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Surf's Up For a Wave Election



House Republicans were caught on the horns of a dilemma. If they didn't pass a bill that effectively repealed and replaced Obamacare, they would either look ineffectual or in defiance of their conservative base. But to pass a bill with no Democratic support in a narrowly divided House, they would need support of the vast majority of the conservative Freedom Caucus, which would mean a bill that would never survive in the Senate, where members have substantially more diverse constituencies.

Beyond those factors, they faced a potential backlash from Americans who either would be adversely affected by the bill or fear that they would. So the Republicans were forced to pick their poison: Either look incompetent or thumb their nose at their base. They chose to side with their base. Many moderate and swing-district Republicans hope that the Senate will substantially tone down the legislation and that the Freedom Caucus will feel pressured to go along with a much more measured bill after a joint Senate-House conference committee reconciles the two versions.

So now what? Since Inauguration Day, President Trump has had the lowest job-approval ratings of any newly elected president since the first "scientifically based" poll by George Gallup in 1936. More than anything else, midterm elections are referenda on the incumbent president. Obviously no one knows what is going to happen in next year's midterm elections, but analysts who have watched congressional elections for a long time are seeing signs that 2018 could be a wave election that flips control of the House to Democrats.

The late Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neill was famous for having said, "all politics is local." I would add an important caveat: "All politics is local, except when it's not." Roughly once a decade we see a tidal wave election, almost always at midterm, in which an invisible hand seems to boost candidates of one party and drag down candidates of the other. Candidates who normally win big end up winning by smaller margins. Lawmakers who usually have competitive races often get sucked away by the undertow. Districts that should be safe are no longer safe. Strong campaigns lose to weak campaigns, underfunded campaigns topple well-funded campaigns.

In years like 1994 and 2006, challengers who didn't get a dime from their party's House campaign committees won anyway. Waves also swept away the party in power in 1946, 1958, 1966, and 1974. In each of these midterm elections, the party in the White House lost at least 40 seats in the lower chamber and as many as 65 (in 2006 it was "just" 30 seats.) The biggest waves tend to occur when the presidency and majorities in both the House and Senate are in the hands of the same party.

It would be highly unlikely for Republicans to lose 40 or more seats. In many states, congressional-district boundaries were drawn in 2011 by Republican governors and state legislatures, and they were exceedingly generous to GOP lawmakers. Population patterns play an even bigger role. Democratic voters tend to be concentrated in urban areas and college towns while Republican voters are more efficiently allocated throughout the country.

Generally speaking, midterm electorates are older, whiter, more conservative, and more Republican than presidential electorates. But Republicans still can have bad midterms: President George W. Bush's second midterm election in 2006 was a horror show.

These factors are important and might well diminish the potential for large GOP losses next year, but they don't repeal the laws of political gravity. They simply mean that the kind of wave that in past decades might have resulted in 40- to 65-seat losses might end up as a 20- to 30-seat loss. The magic number in 2018 is 24. That would give the Democrats control of the House.

Of course, we don't know what President Trump's job-approval ratings will be in the fall of 2018. We don't know what the voter mood will be either, but right now the Democratic base seems highly energized while the Republican base is in the Slough of Despond. A big question is whether Trump voters will behave like Barack Obama voters. In 2008, a lot of fresh new voters came online to elect Obama, but in 2010, when his name was not on the ballot, they stayed home. When he was up for reelection in 2012, they turned up at the polls again, then didn't show up in 2014. No one needs to be reminded that Democrats had good years in 2008 and 2012, and horrific years in 2010 and 2014. Will the Trump voters who turned out in 2016 do so again when he's not on the ballot? Finally, there is the matter of incumbent retirements and candidate recruiting. There are rumors that a disproportionate number of Republican House members will retire while Democrats may stick around to see if they get back in power. Usually it's easier for an incumbent to hold onto a seat. And while a large influx of first-time Democratic candidates is emerging, Republicans who aspire to Congress may wait for a more propitious time to run.

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