democrats in party primaries earlier in 2018—and the first Muslim women to serve in the Congress, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. House Democrats will arrive in January with a striking mandate from the American people. With counting nearing completion in late November, the cumulative vote for Democratic congressional candidates was 59,661,690, while the Republicans secured just 50,559,128. That is the largest midterm margin for either party in the history of the United States.
- ⇒ Democratic Senate candidates won 22 of the 35 contests nationwide. Two more seats went to independents who caucus with the Democrats (Maine’s Angus King and Vermont’s Bernie Sanders), while the Republicans won just eleven seats. Republicans retained control of the hun-

dred-seat chamber, where only about a third of seats are chosen in any election cycle, and they flipped seats in three states where Trump retains a strong following: North Dakota, Missouri, and Indiana. But Democrats grabbed seats from the Republicans in two key western states, Arizona and Nevada. And a Republican who has been highly critical of Trump, Mitt Romney (the party's 2012 presidential nominee), won an open seat representing Utah. That means there will be little change in the internal dynamics of the upper chamber of the Congress, where the advantage afforded to small states is dramatically beneficial to the Republicans. The cumulative vote in the 35 Senate contests illustrates the imbalance but also the growing appeal of the opposition party. Roughly 50 million votes were cast for Democratic Senate candidates, while roughly 35 million were cast for Republican Senate candidates.

- ⇒ Democrats also achieved dramatic gains in statehouses across the country, where governors can expand access to federal healthcare programs such as Medicaid, where attorneys general can join lawsuits to block the president's assaults on immigrants, where secretaries of state can expand voting rights, and where legislators can upend gerrymandering abuses. Seven new Democratic governors will take the places of Republican leaders in Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, and Wisconsin. Progressive governors with ties to organized labor and civil rights groups will replace nefarious right-wingers such as Scott Walker in Wisconsin, Rick Snyder in Michigan, and Paul LePage in Maine. Democratic Governors Association chair Jay Inslee noted on the day after the election, "After last night's results, 38 million more Americans will have a Democratic governor. That means that Democratic governors now represent a majority of Americans—more than 175 million people."

Democratic governors will have an easier time managing in the statehouses, since Democrats finished the 2018 election cycle with an overall gain of some 380 state legislative seats nationwide and flipped at least seven state legislative chambers from red to blue. The state results have federal consequences as well, as state legislatures and governors will draw new congressional-district lines based on the 2020 national census. With Democrats in control of more states, it is likely that more competitive congressional districts will be drawn and that the Democratic winning streak of 2018 could be extended into the 2020s. "That's a twelve-year election cycle because these governors are overseeing a redistricting cycle," says DNC chair Perez, "and that's a big deal."

- ⇒ The most ominous signal for Trump came from the three states broadly seen as having made him president. Trump lost the 2016 popular balloting for president by almost 3 million votes, yet narrow victories in three Great Lakes states (which have long histories of backing Democrats for the presidency) gave the Republican the majority he needed to prevail in the Electoral College. Those three states were Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Trump won Wisconsin by 0.7 points (22,748 votes), Michigan by 0.2 points (10,704 votes), and Pennsylvania by 0.7 points (44,292 votes). The *Washington Post* announced, "Donald Trump will be president thanks to 80,000 people in three states." So Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania were kind of a big deal on November 8, 2016. They were also kind of a big deal on November 6, 2018. The three states had Senate races in which prominent conservatives were challenging supposedly vulnerable Democratic incumbents. They also had gubernatorial contests. That's six major races in the three states that gave Trump the presidency. Democrats won all of them. Three Democratic senators—Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin, Michigan's Debbie Stabenow, and Pennsylvania's Bob Casey—were reelected with ease. Three Democratic gubernatorial candidates—Tony Evers in Wisconsin, Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, and Tom Wolf in Pennsylvania—were also winners.

