Whistling Past the Graveyard

written by Michael Hirsch | January 21, 2019

For those who expected the midterm elections to be a slow grinding of the far right and the nation's wax museum-Bonapartist president, the mills of the gods on election night operated as if on seasonal layoff. The much-hoped-for Blue Wave flood of liberal Democrats sweeping reactionary Republicans out of office in both houses of Congress, fueled by the largest proportional turnout for a midterm election since the 1960s, never reached even high-tide levels. Trump-enchanted GOP voters were energized, too, part of a noxious Red Tide aided by the anomaly that far more Democratic than GOP Senate seats were in play this year, and the results for a rejuvenated electoral left in the United States seem more tortured than had Democrats either swept the two houses of Congress or were savagely cut back in both.

Here's why.

Had Democrats secured a Senate majority, the party would have made a squat target for an energized left, under sharp scrutiny and pressure to deliver on promises never fleshed out or systematically developed and forced to rejigger its pose as the lesser of the two indebted corporatist flanks in politics. Conversely, had the Democrats remained a minority in both houses of Congress, the two-party-shuffle game would have been up and independent political action perforce made at least more viable than at any time since the 1924 effort to form a labor party. Saying as much is not posing a celebration of joy amid the ruins or a revisit to the German Communist Party's *Nach Hitler Uns* (After Hitler Us) pre-1933 sectarian madness, only recognizing that a third-party initiative would have had more of an opportunity to grow under neutered Democrats than it has now.

As it stands, with the Democrats soon in control of just one house of Congress, the egregious Trump still ensconced in the White House, an enlarged Republican majority in the Senate, and the mainstream parties roughly equal in gubernatorial offices, the run-up to 2020 looks to be one long round of gestures and media catnip. Any left-wing advances will likely be extraparliamentary, rife with possibilities but with little interim electoral analogue or spillover. Welcome to the brave, new world.

Election Pluses and Minuses

The fact that the Democrats' House of Representatives take-back majority was slim is no tragedy. As in sports, the operative phrase "they don't ask how you won but did you win" applies to politics, too. As practiced in the USA, politics is much like a spectator sport, as anyone gorging on MSNBC or Fox News can attest. Still, given the huge impediments to a fair election, gainsaying any win may seem puerile. A key question then is what reforms the Democratic leadership will promote, especially given that party leaders will again hold majorities on and chairs of congressional committees. With control of the House, committee chairs will have extraordinary capacity—if they choose or are pressured—to initiate, move, or block legislation.

For example, Massachusetts Rep. Richard Neal will head the Ways and Means Committee, which, as the *Wall Street Journal* (November 8, 2018) explains, has among other powers "jurisdiction over taxes, trade, health care, and Social Security." If Medicare for All, and not simply the protection and modest expansion of the Affordable Care Act—the arbitrarily convenient limit on which too many Democrats campaigned—has hope of eventual passage, it'll start through this committee, as would Social Security benefit increases and mooting Trump's tax-all-but-the-rich initiatives. Similarly, California's Maxine Waters, slated to head the Financial Services Committee, could wage war against banks over predatory lending, including Wells Fargo and Deutsche Bank, regular targets of hers, at least rhetorically.

The new committee chairs are also in a plum position to initiate impeachment proceedings against five-and-dime-king Trump, if fear doesn't make them wet themselves first. New York City's Jerry Nadler will head the Judiciary Committee, whose duties include investigating grounds for impeachment. A House veteran and liberal on things that don't spell Israel or Palestine, Nadler was among those House members considering but eventually walking away from backing impeachment proceedings against George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in 2006 and 2007. Anyone betting on the outcome of any of these options?

Democrats also scored well in statewide races. *Vox* reports (November 9, 2018) how "Democrats flipped seven governorships, six state legislative chambers, and more than 300 state House and Senate seats on election night." Among the victors: New York State Democrats, who, with one exception in the 2009 never controlled the state Senate for decades, making legislation passed by the Assembly notoriously known as "one chamber bills." As with the House Democrats, they can no longer blame Republicans for failing to enact progressive legislation.

Even the limited act of voting is problematic today, and ripe for defending. Voter suppression alone—and its partner in crime, gerrymandering—is likely to explain the failure of several ostensibly promising midterm candidates. A split Congress won't likely touch it, but social movements must, if only as a hedge on the right and center.

