

WORLD

How Democrats defied the odds

The Upshot

BY NATE COHN

It wasn't necessarily the election of either party's dreams. The Democrats are poised to gain around 35 seats after voting this week. Republicans seem likely to gain a few seats in the Senate, and they triumphed in some high-profile governor's races.

But Democrats faced formidable structural disadvantages, unlike any in recent memory. Take those into account and 2018 looks like a wave election, like the ones that last flipped the House in 2010 and 2006.

In the House, where the Democrats had their strongest showing, it's impressive that they managed to fare as well as they did. In a sense, Republicans had been evacuated to high ground, away from the beach.

At the beginning of the cycle, only nine Republicans represented districts that had tilted Democratic in the previous two presidential elections. Even in a wave election, these are usually the only incumbents who are standing on the beach with a greater than 50 percent chance to lose.

There were 24 such Republicans in 2006 and 67 such Democrats in 2010.

Democrats had so few opportunities because of partisan gerrymandering and the tendency for the party to win by lopsided (and thus inefficient) margins in urban areas. It gave Republicans a chance to survive a hostile national political climate that would have normally doomed a party. The Democratic geographic disadvantage was even more significant in the Senate this cycle. There, Democrats were defending 10 seats in states carried by the president in the 2016 election, including five that he won by at least 18 points.

As a whole, the House Democratic candidates overcame all of these disadvantages. They are on track to win more seats than Democrats did in 2006, with far fewer opportunities. They even managed to win more seats in heavily Republican districts than the Republicans managed to win in heavily Democratic districts in 2010.

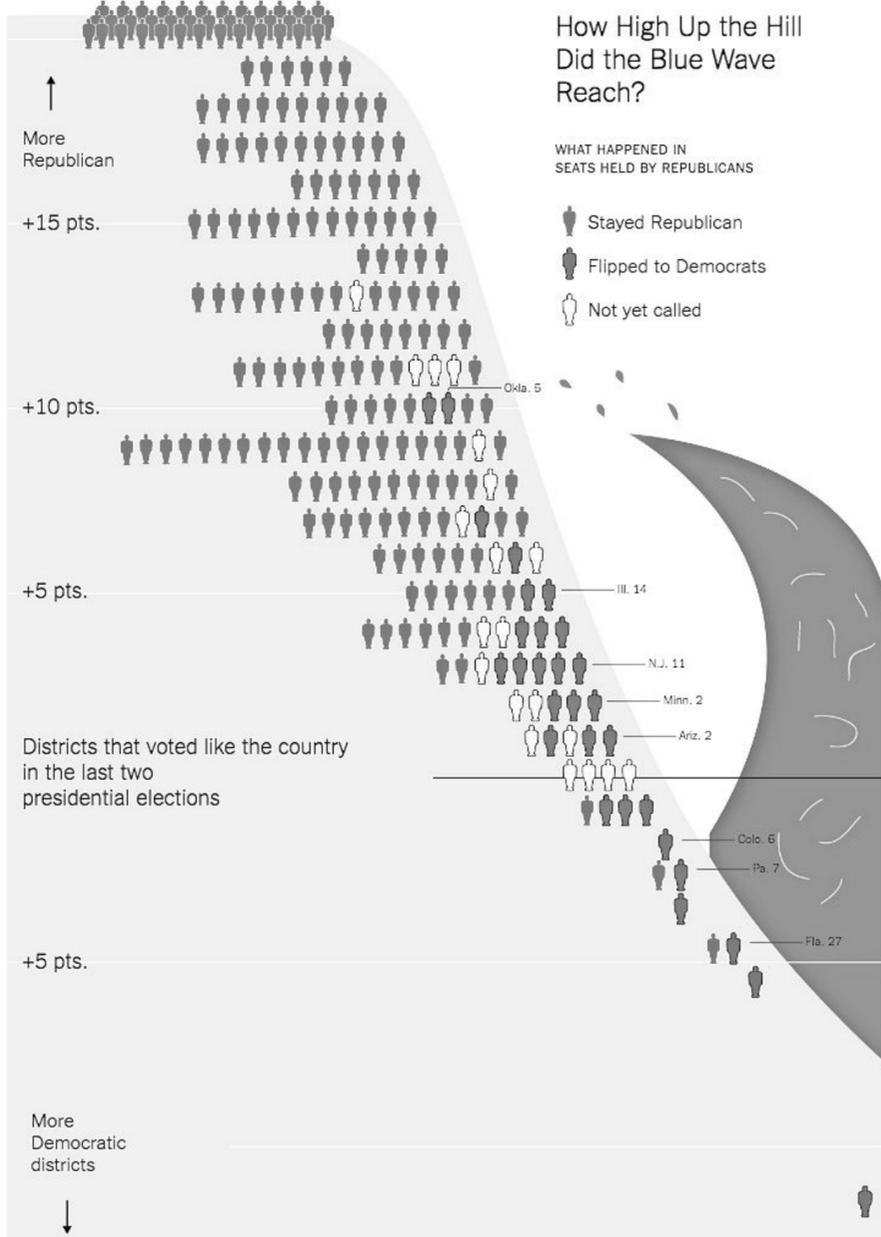
Democrats pulled it off with an exceptionally deep and well-funded class of recruits that let the party put a very long list of districts into play. In prior years, the party in power wouldn't have even needed to vigorously contest many of these races.

