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The Parties Prep for a Rematch



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There are three distinctive seasons in the biannual election cycle. The first is to figure out what happened in the last election and why. The second is to recruit the strongest candidates you can find. The third is the campaign itself. The Republican National Committee's autopsy of the 2012 election, under the direction of then-party chairman Reince Priebus, was unprecedented and highly commendable—even if most of its advice was ignored.

This year, Democrats became so consumed with the Democratic National Committee elections that they didn't really examine what happened on a national level. One thing that is taking place, though on an ad hoc basis, is looking at the voting tapes (though actually no longer on tape) to see who voted in 2016—and who voted in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

A big question for Democrats is whether Hillary Clinton was a uniquely problematic candidate, or whether the party was suffering from a more systemic problem. No doubt the Democratic defeat was due to a combination of both, but the deeper question is how much of each. Simply blaming Clinton or her campaign for the loss would clear the party's conscience, but it wouldn't explain Democrats' difficulties with certain constituencies. Working-class whites, for example, once a key constituency of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal Coalition, can now be more aptly described as a key element of the Republican base.

The second phase, candidate recruitment, is critical. While it is technically true that you can't beat someone with (literally) no one, there are plenty of nobodies, figuratively speaking, who get elected in wave elections. People on a lark or with delusions of grandeur file for an office, their party captures national momentum, and suddenly they're being sworn into Congress. Just walk down a corridor on Capitol Hill and you're sure to see a door with a name of someone who initially ran as a nobody.

But it is obviously better to have more than just having potted plants on the ballot. In a perfect world, you get someone who is qualified, appealing, and in tune with the public mood. Sometimes experienced candidates are best; at other times, outsiders have a better chance. Another relevant question is whether candidates who are strong primary candidates will stand up in the general election. Some moderates and establishment-oriented Democrats are concerned that Democrats will nominate a lot of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren devotees, not just in relatively liberal jurisdictions but also in constituencies that would prefer less-ideological candidates.

The House and Senate campaign committees for both sides, the two governors' associations, and the state-legislative campaign committees in each of the 50 states are busy recruiting now. The first filing deadlines generally begin in December with Illinois and Texas, the last ones occur during the summer of 2018. While a lot of candidates are self-starters and don't need recruiting, others have to be found and cajoled to run. One thing I have learned over

four decades of being in this business is that anyone who has to be convinced to run might not have the heart for it, and some big names who are past their primes can turn out to be lousy candidates.

More important is the political environment during the recruiting season. When the wind appears to be at the back of one party, it tends to have a better recruiting year. This is also a consideration when incumbents decide whether to run again. If the year looks to be tough for an incumbent's party, it can be an incentive to retire. But not always. I recall a senator who had been in office for several terms telling me that he would like to retire then but was worried that his party would not be able to hold his seat. He decided to run again and is still on the Hill after a couple more terms.

Right now, the wind seems to be favoring Democrats, which should make their recruiting and incumbent retention somewhat easier. It should be more difficult for Republicans. That may remain the case, but currents sometimes change. In 1981 and 1982, Democrats were still recoiling from Ronald Reagan's landslide, 10-point victory over President Carter, an election in which Republicans scored a net gain of 34 House and 12 Senate seats, gaining a majority in the upper chamber. Democrats entered the Reagan presidency in a full fetal position only to have a recession turn the tables. They picked up 26 House seats, and the GOP won four Senate races by the narrowest of margins, gaining a wash and averting a disaster.

So watch the political winds now, during this odd year. They are not determinative of what will happen in next year's midterm elections, but they will supply important clues.