

Opinion

U.S. Democrats need a rural strategy

Without a smarter approach to rural America, liberals will be stuck in the minority for a long time.

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Contributing Writer

As expected, the reality produced by Tuesday's results will be a split Congress, with Democrats running the House of Representatives and Republicans in charge of the Senate. Republicans will expand their Senate majority from the current 51-49 to as much as 54-46, pending the outcomes of a few races that as I write are still too close to call, but in which Republicans hold slim leads.

Elected officials of both bodies will pay lip service to the idea of working together, and some of the more Panglossian pundits will express the hope that even this divided Congress will produce a deal on infrastructure spending or prescription drug prices. I guess maybe, but let's be realistic. What seems more likely is not only lack of

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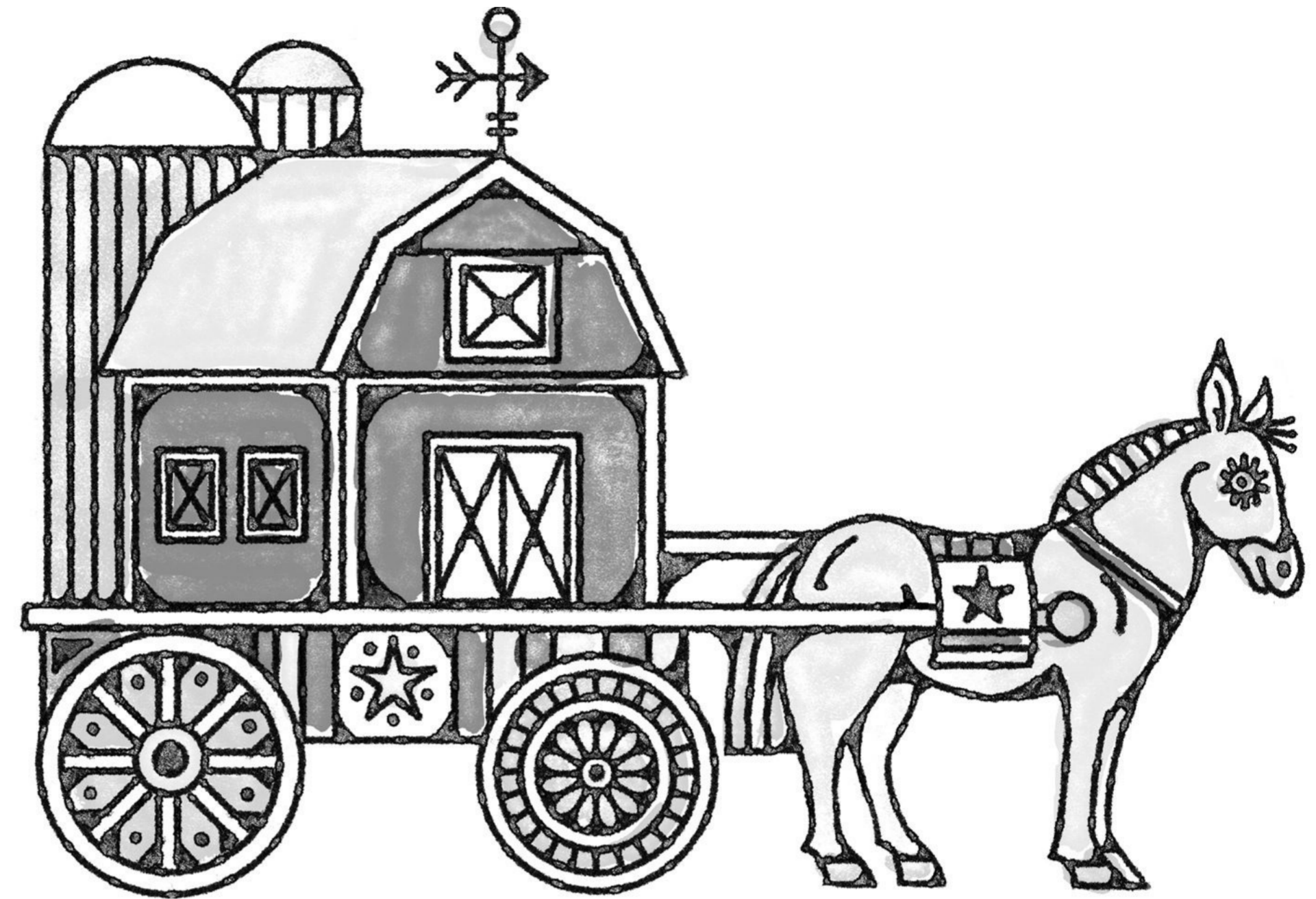
cooperation but also active warfare between the two bodies. House Democrats will pass some progressive legislation, as they should, to show the nation their priorities heading into the next presidential election. But of course these bills will go nowhere in the Senate. If by some miracle the two

chambers do manage to pass similar versions of a bill, the conference committee deliberations will be a food fight.