This year, Republicans generally succeeded in recruiting high-performing candidates to Senate contests in Arizona, Florida and North Dakota, even in a national political environment that sent House Republicans for the doors.

Democratic House candidates were helped by the declining value of incumbency, which made it harder for Republicans to outrun disapproval of the president.

The same forces, however, made it harder for Democratic senators to run as far ahead of the national party as they had in the past, and often their states had shifted far to the right since their last election six years ago. In general, the split decision between the House and the Senate can be attributed mainly to the combination of the growing relationship between presidential vote and congressional vote and the declining value of incumbency.

The apparent loss of Senator Bill Nelson, a Democrat in Florida, in particular,



is not consistent with a typical wave election result. But this is the main driver of the difference between the results in the two chambers.

The Democratic Party gained a majority in the House with an exceptionally deep and well-funded class of recruits.

Democrats benefited from a huge number of Republican retirements, and they have flipped eight of those seats so far. Many retirements were inevitable, but the number — the highest since

1992, a redistricting year — was not. Democrats also benefited from a string of court decisions that eroded or outright eliminated Republican gerrymanders in Florida, North Carolina, Virginia and, most recently, Pennsylvania.

It is hard to measure the accumulated effect of these decisions. But it could have easily represented the Democratic margin of victory in Virginia's Seventh District and in Pennsylvania's Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and 17th. That's atop Democratic gains already realized in 2016 in Florida and Virginia.

The Democratic disadvantage in the Senate isn't going anywhere. State lines aren't about to be redrawn, after all, and

Hillary Clinton won just 19 states in 2016 while winning the national popular vote.

Perhaps Democrats still would have won the House without redistricting efforts and with a more typical number of Republican retirements. We still don't know the full picture because the counting has not been completed. But Democrats are likely to win the national popular vote in this election by seven to eight points once late votes — which typically lean Democratic — are counted.

That would be a slightly larger margin than Republicans achieved in 1994 or 2010. It would be about the same as the Democratic advantage in 2006. It would be, in a word, a wave.

Political realignment shows a chasm in U.S.

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should be urgently concerned about the collapse of the longstanding political alliance between culturally conservative rural voters and high-income suburbanites who are focused on the economy and issues like education and child care.

"We've been on a steady trend losing suburbanites, losing college-educated women, and it's time for the Republican Party to adopt a suburban agenda," Mr. Cantor said.

Mr. Cantor's home state, Virginia, offered a stark example of the quickening march of cul-de-sac-dwelling professionals toward the Democratic Party. Democrats gained three House seats in the state, including Mr. Cantor's old district, on the strength of these voters. Republicans faced a humiliating loss in Virginia's election for the Senate, after a Trump-style racial provocateur won the party's nomination.

The most optimistic Democrats regarded the list of House victories as a road map to a grander national restoration in the 2020 presidential election. Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, in an interview, also held up Democratic wins for governorships in Colorado, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico and Wisconsin to argue that the party's path back to 270 Electoral College votes had come into focus on Tuesday.

"Look at the Southwest and Midwest — in a presidential, that's what we're going to need," Mr. Emanuel said.

Not every Democrat was so ebullient in the aftermath of Tuesday's elections. Former Gov. Tom Vilsack of Iowa, who served as agriculture secretary in the Obama administration, complained bitterly about his party's worsening struggles with rural voters. "It's so frustrating," said Mr. Vilsack, who has been pleading with Democrats to aggressively court the Farm Belt. "You pick out the interest group that's part of our base and we always have a message for all of those folks, but we don't do the same thing for folks in rural places."

Mr. Trump insisted in a rollicking and often hostile news conference on Wednesday that he was not at all concerned about his new political fragility, claiming that his party had enjoyed a "great victory" on Tuesday. He boasted that in the races he cared about most — in the states he frequented most in the campaign's final days — Republicans largely won.

And win they did. For Democrats like Senator Claire McCaskill, a Missouri moderate, the rightward shift of rural America coincided with her own party's tilt to the left, with fatal consequences. A political survivor who repeatedly escaped defeat over a decades-long career, Ms. McCaskill lost her bid for re-election on Tuesday to Josh Hawley, a Republican who happily parroted Mr. Trump and made the nomination of Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh the centerpiece of his campaign.