Democrats, it turned out, had many reasons to celebrate as the scope and character of their 2018 success became clear. But they also had their work cut out for them. In the divided American system of government, with its many layers of conflicting authority, Republicans retained a good deal of power. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Trump focused on whatever victories his party could claim—while steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the general rejection of his policies and his approach to governing. The president, who has never let facts get in the way of his self-aggrandizing political spin, claimed that the 2018 results were “close to a complete victory” for the Republicans. That statement revealed Trump to be either outrageously dishonest, delusional, or perhaps both.

Larry Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota, explains, “There’s no doubt, we’re entering new territory and Donald Trump is in big trouble. The election results, no matter what he says, were devastating to him. The coalition he put together is clearly strained and he seems incapable of creating consensus.” And that’s not the worst of it for Trump. With the Republicans’ loss of the House, Democrats now have the power to investigate Trump and his associates—and to pick up on revelations from the investigations of others, most notably special counsel Robert Mueller, who has been conducting a sweeping inquiry into Russian influence on the 2016 Trump campaign and, presumably, more recent wrongdoing by the president and his associates. “Obviously with the investigations starting soon in the House,” Jacobs told the *Guardian* after the election, “ [...] if Democrats manage to reveal corruption, it’s going to damage Trump’s claim to drain the swamp. He’s going to look swampy.”

During the first two years of his presidency, Trump had a Congress that covered for him. House Speaker Ryan thwarted inquiries; key figures in the chamber, such as House Judiciary Committee chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Virginia, and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence chair Devin Nunes, R-California, actively aided the president’s efforts to thwart transparency and accountability. Under Ryan, Goodlatte, and Nunes, the constitutionally defined system of checks and balances was turned against itself. The legislative branch of the federal government did not temper the worst excesses of the executive branch: it sustained and enhanced them.

For obvious reasons, Trump wanted this arrangement to continue. But the voters chose a different arrangement, as House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California noted after it became clear her party had prevailed. “Today is more than about Democrats and Republicans,” she announced. “It is about restoring the Constitution’s checks and balances to the Trump administration.”

The consequences of this development for the president were summed up by Maryland congressman Elijah Cummings, the Democrat who will take charge of the powerful House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. A lawyer who has served in the House for more than two decades, Cummings spoke of his new duties in starkly constitutional terms. “I want to look at all the things the president has done that go against the mandates of our Founding Fathers in the Constitution,” he declared. “We need accountability, transparency, integrity, and honesty from this administration.”

The prospect of scrutiny brought out the worst in Trump. At the same postelection press conference where he told reporters “I think I am a great moral leader,” the president threatened to investigate members of Congress who investigate him and declared, “I’m just going to blame them.” But Cummings was not intimidated. “Right now, we have a president who is accountable to no one,” the congressman told CNN. That, he promised, would change with the transfer of control of the House.

## To Impeach or Not to Impeach

How much it will change is an issue of great concern to grassroots activists across the United States, who from the first days of Trump's tenure have argued that Congress must address this president's blatant disregard for the rule of law. "The change in control over the US House of Representatives marks a significant step forward, but it will not, on its own, end Donald Trump's corrupt and dangerous reign," says Tom Steyer, the billionaire philanthropist who has funded a network of groups seeking to have Congress impeach Trump. Steyer and his supporters want House members to use their authority under the Constitution to charge Trump with wrongdoing and pass articles of impeachment against him—setting up a Senate trial that could lead to the president's removal from office. After the election, Steyer explained, "The American people have voted for real change, and it's critical that these new representatives recognize this will only come with a true political reckoning for the corruption, self-dealing, and lawlessness exemplified by Mr. Trump. He cannot be permitted to continue to break the law with impunity."

Pelosi has rejected calls for immediate action on impeachment, and most House Democrats remain cautious. But incoming House Judiciary Committee chairman Jerry Nadler, D-New York, promises that Trump is "going to learn he's not above the law." Nadler, like Cummings, is a senior member of the House with a deep understanding of the Constitution. The New Yorker will not rush to judgment. But, Nadler has said, "we are going to have to do something to provide a check and balance, to protect the rule of law."

