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Democrats Take Heart: The GOP Is Sinking



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After last month's losses in the Georgia 6th District and South Carolina 5th District races, a narrative took hold on why the Democratic Party had whiffed in all four competitive special elections this year—it had no message, it had no leadership, and its most visible representative, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, had become a liability. Bottom line: Democrats were doomed to a poor showing in the 2018 midterms. “Our brand is worse than Trump,” Democratic Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio pronounced to The New York Times.

It seemed to matter little that Democrats never had much of a chance in the Kansas, Montana, and South Carolina contests. Only pressure (or shaming) from the party's liberal netroots pushed the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee to compete in these long-shot districts in the first place.

While the Democratic brand is certainly not sterling these days, polls consistently show that the party is viewed more favorably than Republicans and stratospherically better than President Trump.

The major polls don't test attitudes toward the parties often during the off-election years, but an April poll by NBC News and The Wall Street Journal found that 31 percent had a positive view of the Republican Party, 47 percent had a negative view, and 21 percent were neutral, for a net of minus-16 points.

The poll showed 34 percent holding positive views of Democrats, with 39 percent negative and 26 percent neutral, for a net of minus-5 points.

When NBC News and the Journal interviewed 765 registered voters June 17 to 20 and asked which party they preferred to control Congress after the next election, 50 percent favored Democrats, the highest share either party has received in nine years, while 42 percent preferred Republicans.

So it's pretty clear that while the image of Democrats is not exactly spectacular, the party is far better off than Republicans. The Democratic advantage is even more pronounced when the party's standing is compared to that of Trump, who had a minus-15 job approval rating in May and June NBC/WSJ polls.

What many people mean when they talk about the Democrats' leadership is the party's most prominent members on Capitol Hill, where the top three Democrats in the House are septuagenarians and where the new Senate leader, Chuck Schumer, is 66 and something less than a household name. Most of the trash talking is directed at Pelosi, 77, who has been the top Democrat in the House since 2003, when she took over for Dick Gephardt.

Ad tracking from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group shows that Pelosi was the target for 4,653 GOP

television spots during the Georgia special election, prompting many analysts to blame her for Jon Ossoff's loss and one Republican consultant to say that she was "the gift that keeps on giving." I think Ossoff's age (30), thin resume, and residence outside the district were bigger problems. But because he was essentially a cipher, it was easier to attack Pelosi, whose low standing among Republicans drew many to the polls.

Would House Democrats benefit from a new generation of leaders? Of course, but it's not at all clear who they might be and an intramural fight would likely be a distraction for the party. And who could raise even half the money that Pelosi does each cycle? I am an independent and a dyed-in-the-wool moderate, so I am closer philosophically to Minority Whip Steny Hoyer. But he couldn't begin to raise as much money, and certainly none of the younger members could. My hunch is that Pelosi feels an obligation to stick around and raise money to help her party win back its majority, and once that happens, she would be more than delighted to head back to San Francisco.

It would surely be better for Democrats if they were united behind a single leader and had a unified message. The reality, however, is that no party has a clear leader or message in its first year out of the White House. The Democrats' *raison d'être* is to oppose President Trump and the Republican majorities in the House and Senate. When minority parties have succeeded in midterm elections, it has been because voters were not happy with the people and party in power and decided to go with the alternative. This is the way American politics works. It might well be all that House Democrats need next year.