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**Now We Face 2016!**

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[DECEMBER 18, 2014 ISSUE](http://www.nybooks.com/issues/2014/dec/18/)

In late October, the true extent of the disaster that awaited the Democrats began to come into sharp focus. Republican Joni Ernst started pulling away from her Democratic opponent in the Iowa Senate race, one the Democrats needed desperately to win. Some other states that had once seemed as if they could be close were increasingly written off. All the statistical experts from Nate Silver on down jacked up their “X percent chance the Republicans will take the Senate” predictions from 63 or so to 65, 70, 73.

[](http://www.nybooks.com/galleries/james-ferguson-illustrator/2014/dec/18/mitch-mcconnell/)Mitch McConnell; drawing by James Ferguson

In the face of all this, Democratic insiders—the kind who are so inside that they’re already thinking about the next election before the current one has even been held—took comfort in the fact that all this damage could be reversed in 2016. In that election, the Republicans—by dint of having had such a banner year in 2010, when they elected senators from states that lean or simply are blue—will have to defend twenty-four Senate seats, and the Democrats just ten. Also, since 2016 is a presidential year, the Democratic base voters who so aggressively stayed home on November 4 will presumably come to the polls, making for a more Democratic-leaning electorate.

So this was the theory. But now, with Republicans headed toward perhaps a fifty-four-seat majority in the Senate, I wonder. The “Senate will flip back” scenario was predicated, I think, in most observers’ minds, on the Republicans possessing, say, fifty-two Senate seats. That would mean the Democrats would need to win only three seats held by Republicans, and three seems possible. Ron Johnson in Wisconsin, Mark Kirk in Illinois, and perhaps Kelly Ayotte in New Hampshire—all first-termers—seem vulnerable if, say, Hillary Clinton is sweeping those states.

But if the GOP captures fifty-four seats—with the expected defeat of Mary Landrieu in Louisiana in December’s runoff[1](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fn-1)—then the Democrats would need a net gain of five seats next time. That’s a bigger hill to climb. Pennsylvania Republican Pat Toomey is, like the three aforementioned, in his first term. Iowa and Florida might present openings. But winning five of those six seems to me a long shot for the Democrats—it would require the kind of “wave election” we don’t usually have these days in presidential years. (By the way, we can be sure that Hillary Clinton has thought of all this, and we can wonder whether it has made the prospect of a White House run any less attractive to her.)

So it may well be the case that the Republicans have built themselves an impregnable Senate majority for the time being. And in the House of Representatives, the GOPmajority appears to be solid at least until the next redistricting, which is far off in 2022.

At the same time, nothing that happened in this election would seem to threaten what has become a built-in Democratic advantage at the presidential level. Adding up the states that Democrats have won in at least five of the last six presidential elections yields 257 Electoral College votes, while doing roughly the same for Republicans brings them to just 206.[2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/" \l "fn-2) This leaves the five states, totaling seventy-five electoral votes, that for presidential purposes are truly purple: Florida, Ohio, Virginia, Colorado, and Nevada. Merely winning Virginia’s thirteen electoral votes, while losing the other four states, would still give Democrats the needed 270 votes.

Obviously, none of this amounts to a guarantee. But the point is that the Democrats have many more seemingly workable paths to 270 electoral votes, and thus the White House, than the Republicans do. But the Republicans seem to have as strong a hold on their congressional majorities. And so here we are, entering the twilight of the Barack Obama era, which opened with some observers touting a certain Democratic realignment and with millions of liberal hearts pulsating with hope. Now it is ending with our partisan divide seemingly institutionalized into a presidency that will likely amount to a Democratic branch of government and Congress a likely Republican branch. It is not a likely prospect for agreement on changing the country for the better.

The parties, of course, know all this, and the boiler-room types at both parties’ national headquarters devote their days to thinking about how to break the deadlock. The Democrats’ challenge has chiefly to do with how to compete in midterm elections, both in crafting a convincing message and in getting their core voters to come to the polls (the two are of course related).