Voter Suppression, Gerrymandering, and Ballot Questions

Liberal writer Michael Tomasky (*New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2018) called 1982 "a zenith for voting rights in the United States." That was when the unlikely Ronald Reagan stepped in to bulk up the Voting Rights Act, signing into law in 1982 significant amendments to the original 1965 legislation. A notable change made it easier to sue states and localities under the act's Section 2, which affirmed that plaintiffs did not need to prove discriminatory intent in voting laws, just discriminatory effect. The nadir came when it was undone in 2013, as a split Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the bill was ancient history that unfairly burdened localities. Today we see the spectacle of local election officials in Georgia closing seven out of nine polling places in one predominantly African American county, shamelessly claiming the sites weren't compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. No such largess, as it were, was proffered for the differentially abled in predominantly white districts.

Schemes such as gerrymandering; byzantine identification requirements aimed largely at blacks, Latinos, and youth; and the refusal of many states to enfranchise ex-felons while insisting that voter fraud—newspeak for political exclusion—is rife and requires "ballot security" when such fraud is virtually unknown; serve a right-wing agenda to keep millions outside of the election system. The defeat of Trump water-carrier and rank xenophobe Kris Kobach in the Kansas governor's race was in part payback by many state Republicans for edging out the incumbent governor in the state's primary, then blasting school funding and being outspent two to one by his Democratic opponent, and not least for his noxious role in spearheading Trump's fake voter-fraud investigations. As Kansas

Secretary of State, Kobach gained national infamy by moving a predominantly Hispanic-populated town's solitary polling place far beyond the city limits, inaccessible by public transit.

It's also a sign of just how degenerated politics has become that a moral crusade is required, and a sterling leader such as North Carolina's Reverend William Barber II has to launch a nationwide effort, not for socialism or national health care or decent housing or an end to imperial adventures, but for elementary voting rights. Or that the poison exuded by the far right's Paul Weyrich in 1980 that "our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting population goes down" is now a benchmark of Republican policy.

Certainly the victories of insurgent Democratic candidates running as democratic socialists are worth appreciating, though victories such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, Rashida Tlaib in Michigan, and Ilhan Omar in Minnesota (who replaces Keith Ellison, elected the state's Attorney General) speak as much to the myopia of centrist establishment Democrats in not taking their challengers seriously as they do to the commitments of challengers and successes of cohering insurgent campaigns. The test for these will have to be the degree to which the new breed of reformers are accountable to a progressive constituent base.

In Wisconsin, the far-right governor Scott Walker, who headed up, even before the High Court's malicious Janus decision, the eradication of state public sector unions and was considered a potential future GOP presidential candidate, lost narrowly to his Democratic challenger, State Superintendent of Schools Tony Evers, after seeing a huge increase in the votes not only of state-capital residents but of black voters and previous GOP supporters in Milwaukee and its suburbs (*Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 2018). Evers will have his hands full, as the state legislature is still dominated by the Republicans.

On the face of it, Florida's outsized 65 percent approval vote to enfranchise the state's 1.4 million formerly incarcerated felons would seem to privilege former black prisoners, who comprise a significantly higher proportion of the state's black population than do white felons vis-à-vis whites. Here's the rub, which could be counterintuitive: As reported by *Politico* (November 8, 2018), those convicted felons who completed the terms of a criminal sentence include sizable numbers of whites as well, and no evidence can be cited as to how any of those affected, whatever their ethnicity, would prize one party over any other.

Where establishment party machines took their challengers seriously, results were not so rosy. In California, Jovanka Beckles, a two-term Richmond City Council member, children's mental health specialist, and a leader of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, was the first of the independent group's cadre to campaign for public office as a Democrat. Beckles ran a spirited, more than 1,000-volunteer campaign for the state Assembly in an East Bay district stretching from communities north and east of Richmond, home of the disaster-prone, pollution-spewing Chevron Oil, and down the San Francisco Bay coastline to Berkeley and northern Oakland. Her November 9 letter to supporters characterized her campaign's effort as an

> unprecedented coalition of labor unions, democratic socialists, environmentalists, and progressive organizations that came together in this campaign to form the solid core of a new phase in progressive politics in the East Bay and California. … Together, we took on the wealthiest and most powerful players for the benefit of the many, not the few. Because my campaign has been powered by this mighty movement of people over profit, we have been able to inspire and mobilize thousands of working people across the East Bay with a platform with something to offer them—Medicare for all, housing for all, and quality, public education.

Beckles was defeated by establishment handpuppet Buffy Wicks, who garnered 56 percent of the

15th Assembly District vote, thanks in part to backing from top Democratic officials and heavy funding from in- and out-of-state Democratic sources. (California's unique election system institutionalizes nonpartisan primaries, allowing the top two contenders to compete in the general election, regardless of party affiliation.) Despite this being her first run for office, Wicks was a party insider, having served in Barack Obama's two presidential campaigns and as deputy director for the White House Office of Public Engagement.