The extent to which Trump might be checked and balanced by the House depends, at least in part, on the conclusions drawn by Mueller's probe. Nadler has been an ardent defender of the Mueller investigation—which Trump attacks as a "phony witch hunt." Clashes between the president and Nadler's committee are inevitable, and the new chairman is aware that an impeachment inquiry could ensue. Speaking in 2017 to the DC insider journal *Politico*, the incoming chairman explained, "If you are actually going to remove a president from office, you are in effect nullifying the last election. Certainly the people who voted for him will think you're nullifying the election. It's OK to do that. It may be necessary to do that—as long as you have persuaded a sufficient fraction of the president's former supporters, the people who voted for him, that you have to (proceed), that it's necessary."

If it does become necessary, any move to impeach Trump would be complicated by political realities (Democratic caution and Republican control of the Senate) and by the desperate responses of a president who is famously incapable of controlling his emotions—and his Twitter account. No previous president has been removed by the Congress, though the threat of impeachment and removal forced Nixon to resign in the 1970s. Since the establishment of the republic in 1787, two presidents have been formally impeached by the House (Andrew Johnson in the nineteenth century and Bill Clinton in the twentieth), but both survived Senate trials and finished their terms. Trump could do the same. Many Democrats fret that Trump might relish a high-profile fight with Congress more than the duty of governing. This president invariably prefers performing for an audience—on the internet, on television, and at campaign-style rallies—to the practical work of policy-making. And an impeachment fight creates the prospect for Trump to engage in epic theatricality—and in precisely the sort of ugly political maneuvering and manipulation that delights his most ardent supporters.

Dealing with Trump's paranoia is always challenging for Democrats—and for media outlets whose attention is riveted on the president's every move. The challenge will only be greater if an impeachment inquiry becomes necessary.

But, like so many challenges in this awkward moment for America, this one offers an opening that the opposition could use to reset the debate. No matter what happens on the accountability front, Democrats must focus on establishing an alternative vision for the country that is bold enough to grab the attention of the electorate as it looks to 2020.

## What Would Bernie Do

As he was traveling the country to campaign for progressive contenders for federal and state posts in the midterms, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders began arguing that Democrats must balance their demands for presidential accountability with policy demands that move the overall debate to the left. Sanders, the 2016 presidential contender who may run again in 2020, is all in for the resistance to this presidency. "Trump is a demagogue. He is a pathological liar," he told me in a recent interview.

*Trump is also somebody who clearly does not respect democracy, who in fact is working overtime to undermine democracy in this country. When you attack the media as 'enemies of the people'—wow. Now we're so used to this. But if you and I were chatting three years ago and we said we'd have a president of the United States [who] attacks the media as 'enemies of the people'—so that anything the media says, people should not believe a word of it—we would have said that's beyond the pale. You have a president that is insulting and attacking our democratic allies but feels very comfortable with authoritarian types—whether it is [Russia's Vladimir] Putin or [Saudi Arabia's Mohammed] bin Salman—or even has personal affection for Kim Jong-un. This is a person who does not believe, in my view, in democracy and who is very much an authoritarian personality.*

It is essential to "expose [Trump] for what he is," says the senator. But, he adds, "It's not good enough to just beat up on Trump. You beat up on Trump and people say, 'Yeah, you're right, but so what? Why vote?'"

Because Trump will still be the president, says Sanders, congressional Democrats must utilize their newly obtained "bully pulpit" to steer the debate in a strikingly more progressive direction than the party has had since its Great Society heyday of the mid-1960s, and arguably since the New Deal days of the 1930s.

The nation's most prominent democratic socialist argues that Democrats in the House must embrace their majority status and move immediately to enact an agenda that stands in stark contrast to Trump and Trumpism. Senate Democrats, even though they are in the minority, must fight to record their votes in favor of a parallel. Even if Senate Republicans block votes, even if they reject measures, even if Trump threatens vetoes, Democrats should press on—knowing that, in doing so, they can rearrange the debate, expand the parameters of the possible, and force Trump off his talking points.

To this end, Sanders has proposed a progressive program that he says Democrats should adopt as their own and move to enact. It includes:

- ⇒ Increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and indexing it to median wage growth thereafter. The current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour is a starvation wage that must be increased

to a living wage. This would give more than 40 million Americans a raise and would generate more than \$100 billion in higher wages throughout the country.