It must be said that the Democrats’ main problem in this election was economic. While many indicators are positive, wages in the middle are flat. In fact, median household income was lower in 2012 ($51,017) than it was in 2008 ($53,644), not a record that would inspire workers to vote.

Nevertheless, the Democrats’ midterm message dilemma has to do with more than wages and is one of long standing. During the last quarter-century, there have been only two midterm elections in which they outperformed expectations, 1998 and 2006. But even in those elections, the party had no message to speak of. Democrats did well in 1998 because the Republicans were impeaching Bill Clinton, and Clinton’s more ardent voters came out to vote in much larger numbers than the preelection polls had suggested. In 2006, when the party recaptured the House and Senate, George W. Bush was so unpopular that all the Democrats had to do was say “We’re not him.” (In fairness, the Democrats were particularly effective in recruiting candidates that year. They were able, to take only one example, to recruit Jim Webb to run in Virginia.)

In contrast, the Republicans have been much better at figuring out how to make their voters feel that something big is at stake in the off years. In 1994, by means of the Contract with America, they “nationalized” the election, presenting a list of ten matters they’d take up if voters gave them the House, including a balanced budget requirement, tax cuts, and reform of Social Security and welfare. In 2002, Bush put an unusual amount of personal time and effort into campaigning, and his party gained seats in an off-year election, a rare accomplishment. In 2010, the Tea Party appeared, lending a name and a kind of ideological coherence to all the rage that was present in the southern and western parts of the country, rage in no small part at having a black man in the White House, according to some polls. Republicans are better at midterm electioneering.

The main reason for this is that the GOP is more ideologically homogeneous. The Republicans have their fissures too, which these days mostly separate the conservatives from the radicals, rather than, as in the post–World War II period, moderates from conservatives. But most of those differences are of degree. The conservatives want to cut spending; the radicals want to cut it deeper and more quickly. They both see most taxes for nonmilitary purposes as illegitimate appropriations of their hard-earned money. In general the GOP functions today more like a party in a parliamentary system, with the internal discipline that implies.

Also, the Republicans are unafraid of being who they are. They use the word “conservative” with exuberance; they constantly attack the federal government, or just “government”—except for their almost unanimous reluctance to vote for such matters as surveillance reform, which they blocked on November 18. All this makes it easier for them to craft a message and maintain a “brand,” to use the currently pervasive word, that can carry over from election to election.

The Democrats, on the other hand, are more ideologically disparate; there are serious divisions within the Democratic coalition on entitlements, trade, and other issues. In addition Democrats run from the word “liberal” (these days, many now even run from “progressive,” the supposedly less offensive substitute word they started using in the 1990s), and they are often terrified of defending government.

And finally, if the Republicans are a parliamentary party, the Democrats are increasingly the polar opposite—a party in which it is understood and accepted, indeed to a fault, that congressional legislators are individual actors who must do whatever it is they think they need to do to save their own necks. This has long been true, but it’s grown much worse in the Obama years as red-state and swing-state Democrats, fearful of their constituents’ wrath, sprint away from their party.

Thus, all of the red-state Democratic Senate candidates had to, or felt they had to, emphasize the points on which they disagreed with the president. The saddest case was Alison Lundergan Grimes, the Democrat who ran against Mitch McConnell in Kentucky. As is well known, Kentucky is one of the Affordable Care Act’s great success stories. Under the “Kynect” state exchange established by Governor Steve Beshear, more than 500,000 Kentuckians have gained coverage, with more than 350,000 of those qualifying for the Medicaid subsidies. The percentage of uninsured in Kentucky—in one year—dropped from 20.4 percent to 11.9 percent.

And yet this was a liability for the Democrat. McConnell, whose mantra was to repeal Obamacare “root and branch,” won in a wipeout. The absurdity of the outcome was captured in a May poll of Kentuckians by NBC and Marist College. When asked how they felt about both Obamacare and Kynect, respondents disapproved of Obamacare by 56 to 33 percent but they approved of Kynect by 29 to 22 percent, despite the fact that Kynect *is* Obamacare. Only 22 percent of whites disapproved of Kynect, but 60 percent of them disapproved of Obamacare.