Especially heartbreaking was the loss of Question 1 in Massachusetts, the Nurse-Patient Assignment Limits Initiative, which if passed would have mandated rational patient-nurse staffing limits for the state's overworked healers. The hospital industry mounted a fierce disinformation campaign, saying the limits would harm not only hospital bottom lines but nurses themselves. Opponents of the ballot question, including the American Nurses Association of Massachusetts, an employer lobby, cried poormouth and said the patient-capping proposal and the need to hire added staff would cost some $1 billion annually.

That loss was offset to a degree by ample passage of two other Massachusetts ballot questions. One will establish a commission to prepare an amendment to the U.S. Constitution overturning the High Court's invidious 2010 Citizens United decision granting otherwise human rights to corporations, thus allowing them to spend unlimited sums on political campaigns. A second will outlaw discrimination based on gender identity.

In other news, *Propublica* (November 8, 2018) reported three states passing same-day or automatic voter registration measures, while in Colorado, Michigan, and Missouri, voters overwhelmingly approved measures that aim to limit or end gerrymandering. Utah, which heavily backed Mitt Romney's ascension to the Senate, also approved an independent commission to draw its district lines.

That skewed mix of insurgent hopes and establishment wins by candidates and ballot issues held nationwide with rare exception. As noted by Nick Brana, a disabused founding member of Our Revolution and now national director of the Movement for a People's Party, there were actually very few congressional wins by candidates endorsed by the various progressive organizations (Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, Brand New Congress, and the Democratic Socialists of America), and of those few, several were already incumbents. "Only two of the House winners were actually opposed by the party and unseated establishment Democrats in the primaries—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley," the latter the first African American woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts. And, as Brana points out, "[t]here are 435 members of Congress" (*Independent Voter Network,* November 7, 2018).

Conservative political scientist-cum-election maven Norman Ornstein summed it up bluntly: "Democrats elected many more pragmatic progressives and moderates, along with just a few Bernie Sanders acolytes. … Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was more the exception than the rule" (*New York Daily News*, November 11, 2018).

So Where Do We Go from Here?

The late I.F. Stone said, "The only kinds of fights worth fighting are those you're going to lose, because somebody has to fight them and lose and lose and lose until someday, somebody who believes as you do wins."

Granted, much of this essay is dour, but elections have a place on any socialist's dance card. What is pertinent is fixing on the appropriate arabesque. Regardless of what happened or could have happened on November 6, the rebellion that percolated just before the election surge that changed

the leadership in the lower house of Congress does not depend on the complexion of the governing class's congressional alignment. In fact if mass movements are taken into account, much did happen, just not electorally. From the numerous women's marches, the defense of immigrants, the fight waged by the indefatigable Reverend Barber and others to protect and expand voting rights, to the West Virginia teachers strike, the Google walkout, and the growth of socialist consciousness and militant organization among a new generation of union and community activists—these are seedbeds not just of resistance but of rebellion.

Saying that should put paid to competing assumptions rife on the left that electoral activity is either the golden road to socialism or a snare that hobbled movements in the past and will do so again. The election results offer ample evidence supporting both approaches. Or neither. Capitalist rule dominates politics as it does every aspect of civil society. Similarly, the contending electoral perspectives boosting either a Democratic Party insurgency or its assumed alternative, independent political action—that is, the endless debate over working "inside" versus "outside" the Democratic Party—do not exhaust the possibilities for effecting social change. Neither are they necessarily in irreconcilable contention, especially if the Holy Grail of politics is mistakenly translated one-dimensionally as voting with little attention to base building.

This is not a call to abandon an electoral focus—a key weakness of radical syndicalism despite its many strengths—but to situate it better. A politics of class struggle goes way beyond pumping for candidates or casting a ballot, the latter a solitary if necessary act that is one more *de minimus* consumer choice, not a collective activity except in the aggregate. Class politics can't be subsumed into such limited boundaries, and militant working class parties historically knew as much. Whatever choices opted by the left, as even the vagaries of this contentious midterm election demonstrate, vote-getting comprises just one among many needed expressions of struggle. The fact that some would stoop to deny the democratic right to vote is at least reason enough to defend it.

Correction: The characterization of Jerry Nadler was corrected from the print version of this article, which incorrectly referred to his relation to Nixon's impeachment. .

"I have a natural instinct for science."