"The further you get from metropolitan areas, the more powerful Donald Trump is and the more allegiance there is to whatever he says and does," said Ms. McCaskill, who only 12 years ago won her seat in the Senate by carrying a number of rural counties.

Ms. McCaskill was not the only Democrat felled by Mr. Trump's barnstorming. Her Senate colleagues Joe Donnelly of Indiana and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota were also swept out of office, and a number of their colleagues won by far

closer margins than was expected. In every case, the results came about for the same reasons: Working-class white voters abandoned their ancestral party.

In states like hers, Ms. McCaskill said, the president's inflammatory appeals to division and fear were ubiquitous, in large part because of Fox News, the conservative television broadcaster. She recounted walking into restaurants in every corner of Missouri, a Republican-leaning red state, and invariably seeing the channel airing footage of the Central American migrant caravans that Mr. Trump demonized.

Mindful of her party's delicate position, Ms. McCaskill said she was also concerned about the implications of a divided capital. "If this turns into, 'the House investigates Trump and Trump turns the House into his foil,' nothing is going to get done, and that's not going to help us," she said.

Perhaps most ominous for Democrats on Tuesday were the election results in Florida — the only diverse and densely populated swing state in which Mr. Trump's party appeared to win election for both Senate and governor.



Senator Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, lost as rural voters switched allegiance.

To the shock of national Democratic leaders, Senator Bill Nelson was in a re-election battle against Gov. Rick Scott that appeared headed for a recount, while Andrew Gillum, the liberal mayor of Tallahassee, was defeated by the former congressman Ron DeSantis in his bid for governor despite leading in most every poll during the general election.

Just as Mr. Trump did two years ago there, Mr. Scott and Mr. DeSantis rolled up wide margins in the state's rural reaches and retirement hubs that lean conservative, and won just enough Hispanic voters to offset their losses with African-Americans and suburbanites.

Those results reinforced for Democrats that there is a limit to the inroads they can make in historically Republican communities. And some of the Democratic lawmakers who were most essential to securing the House majority warned that the party could not take its gains in the suburbs for granted.

Representative Stephanie Murphy, a Democratic moderate from Florida, said the party would have to manage its House majority carefully to cement its emerging coalition. Having won a second term Tuesday in a purple district — one that is neither reliably conservative nor liberal — around Orlando, Ms. Murphy said the less-ideological voters who abound in districts like hers were open to electing Democrats they viewed as reasonable and public-minded.

When the new Congress is sworn in, in January, Ms. Murphy said, Democrats will not "veer as far left as the Republicans wanted voters to believe."

Where trade war hits home, voters still stand by Republicans

WASHINGTON

BY GLENN THRUSH AND ALAN RAPPEPORT

Voters in Republican-leaning states largely shrugged off concerns about the economic effect of President Trump's global trade war, throwing their support behind the party's candidates who embraced the administration's protectionist agenda despite attempts by Democrats to turn it into a wedge issue.

In a series of high-stakes Senate races in states exposed to Mr. Trump's tit-for-tat tariffs, voters ousted three incumbent Democrats in the elections this week who tried, in varying degrees, to tie their Republican opponents to the president's tariffs on steel, aluminum and Chinese goods. Those tariffs have provoked retaliatory levies on agricultural and industrial products in Republican strongholds.

Democrats tried to seize on the issue, to little effect. Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota ran ads accusing her opponent, Representative Kevin Cramer, of failing to protect farmers from China's retaliation — remarking that her state needed Mr. Trump's help "like a cow needs a hamburger." Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri toured a nail company that said it was going to go out of business as a result of steel and aluminum tariffs. Senator Joe Donnelly of Indiana said the tariffs would cause "lasting harm" for farmers.

All of them lost, and badly. Mr. Cramer, who mildly criticized the tariffs but praised Mr. Trump's overall approach, beat Ms. Heitkamp by nearly 11 points.

Josh Hawley, who unseated Ms. McCaskill, and Mike Braun, who trounced Mr. Donnelly by nearly 10 points, did not

back away from their support for the tariffs.

"Senator McCaskill thought she could drive a wedge between Josh and the ag community. It didn't work," said Kyle Plotkin, Mr. Hawley's campaign manager, referring to the agricultural community.

In many ways, the races were a test of whether Mr. Trump's strategy of emphasizing short-term pain for long-term gain would resonate with parts of the country battered by, or hostile to, globalization.

"People are willing to deal with some short-term pain to serve a long-term goal," said Eric Branstad, a former administration official in the Commerce Department who ran Mr. Trump's campaign in Iowa two years ago. "The fact that Trump concluded a deal with Canada and Mexico gave people a sense that things were moving in the right direction," Mr. Branstad said. "There's also the trust factor for him here."