- ⇒ A path toward Medicare for all. The Medicare-for-all bill, which is widely supported in the Senate, has a four-year phase-in period on the way to guaranteeing healthcare for every adult and child. Over the first year, it would lower the Medicare eligibility age from 65 to 55; cover dental, hearing and vision care for seniors; provide healthcare to every young person in the United States; and lower the cost of prescription drugs.
- ⇒ Bold action to combat climate change. An October 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made it clear we have just twelve years to substantially cut the amount of carbon in our atmosphere or our planet will suffer irreversible damage. Congress must pass legislation that shifts our energy system away from fossil fuels and toward energy efficiency and renewable energy. We can lead the planet in combating climate change and, in the process, create millions of good-paying jobs.
- ⇒ Fixing our broken criminal-justice system. We must end the absurdity of the United States having more people in jail than any other country on Earth. We must invest in jobs and education for our young people, not more jails and incarceration.
- ⇒ Comprehensive immigration reform: The American people want to protect the young people in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and to move toward comprehensive immigration reform for the more than 11 million people in our country who are undocumented. And that's exactly what we should do.
- ⇒ Passing progressive tax reform. At a time of massive and growing inequality in both income and wealth, Congress must pass legislation that requires wealthy people and large corporations to begin paying their fair share of taxes. It is unacceptable that there are large, extremely profitable corporations in this country that do not pay a nickel in federal income tax.
- ⇒ Passing a \$1 trillion infrastructure plan. Every day, Americans drive to work on potholed roads and crumbling bridges and ride in overcrowded buses and subways. Children struggle to concentrate in overcrowded classrooms. Workers are unable to find affordable housing. The structures that most Americans don't see are also in disrepair—from spotty broadband and an outdated electric grid to toxic drinking water and dilapidated levees and dams. Congress should pass a \$1 trillion infrastructure plan to address these needs while creating up to 15 million good-paying jobs in the process.
- ⇒ Lowering the price of prescription drugs. Americans pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs because, unlike other countries, the United States doesn't directly regulate the price of medicine. The House should pass legislation to require Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices and allow patients, pharmacists, and wholesalers to purchase low-cost prescription drugs from Canada and other countries. It should also pass legislation to make sure that Americans don't pay more for prescription drugs than citizens of other major countries.
- ⇒ The House should pass the College for All Act to make public colleges and universities tuition-free and substantially reduce student debt. In a highly competitive global economy, we must have the best-educated workers in the world. Every young person in America, regardless of income, must have the opportunity to receive the education they need to get a decent job and make it into the middle class.
- ⇒ When one out of five seniors is trying to get by on less than \$13,500 a year, we must expand Social Security so that every American can retire with dignity and security. The House should pass



legislation to expand Social Security benefits and extend its solvency for the next sixty years by requiring that the wealthiest Americans—those making more than \$250,000 a year—pay their fair share of Social Security taxes.

That's a strong start on a progressive agenda and, if House Democrats were to begin moving on individual items, it would undoubtedly gain attention. But the ambition of those who seek to move beyond Trump and Trumpism must extend beyond the Sanders list. It has been argued, correctly, that a progressive program for these times must also address issues of militarism and bloated Pentagon budgets, US interventions abroad, and threats to human rights abroad and at home. This has been a priority for the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), the largest ideological caucus in the House, which will have more than ninety members when the new Congress convenes. The caucus shares the "go big" vision that Sanders has advanced. CPC co-chair Mark Pocan, D-Wisconsin, mocks the caution of moderate Democrats. "A number of members of Congress prefer to spend their life in [the] fetal position, rocking in the corner of the room," says Pocan. "We don't do that. We're the folks out there trying to advocate for big change."

The CPC is suddenly influential, meeting with Pelosi and other House leaders and negotiating for key committee assignments. When the caucus held a November press conference to welcome newly elected rising stars on the left, including Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley, to its ranks, the crowd of reporters was so large that CPC co-chair Pramila Jayapal, D-Washington, mused: "The press is paying attention to us! I like this!"