Grimes came in for criticism from some quarters for the way she ran her race, especially for refusing to say that she’d voted for Obama for president. And she did not put much emphasis on touting Kynect’s success. But who is to say that she would have benefited from doing so? The wily McConnell would have hung the dreaded Obamacare around her neck like cloves of garlic, and she might have lost by even more.

Grimes tried to run, for Kentucky, on a reasonably frank economic populist message. She touted raising the minimum wage, and she brought in Elizabeth Warren to campaign for her twice. But in Kentucky—and Louisiana and Arkansas and North Carolina, where Democrats did not win—cultural issues such as antipathy to federal government as such, as well as abortion and gun control, fully trump economics now among most white voters. McConnell released a bumper sticker during the campaign that said: “Coal. Guns. Freedom. Team Mitch.” No amount of economic populism was going to beat that.

In such a climate, crafting a consistent national message became well-nigh impossible. In the coming years, the Democratic Party will face a decision about whether it should even bother trying to compete in such states anymore (unless it happens to have an extremely popular candidate), or whether it should simply try to lock down every congressional seat it possibly can in blue and purple America. The latter course narrows the path to Senate and House majorities, but at least it could produce a more ideologically coherent party.

The other problem Democrats need to solve, related to but not wholly dependent on message, is getting their core voters to come out to vote in midterms. National turnout overall was just 36.4 percent, the lowest since 1942. Young voters (up to age twenty-nine) made up 19 percent of the electorate in 2012 and just 13 percent of voters this year. The Latino vote went from 10 to 8 percent. African-Americans dropped a point, from 13 to 12 percent.

On top of that, most of these groups voted less heavily Democratic than previously. In 2012, young voters went Democratic by 60 to 36 percent. In 2014, that went down to a 54-to-43-percent Democratic advantage. Latinos voted 71 to 27 percent for Barack Obama over Mitt Romney. In 2014, the Latino vote still went Democratic, but by the somewhat reduced 62 to 36 percent.

Meanwhile, reliably Republican voting blocs either stayed constant over 2012 or increased their share. White men, for example, a strongly Republican demographic, went from 34 to 37 percent of the electorate and 64 percent of them voted Republican, two points more than in 2012. Self-identified evangelicals stayed at 26 percent and gave Republicans the same whopping 78 percent of their vote as they had two years prior. An interesting fact, exhumed from the exit polls by the writer Rich Yeselson for*Jacobin* quarterly, is that Democrats carried the 74 percent that is the nonevangelical portion of the electorate by a comfortable 55 to 43 percent.[3](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fn-3)

Coming into the election, Democratic operatives were touting what they called an unprecedented off-year get-out-the-vote effort, the so-called Bannock Street Project, named after the location of a similar and locally successful effort in Colorado and Nevada in 2010. This effort targeted ten states and reportedly devoted $60 million to turnout efforts, a figure without precedent. The money was apparently spent as advertised, yet it amounted to nothing in the end.

Why was this effort so ineffective? As noted, it is surely related to the lack of an appealing message. This seems to have been true in the case of Latino voters in particular. Obama had planned on announcing steps to ease the immigration crisis over the summer. Then when summer came, he said he was delaying the announcement. This was surely at least in part at the behest of the red-state Democrats who feared voter backlash. Latinos saw that they were being pushed to the side. Some Democratic candidates, notably Kay Hagan in North Carolina, did little to try to energize Latino voters. Hagan had voted for the Senate immigration reform bill in 2013 but, in the usual red-state Democrat fashion, was hesitant about standing by her vote. Pro-immigration activists crashed a late-October rally of hers, carrying signs such as “Kay Hagan Lost My Vote.”

The turnout problem, I suspect, runs deeper than the message of the moment. Republican voters, being older and somewhat wealthier and more likely to own property, are more apt to see politics as a continuing conflict of interests that roll over from one election to the next—they can always be convinced that some undeserving person is coming to take away what they’ve earned. Voters who are overall younger and have fewer assets are less likely to view politics in such stark terms. The thundering high and crashing low of these voters’ experience with Obama—“I had such hope in him, I thought he could really change things”—reflect this.