So this is what we can expect. Two more years of continuing resolutions and possible government shutdowns. And if the Republicans do increase their majority to 54, it seems entirely possible that the Democrats might not recapture the majority there for a very long time indeed.

I woke up Wednesday morning and, as people like me are wont to do, glanced over the Senate seats that will be up for re-election in 2020. On paper, they look better for the Democrats. This year, the Democrats were defending 26 seats, and the Republicans just nine. The Democrats' 26 included 10 incumbents in states that President Trump carried. In 2020, it's the Republicans who'll be defending a majority of the seats — 22 out of 33.

That sounds hopeful, if you're a Democrat. But if you look at the map, you see that most of the Republican-held seats are in states that would elect a dog before they'd elect a Democrat. Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Nebraska, Idaho, Wyoming — you get the picture. All told, there are about 14 states where the idea of electing a Democrat to the



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Senate is all but inconceivable, and another three or four where it's perhaps not inconceivable but where the stars would need to align just so. The numbers for comparably Democratic states are perhaps 12 and I think zero.

Specifically with respect to 2020, if you had to ponder five possible pickups that would give the Democrats control, here are the states and senators on whom the Democrats need to focus: Susan Collins of Maine; first-termer Joni Ernst of Iowa; Thom Tillis of North Carolina, another first-termer; Cory Gardner of Colorado, a third first-termer; Jon Kyl of Arizona; and I suppose David Perdue of Georgia, or maybe John Cornyn of Texas, should the exciting Beto O'Rourke decide to take him on.

From that list, I trust you can see the problem. If Democrats are having to count on North Carolina (where the party last elected a senator in 2008) and Georgia (2000) and Arizona (1988), they're barking up an awfully tall tree.

What can they do? People discuss long-term — and long-shot — fixes, like adding the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico as states the first chance they get. At an even greater extreme, maybe someday we should do to the Senate what Britain did to the House of Lords in 1911 and strip it of real lawmaking power. That may sound crazy, but something must be done. On Tuesday, according to *The Times*, Democratic Senate candidates garnered 45 million votes, and Republicans just 33 million (57 percent to 42 percent). Yet, the

Republicans will gain perhaps three seats. That is not democracy.

In the nearer term, Democrats simply must find, field and finance candidates who can win statewide in purple states. I don't mean centrists — look at Phil Bredesen in Tennessee, who got clobbered. I mean candidates who can first excite base voters, because they must do that to be competitive, but who can also go out and get some votes in parts of these states where Democrats normally get crushed.

To do this they need a rural policy — doing something real about the opioid crisis, for starters. Emphasizing a smart rural broadband program. Tom Vilsack, a former Democratic governor of Iowa who went on to be secretary of agriculture under President Barack

Obama, has outlined a “four-pillar” rural and agricultural program that Democrats could adopt, including an emphasis on exports, economic diversification and conservation. They should take heed.

I'm tired of watching election-night returns and seeing dots of blue in oceans of red. Democrats won't make huge dents in those oceans, even with a solid rural strategy, but remember — they don't need to. As close as many elections are these days, small dents will do just fine. But unless Democrats make them, they may not hold the gavels in the Senate for quite some time.

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It's time for online voting in America

Using blockchain technology, online voting could boost voter participation and help restore the public's trust in the electoral process and democracy.

Alex Tapscott

Messing with polling stations is one of the most common voter suppression tactics. Across the United States, polling stations have been closed in minority neighborhoods, had their locations changed from election to election, and have been kept understaffed, or inaccessible, or ill-equipped, so that voters must stand in line for hours.

These tactics work to lower voter turnout and undermine confidence in the electoral process. In the 2016 election, only 55.4 percent of eligible voters actually voted — one of the lowest turnouts in two decades. In the same year, only 29 percent of Americans were very confident that the ballots cast nationwide would be counted as intended, and only two-thirds of Americans were very confident that their own ballot would be counted as intended.

America's democracy depends on addressing these vulnerabilities. The more that eligible voters participate in elections and the more transparent and durable the process, the more legitimate the outcome. Fortunately, a simple solution to the problem exists, if we allow citizens to vote online using their smartphone or home computer.

Online voting isn't a silver bullet. It wouldn't thwart political disinformation campaigns that rely on false tweets or bogus Facebook pages, and it wouldn't be a solution to the problems presented by gerrymandering. However, done properly, online voting could boost voter participation, avoid administrative errors at polling stations, and help restore the public's trust in the electoral process and democracy.

Until now, the internet as we know it has generally failed to meet basic voting system requirements: A vote must be cast and counted for the intended candidate, counted only once, remain anonymous, and be verifiable after the fact, even amid a power outage.