Republicans lost two House seats in Iowa, which has also been hit by retaliatory tariffs on soybeans, pigs and other agricultural products. But those losses had less to do with trade than with suburban gains by Democrats in more affluent and educated areas adjacent to midsize cities like Des Moines and Davenport. In North Dakota, where soybean farmers have struggled with China's retaliatory tariffs, 93 percent of Republican voters supported the president's positions on trade, about the national average for Republicans, according to exit polls from CNN.

Nationally, less than a third of all voters said that Mr. Trump's trade policies had hurt them. It is impossible to quantify the influence of the president's trade policies, especially in industrial states like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan, in which support for Democrats



A soybean farmer in Salina, Kan. China has imposed retaliatory tariffs on soybeans, but the political consequence was barely detectable in some states.

surged significantly. Democratic consultants in those states said the tariffs contributed to a general anti-Trump sentiment but were not a central issue in the midterm elections.

An analysis by The New York Times of election results and economic data showed that Mr. Trump's party continued to perform strongly in agriculture-rich House districts — which helped create a rural firewall that largely limited the party's losses to suburban areas. Republicans held onto a large majority of the 25 districts that are the most dependent on agricultural jobs.

Mr. Trump's overall popularity in rural America seems to be growing — and it seems to have been stoked by the tactic, employed by China and other trading partners, of targeting retaliatory tar-

iffs at Trump-friendly districts.

"I think our pain definitely has a purpose," said Doug Schroeder, a corn and soybean farmer from Mahomet, Ill., a district that voted Republican on Tuesday. "I don't think the balance of trade with China has been fair for a long time. Someone needed to stand up and do something."

In Washington State's Fourth Congressional District, which includes much of the state's wine-producing region, Representative Dan Newhouse, the Republican incumbent, defeated his challenger by 28 points on Tuesday. Two years ago, in a far more Republican-friendly environment over all, Mr. Newhouse won by just 16 points.

The expansion of the Republican majority in the Senate, and the failure of the

tariffs to ignite a political brush fire, is likely to embolden Mr. Trump as he contemplates additional tariffs on all Chinese imports before he meets with President Xi Jinping of China this month in Buenos Aires.

Mr. Trump, speaking on Wednesday at a White House news conference, signaled he would continue his pugilistic approach to trade. Mr. Trump heralded

"People are willing to deal with some short-term pain to serve a long-term goal."

the revised North American Free Trade Agreement, which still needs to be approved by Congress and expressed hope that Democrats, who now control the House, will help shepherd it through. He boasted that tariffs on China were filling the coffers at the Treasury Department.

And he reiterated his threat to impose tariffs on automobiles from countries that do not agree to trade deals that benefit the United States, suggesting that tariffs on Japanese cars could soon be in store. "Say hello to Shinzo," Mr. Trump told a Japanese reporter, referring to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan. "I'm sure he's happy about tariffs on his cars."

Still, the trade issue, so central to Mr. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and appeal to voters in the Midwest, was little more than background noise in states like Indiana and Missouri, overshadowed by the fierce and polarizing debates over health care, immigration and Mr. Trump himself. And even in North Dakota, where farmers are reporting a sharp decrease in Chinese demand for soybeans, the political consequence was barely detectable.

Mr. Trump, who authorized a \$12 bil-

lion bailout in July for farmers hit by China's tariffs, made a point of playing down his own responsibility for the pain felt by local businesses and farms, repeatedly placing the blame on Beijing.

In September, a staff member for a Republican congressional candidate in Iowa contacted the White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, with word that The Des Moines Register was running a paid supplement from a Chinese state-run news organization trying to undercut support for Mr. Trump among Iowans. Days later, at the United Nations, Mr. Trump used the paper to accuse China of "trying to meddle in our elections" — a charge Beijing vehemently denied.

"China was very attuned to our internal politics, and they tried to maximize the angst that was felt in some of these Trump areas, but they clearly missed the mark," said Joseph Parilla, a fellow at the Brookings Institution who has analyzed the patterns of retaliatory tariffs in Republican-leaning states.

"The thought that American voters pick a candidate based on how they position themselves on the issues," he added. "They didn't realize that a person's partisan affiliation determines their positions, even when the policy directly impacts them, not vice versa."

Joshua Bolten, the chief executive of the Business Roundtable, said on Wednesday that he was still hopeful that Mr. Trump would pursue a more "co-operative" trade agenda in the second half of his term.

"What the business community will be looking for over the next two years of the Trump Administration is a lessening of the conflict with our good friends, allies and trading partners," he said.

Binyamin Appelbaum and Jim Tankersley contributed reporting.