The Democratic Party must therefore find a way to get its voters to see politics more the way Republican base voters do, as a set of interests that are in serious danger and that must be defended every two years. With this Senate, they will have ample opportunity to do so—to point to failures and try to tell their voters that a president is only as strong as his or her congressional majority. The Democrats will not solve their midterm crisis until they can put across the larger set of personal and family consequences of Republican local victories.

Thinking about future elections, we should ponder 2018. That’s a year in which the Democrats will be back to defending at least twenty-four Senate seats, including in Montana, Indiana, Florida, and Ohio. Even if there *is* a President Clinton and a Democratic Senate, that election looms as another slaughterhouse for Democrats unless they get their voters to the polls.

The Republicans, meanwhile, face two dilemmas, both of which stem from the same problem. The problem is the party’s overreliance on an extremely conservative and largely white-evangelical base. After the election Ralph Reed, the founder of the Christian Coalition, boasted, probably accurately:

If you look at where the Republican Party was on election night 2008 and you look at where it is today, without a muscular turnout of evangelical voters in these kinds of margins, it just simply does not happen. Joni Ernst just does not beat Bruce Braley [in Iowa]. David Perdue does not avoid a runoff in Georgia yesterday.

(He took it for granted that we knew that Perdue, just elected senator, is a born-again Christian and Ernst, also a new senator, is a member of an evangelical church.)

The dilemmas are legislative and political. Will a Republican Party in full control of Congress feel any more compelled to try to pass legislation? The ever-hopeful Washington insider class looks for encouraging signs, such as the surprisingly conciliatory tone McConnell struck in his victory speech and at a press conference the next day, when he pledged no government shutdowns.

The lead story out of the mainstream political press this year has been that establishment conservatism “tamed” the Tea Party, and to the extent that a number of Tea Party challengers lost to establishment conservatives in GOP primaries, this is true. But it’s also a fact that McConnell’s caucus is about to get considerably more conservative than it had been, with the addition of seven very conservative senators: Ernst, Perdue, Colorado’s Cory Gardner, Nebraska’s Ben Sasse, Montana’s Steve Daines, Arkansas’s Tom Cotton, and North Carolina’s Thom Tillis.[4](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fn-4)

Can McConnell herd these politicians? He will undoubtedly start to encounter the same problem Harry Reid had in 2009 and 2010, when Reid was trying to round up votes for Obama. He’ll find that legislators who know they potentially hold the fifty-first vote for a piece of compromise legislation may start dictating terms to their leader instead of the other way around. In addition, the legislators named above will be under enormous pressure from the right not to compromise at all.

The Senate, moreover, is the calmer of the two bodies. On January 3 the House will have fourteen additional Republican seats. A majority of these folks appear to have at least some Tea Party beliefs. Wisconsin Representative-elect Glenn Grothman, for example, opposes equal-pay legislation because “you could argue that money is more important for men.” Just because McConnell says that there will be no government shutdown or negotiations over the debt ceiling hardly means that most GOP House members will agree.

The Republicans’ second problem, the question of the Electoral College, will gradually manifest itself as the 2016 presidential candidates begin jockeying. Using an interactive electoral map will give you a sense of the Republican problem.[5](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fn-5) To get to 270 votes in the Electoral College, a Republican nominee has to steal away some larger blue states. That means winning some combination among Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Wisconsin. But in presidential elections Republicans haven’t carried the first three states since 1988 or Wisconsin since 1984. It would be like the Democrats needing to squeeze two or three wins out of North Carolina, Missouri, Arizona, and Georgia.

Republican voters have developed the habit, in the last two elections, of ultimately settling on the most mainstream, “electable” candidate, but only after dragging him so far to the right that his appeal to the center was damaged, even though he could win in the off year. There is no evidence yet to suggest that this strong tendency is likely to change. Any Republican nominee will still have to walk over those hot coals.