The key weakness of early online voting systems was the inability to

solve what cryptographers called the “double spend problem.” When we send a file on the internet, we're actually sending a copy of that file; the original remains in our possession. This is acceptable for sharing information but unacceptable for recording votes in elections. The possibility that individuals could cast their ballots multiple times for a candidate made these systems useless — just as vulnerable as paper ballot systems. Points of failure included susceptibility to hackers, coding bugs, and human error. With enough resources, any rogue could “stuff” a digital ballot box with illegitimate votes.

The good news is that building a workable, scalable, and inclusive online voting system is now possible, thanks to blockchain technologies. A blockchain is a peer-to-peer network for exchanging anything of value, from stocks, money, intellectual property, and, yes, votes. In a blockchain-based system, public trust in the voting process is achieved not by faith in one single institution, but through cryptography, code, and collaboration among citizens, government agencies, and other stakeholders.

Traditionally in elections, trust is concentrated in the hands of state and federal agencies and other civic institutions, which are prone to hacking, fraud, or human error (think the Democratic National Committee, the Election Assistance Commission, or the California Department of Motor Vehicles). On a blockchain, a distributed network of computers works to verify transactions, with batches of them ordered and recorded in blocks. Each block is linked cryptographically to the preceding block, forming a secure chain or ledger that anyone in the network can see but no single entity can hack or manipulate.

An attacker who wanted to spend the same dollar twice or cast the same vote twice would need to take command of 51% of the computers in the network simultaneously and rewrite the entire history of each dollar or vote on the blockchain in a short time frame, which is exceedingly difficult. Since the network is widely distributed, it could



People lined up for early voting in the midterm election in Atlanta.

survive a natural disaster or an attack on critical infrastructure. Thus, blockchain prevents double-spending, enabling us to run secure, trustworthy online transactions including voting.

In elections run on blockchains, citizens use digital voter IDs to prove who they are. Each digital ID is unique to each person, cryptographically secured with a private key (a unique password) on the person's device, and made up of multiple data points, or factors: proofs of residence and citizenship, biometric data, and voter registration, to name a few. Citizens open their app with their thumbprints or retinal scans and then cast their vote with their private key. The more data points used to create the digital ID, the harder the identity is to replicate and hack. Though voter registration is still required in most states, a robust multi-factor voter ID could eventually replace the registration altogether, as the combination of many data points would make it highly reliable.

As citizens, we can trust the outcome of such a voting system: voters can check the blockchain to verify that their vote was counted correctly, candidates can trust the vote count and election

officials can verify and audit the results. Because the system is decentralized, no government or hacker can change the results without immediate detection.

Hackers could still attempt to steal votes — but they'd have to do so one voter at a time, since there is no centralized database to hack — and they couldn't recast those votes without the corresponding secure voter ID. And, because of the clear chain of custody, citizens could prove that their voting tokens had been stolen. The downside of voting over a blockchain is limited to a delay in the process; to address this, governments could grant each citizen a backup voting token as an added precaution.

Blockchain voting achieves privacy for the individual and improves transparency for the system as a whole. Voting systems will be less costly, more efficient, and more accessible while eliminating most, if not all, opportunities for suppression, fraud, or sham charges of fraud. To be fully inclusive and ensure that citizens who lack internet access can still vote, paper ballots can remain an alternative.

Several start-ups such as Follow My Vote and Votatz are developing blockchain-based solutions for online

voting. At the Blockchain Research Institute, we studied the Cleveland-based Votem. Its clients, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and the National Radio Hall of Fame, deployed Votem's mobile voting applications successfully in selecting inductees. Votem authenticated each voter's identity, provided a chain of custody, and proved itself fast, secure, auditable, and convenient.

Absentee ballots offer a perfect test for blockchain-based mobile voting in government. This is no small matter: Hundreds of thousands of eligible voters live or serve overseas every election, and they face high hurdles to democratic participation. They must remember to vote early, because tens of thousands of absentee ballots arrive too late to be counted. Concerns over security and anonymity decrease online submissions, even when they're available.

Online voting is not without challenges: Technical standards must be consistent across jurisdictions, and software and hardware would need to be audited regularly. The early days of blockchain-based voting would have growing pains, and election boards would need to test solutions at local and state levels before a national rollout.

West Virginia built a mobile voting app for absentee voters in the midterm elections. West Virginians serving in the military and their families cast their ballots through a blockchain-based app on their phone. This makes voting much easier, boosts the trust voters have in the security of the process, and reduces the number of rejected ballots.

There is no shortage of politicians in power who benefit from the inaccessibility, insecurity, or lack of public faith in the electoral process. They have every reason to cast doubt upon, or outright oppose, an improvement in the way elections are run. But with the benefits of blockchain-based online voting so clear, citizens should insist that voters' interests come first.

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