## Ending the Forever War

Ocasio-Cortez, who took on the Democratic establishment in the 2018 campaign when she campaigned as "an educator, organizer, Democratic Socialist, and born-and-raised New Yorker," has who has a huge social-media following and an edgy style that has made her a hero beyond traditional political circles. She always made issues of war and peace central to her politics. She declared in her election manifesto:

*Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States has entangled itself in war and occupation throughout the Middle East and North Africa. As of 2018, we are currently involved in military action in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. Hundreds of thousands of civilians in these countries have been killed either as collateral damage from American strikes or from the instability caused by U.S. interventions. Millions more have fled their broken countries, contributing to the global refugee crisis [...] This continued action damages America's legitimacy as a force for good, creates new generations of potential terrorists, and erodes American prosperity. In times when we're told that there's not enough money, Republicans and corporate Democrats seem to find the cash to fund a \$1.1 trillion fighter jet program or a \$1.7 trillion-dollar nuclear weapon "modernization" program. The costs are extreme: the Pentagon's budget for 2018 is \$700 billion, all to continue fighting an endless War on Terror and re-fighting the Cold War with a new arms race that nobody can win.*

Calls for ending what Ocasio-Cortez refers to as the "forever war" have been voiced by many of the new House members, a number of them young women and people of color who come from immigrant backgrounds. Omar, who was born in Somalia and lived in a refugee camp before coming to Minneapolis, argues,

*We must end the state of continuous war, as these wars have made us less safe. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, entire countries have been destabilized, and we are currently in the midst of an extreme global migration crisis. Meanwhile at home, there have been increasingly cuts to spending on healthcare, infrastructure, education, and housing. We must scale back U.S. military activities, and reinvest our expansive military budget back into our communities. Once this happens, we can begin to repair the harm done, repair America's broken image, and invest in diplomatic relationships.*

CPC leaders such as Pocan and Jayapal, and California Democrats Barbara Lee and Ro Khanna, have for years been campaigning for a reassertion of congressional checks and balances on White House war-making and, in a recent joint statement, arguing that it is “past time to end the culture of waste, fraud, and abuse at the Pentagon.” New members such as Ocasio-Cortez and Omar will turn up the volume on these issues—and that’s essential. The opposition to Republican policies cannot be narrowly focused on domestic policy when, as the CPC notes, “each year, Congress appropriates over half our discretionary budget to the Pentagon.”

Thinking bigger about all the issues is vital for a Democratic Party that has been very good at defining what it is against but not so good at defining what it is for. But Democrats must also look beyond the battles of the moment and start talking about the future. Resistance to Trump is necessary. But there must also be resistance to the politics that makes this Trump, and the next Trump, possible. To do that, Democrats must do more than merely addressing immediate issues; they must address the economic and social changes that feed the anxiety of the electorate.

If there is one clear lesson from the 2018 midterm elections, it is that Americans are unsatisfied. They’re tired of Trump. But there’s more to it than Trump. While Americans split roughly 55 to 45 for the Democrats on November 6, a CBS News poll conducted around the same time found that Americans did not approve of the direction in which the country was headed, by a 58-to-36 margin. That means that the dissatisfaction is bipartisan. It crosses lines of race, class, gender, and age. The dismal mood has deep roots that serious analysts trace back to the Wall Street meltdown of 2008—and the ensuing bailout of the bankers who created the crisis.

If Democrats are going to break the boom-and-bust cycle of American politics and get the country beyond alternating “blue waves” and “red waves,” they have to start talking about why the political moment is so unstable, how Trump has harnessed this instability to advance the worst politics, and how progressives might harness it to advance a better politics.

## **Politics Against Trumpism**

Donald Trump is the president of the United States because the country’s political leaders have failed to respond honestly or usefully to the radical changes that are transforming the lives of Americans and the anxiety these changes create. Trump is not addressing these changes, but he is filling the void created by more responsible political figures avoiding inevitable debates.