The partial exception to this rule could be Rand Paul, who started out his national career so firmly on the right that the base appears for now to be forgiving of his flirtations with “liberal-tarian” issues like sentencing reform. Paul would thus be a formidable candidate—one to whom the right would be willing to cut some slack in the interest of defeating Hillary Clinton. But Paul will be attacked ferociously by establishment conservatives over foreign policy, and mountains of unregulated money will be spent to stop him—perhaps even more than the mountains of such money that made differences in a number of districts in the recent midterms.

In the meantime, there *is* still a president. The most striking aspect of Obama’s postelection position was his vow to press ahead with the executive actions on immigration that he delayed last summer. McConnell warned Obama that doing so would be “like waving a red flag in front of a bull”—in other words, unilateral action on immigration by the president could result in dire consequences in Congress, surely in some Republican minds even including the possibility of impeachment, notwithstanding a broad legal consensus that he has such power.

There are a few matters on which Obama and the next Congress might cobble something together. The most likely would seem to be that he would push for Congress to support a free trade initiative known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), involving a dozen countries including Australia, Japan, and Mexico. Accepting these will mean sparring, to different degrees, with the environmental and labor movements. It will also mean that liberal legislators who would have supported him in 2009 will feel less willing to do so now. At the same time, Obama’s November 10 embrace of a liberal policy on so-called net neutrality—the principle that Internet service providers must transmit all data equally—alongside his immigration vow suggests that in other areas the president might be ready to throw some of his famous caution to the wind.

Obama’s top priorities heading into the last two years of his administration should be these four items: protecting the health care law, trying to see that the recovery extends to middle-class wages, strengthening the anti-ISIS coalition, and working to secure the nuclear deal with Iran.

The health care law clearly must be his highest priority. The Friday after the election, it came as disquieting news indeed when the Supreme Court announced that it would hear*King* v. *Burwell*, the suit that could invalidate the payment of subsidies to citizens who purchase health care through the federal exchange. The votes of four justices are required for the Court to grant certiorari. The four must have been Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Anthony Kennedy, and Samuel Alito, and it’s hard to imagine they took the case for any reason other than to try to kill the law. What will John Roberts do?[6](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fn-6)

Of my four suggested priorities, you may have noticed that Obama’s ability to control them is quite limited. In each case, the other branches of government will have arguably more power than even Obama to shape outcomes. This reflects the reality of American politics today. And with Republican Senate and House committee chairmen soon to have investigative and subpoena power, the Obama era will likely end as acrimoniously as it began. Or perhaps even more so.

1. **1**

The fifty-fourth would be Louisiana, which, because no candidate hit 50 percent on November 4, will hold a run-off election between Democrat Mary Landrieu and Republican Bill Cassidy. Landrieu beat Cassidy by 1 percent, but a third candidate, a conservative, won nearly 14 percent. On the assumption that most of that candidate’s votes go to Cassidy, he is favored to win. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-1)

1. **2**

I say “roughly” because in the Republican case, one must cede to the GOP some states it has won only four of the last six times. These are states Bill Clinton was able to carry but that one must assume a Democrat today—even one named Clinton!—would be hard-pressed to win: Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Missouri, and West Virginia. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-2)

1. **3**

See Rich Yeselson, “Six Points on the Midterm Elections,” *Jacobin*, November 8, 2014. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-3)

1. **4**

Tillis was one of these “establishment conservatives” who actually defeated a Tea Party–backed challenger, but his record as Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives—helping push through a conservative governor’s radical agenda—suggests that he’ll be one of the Senate’s most conservative members. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-4)

1. **5**

Try [www.270towin.com](http://www.270towin.com/), which lets the user choose the “2016 Battleground Map” and turn states red and blue to see what vote totals they produce. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-5)

1. **6**

For a full treatment of this, see my “The GOP Could Make Obama Kill Obamacare,” *The Daily Beast*, November 10, 2014. [↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/18/now-we-face-2016/#fnr-6)