

The 2018 Election and Related Matters

by Phillip W. Weiss

Donald Trump has emerged as the most dominant politician in the United States today. Besides being the mass media's top star, he is driving the entire political discourse. He continues to set the agenda. Immigration, the economy, SCOTUS, taxes, national security, Russia, China, NATO, trade, you name it, all driven by Trump. Also, he is remaking the GOP. This from a business person with no prior political experience.

The Democrats are trying to reply to Trump, but in doing so they come off as angry and shrill and desperate to be heard, all of which is generating an image of a political party that is struggling to avoid becoming marginalized.

In June the Democrats accumulated political capital over the issue of children separation. They put Trump on the defensive. However, the Democrats soon began squandering their advantage when they called for the abolition of ICE. This gave Trump a great opportunity to regain the initiative, which is exactly what happened.

Finally, what remained of the Democrats' political capital disappeared with Maxine Waters' recent public comments which called into question the legitimacy of the Democratic Party as a mainstream political organization.

The only thing that could erode Trump's domination is a scandal so outrageous and offensive that it calls into question his fitness to govern. The Democrats have been searching for such a scandal, but so far to no avail.

Now, with all this established, can the Democrats gain control of the Congress? So far indicators are pointing to a “no” answer, but anything can happen. The electorate is fickle and political trends at the national level may be less relevant at the state and district level.

My prediction for the 2018 election: The GOP will retain control of the House and Senate. In the House the Democrats may gain 4 or 5 seats. In the Senate the GOP may gain 1 or 2 seats. However to this prediction must be added this disclaimer: between now and Election Day anything can happen to influence the results and render all predictions moot.

Further evidence of Trump's political domination can be found in how he is going about selecting a new justice for the SCOTUS. He is virtually marginalizing the Democrats who can only reply with alarmist and obstructionist rhetoric.

Alarmist rhetoric drives voters away – with one exception: the issue of law and order. The Democrats forfeited this issue to the GOP a long time ago and Trump now routinely uses it to “sound the alarm” against the Democrats.

Nevertheless one factor that is to the Democrats' advantage is the status of the American electorate. The American electorate is so divided along racial, ethnic, economic, gender and generational lines that many different kinds of winning coalitions are possible.

Although the Democrats forfeited the issue of the economy to the GOP a long time ago, they still can use social issues as a basis for building a politically competitive coalition. Presently, the number one social issue is immigration.

The results of the 2018 elections could decide which party owns the issue of immigration.

On this issue, both parties have staked out positions so diametrically opposed that it provides the voters with a clear choice. Choice 1: open borders, meaning letting people enter without visas. Choice 2: closed borders, meaning letting people enter only after being issued a visa.

Immigration has emerged as the decisive issue for 2018 because of one person: Donald Trump. From the moment he started his campaign in 2015 he has made immigration his flagship issue. He is directly challenging the Democrats on an issue they have owned for decades. This has created huge problems for the Democrats who are now forced to defend their position.

The Democrats' defense of their position can be summarized as follows: we embrace all newcomers to the US, including those who enter without papers. Given the major divisions within the American electorate, that defense could resonate with enough voters from different groups to provide the Democrats with sufficient political support to win an election. However, that same defense also leaves them vulnerable to charges of being anti law and order and weak on crime, a vulnerability that Trump is aggressively exploiting and using to accumulate political capital.

The 2018 elections will be a de facto referendum on where the American voters are on the issue of immigration. The outcome could shape American politics for years to come.

Glossary of terms:

Owning an issue: when a party can build or claim rock solid support at the exclusion of all other parties around an issue. E.g., the GOP owns the issue of national defense; the Democrats own the issue of women's rights.

Coalition of voters: competing blocks of voters united by one or more issues. E.g., white males across economic lines voting for Trump; African-Americans and so-called millennials voting for H. R. Clinton.

Political capital: public support for an issue which a political party can “cash in” to shape public policy without losing voters. E.g., GOP and lower taxes; Democrats and abortion rights.¹

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¹ Other definitions of “political capital” can be found online at <http://marketbusinessnews.com/financial-glossary/political-capital-definition-meaning/> and http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/ballot_box/2004/11/americas_new_political_capital.html. The term “political capital” was popularized by President George W. Bush after the 2004 presidential election.