Unlike the rest of the world, the United States has barely begun to wrestle with the immediate crisis of climate change. At the same time, it is now thirty years into a globalization revolution that is changing everything about how we relate to the world—economically, socially, politically, and practically. It is

twenty years into a digital revolution that is changing everything about how we communicate, with dramatic repercussions for how we organize our time and our relationships. And it is ten years into an automation revolution that is changing everything about our workplaces and that will ultimately upend our sense of who we are as workers and what we might seek to accomplish.

This is heavy stuff. It is hitting the average American with the force of three Industrial Revolutions at once. Unfortunately, because of the lingering influence of neoliberal fabulism on both parties, serious thinking about the policies needed to address this sea change has been neglected in favor of the fantasy that “the market will come up with a solution.”

Economists speak with a sense of urgency about the concentration of power in the hands of a billionaire class and the monopolization of wealth by trillion-dollar tech corporations. They explain that this is bad for business and worse for humanity. Social scientists identify economic and social inequality as an existential threat. The *Harvard Business Review* explains that “people in all walks of life are becoming very concerned about advancing automation.” Yet the supposedly enlightened leaders of both parties continue to propose “more-of-the-same” schemes to divert precious public resources to billionaires, tech titans, and the military-industrial complex that has already locked up so much of our commonwealth. It is certainly true that the Republicans are more enthusiastic than the Democrats when it comes to tax cuts for the wealthy and for multinational corporations. But there are still plenty of Democrats who entertain archaic fantasies about trusting the market to solve problems that the market has allowed to fester for generations.

Until Bernie Sanders opened up the debate with a 2016 presidential run that shook the Democratic Party’s complacency, scant attention was paid to the fact that the transformation of the US economy is going to require the development of a Scandinavian-style social welfare state to guarantee healthcare, education, transportation, and other basic needs. It is the only rational response to a “gig economy” where workers cannot count on the benefits packages that sustained their grandparents—and that their parents are now losing.

It is their recognition of this fact—not the promise of “free stuff” that so obsessed pundits in 2016—that made young voters such ardent backers of Sanders in his Democratic primary competition with Hillary Clinton. They backed him because his social-democratic agenda sounded like a smart proposal for bringing a measure of stability to the chaotic future and present. Yet, even at his best, Sanders barely touched on the topics that will soon confront society, like whether a universal basic income will be required to sustain workers displaced by robots. And once the nomination fight was done, Democrats defaulted to the habitual caution that keeps the party from inspiring young people and disaffected Americans.

Democrats’ neglect of the essential debate has made it easy for Trump to fill the anxiety void with a combination of over-the-top bragging about his dubious business skills and crude appeals to xenophobia. This was just enough to swing battleground states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—and with them the Electoral College—in 2016. But Trump is incapable of addressing the sources of the anxiety, which is one of the reasons the blue wave hit in 2018.

There are plenty of people—many of them Trump voters and potential Trump voters—who recognize that good employment numbers are transitory, that wages are stagnant, and that tax cuts are more likely to be invested in robotization than long-term job creation. Trump has no answers for the real

issues of our time. So he will keep going further down the rathole of racist politics—as he did in the last weeks before the 2018 election—and he is not going alone. He is taking the Republican Party.

That may not work for him anymore. The 2018 midterm results suggest that he is losing his ability to mobilize the masses, and his vulnerability could increase in the months to come. But Democrats cannot rely on Trump to stumble. That was the strategy they embraced in 2004, when they were taking on another Republican president, George W. Bush. Despite his many failures and fumbled, Bush prevailed—at least in part because Democrats rejected presidential prospects (such as former Vermont governor Howard Dean) who proposed to draw stark lines of distinction between the two parties.

The voters who came to the polls in record numbers in 2018 have given Democrats another chance to draw those lines of distinction. They cannot do so simply by objecting to Trump. They must now make their party the absolute and unequivocal alternative to Trumpism.

Democrats have to get this right, Bernie Sanders told me as we discussed what the party must do with the power the midterm voters have given it. “Trump will still be the president,” he explained. “So it is absolutely imperative that [the Democrats] come up with bold initiatives that they have promised the American people they would do. If not, it will be just awful.” ■■■

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