A Scholar and Citizen Reflects on the 2018 Election

By Richard Cherwitz

The 2018 elections are close to being in the books — and the results give us a great deal to digest and ponder.

As both a scholar of rhetoric and communication, as well as a concerned voter, allow me to offer several initial observations about the outcome of the races — and their implications for both the immediate and long term future.

First, from a purely partisan perspective, I was disappointed by the loss for Beto O’Rourke (Texas), and apparent losses for Stacey Abrams (Georgia) and Andrew Gillum (Florida), three dynamic new leaders. However, as a native Iowan I was delighted that Abby Finkenauer and Cindy Axne unseated the Republican House incumbents.

Second, while troubled by the increased polarization documented on Tuesday, I am heartened that we now have additional checks and balances in Washington, thus restoring the Madisonian model of government and helping to provide oversight for President Trump’s often out-of-
control behavior, as well as his ill-advised policies and unethical rhetoric — something in full view during Trump’s hostile post-election press conference and his firing of Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Third, as someone who studies political communication, it is interesting and noteworthy that the Democrats picked up seven governorships; this portends positively for redistricting following the 2020 census and has significant implications for the 2020 elections, especially since Republicans must secure most of those states to hold on to the presidency.

Fourth, Democratic members of the House of Representatives should heed the warning issued by many astute political analysts: It will be a huge mistake if Democrats focus disproportionately on investigating the president rather than simultaneously putting forward constructive legislation (on healthcare, infrastructure, etc.) with the potential to help Americans and frame a positive message for Democrats going forward. Failure to follow this advice will leave Democrats in the same bind they have found themselves in for the last two years; it will also directly play into President Trump’s hands, strengthening his already successful rhetorical strategy.

Fifth, although many Americans are pleased and others disappointed by the outcome of the elections, in view of the electoral totals that saw Democrats garner millions more votes than Republicans, we must be cognizant of a more salient political phenomenon: the emerging realignment of the nation’s political parties. President Trump has done much to perpetuate this during his tenure in the White House and especially because of his 2018 election rhetoric.

As a result, the Republican leadership soon may be forced to realize that their concern for immediate policy gains and other short-term “goodies” — which has kept them from standing up to and calling out the president — will cost them substantially and irreparably in the future. As many pollsters and informed political observers note, Trump and those who support him are trading white collar for blue collar, rural for urban and suburban, older for younger, men for women, uneducated for educated, white for minority, fearful for hopeful, and xenophobic for tolerant.

This move locks Republicans into relying on a voting demographic that simply is not sustainable given their shrinking percentage of eligible voters. Put bluntly, how one governs and the election rhetoric they employ have long-term consequences, potentially narrowing rather than expanding the audience to whom they appeal.

Sixth, the results provide additional evidence suggesting that gerrymandering threatens the legitimacy of our electoral system. For those who doubt that gerrymandering is unfair and undemocratic, consider the data. Democrats accrued almost 7 percent more of the total vote than Republicans; this yielded a net gain of 30+ seats in the House of Representatives. Compare this with 2010 when the Republicans received 6.8 percent more of the votes, yielding a net gain of 60 seats. In short, that’s nearly twice as many seats for the same popular vote margin in 2018. Perhaps the seven newly elected Democrats who defeated incumbent Republican governors can begin to address the gerrymandering problem.
Finally, the election has done nothing to get us beyond the hyper-polarization and tribal mentality characterizing American politics and perpetuating the lack of civil discourse. In fact, it may increase such entrenched divisions. I hope I am wrong and that both political parties find a way to learn from the results, concluding that real change in how we govern and campaign must occur, lest our democracy continues to descend.

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