

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
Brookings Cafeteria Podcast
“2018 midterms: What happened, what’s next”
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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

All the dust from the midterms hasn't completely settled, but the big picture is that Democrats won enough seats to have a majority in the House of Representatives, Republicans expanded their Senate majority, governors races in Michigan Wisconsin Kansas and elsewhere went to Democrats, and Republicans won key statehouses in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Also, more women than ever are headed to Congress.

To discuss the results of the midterm elections and implications for politics and policy, I'm joined by two Brookings senior fellows. Elaine Kamarck is the founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management, and Camille Busette is director of the Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative.

Elaine and Camille, welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

BUSETTE: It's great to be here.

KAMARCK: Thank you.

DEWS: So we're taping this on Wednesday afternoon, the day after the 2018 midterms and we're airing this on Friday. Some things may change, but I think the broad contours of what happened yesterday aren't going to change that much. So just so the listeners know that.

I'd like to ask you both to offer your overall assessment of what happened in the midterms, Elaine.

KAMARCK: Well if you had to use a sports analogy, it's a tie. It's a tie and kind of like the third game of the World Series, we're going to go into overtime here leading up to the 2020 presidential election. There are good signs for both sides, there's good signs for Republicans and there's good signs for Democrats. And I think as we talk about this we can sort of pull out how you can look at it no matter where you are on the political spectrum.

DEWS: And Camille what do you think?

BUSETTE: I agree with Elaine. I think everyone can declare victory at some level. And I agree that when you look at the final outcome in the House, the final outcome in the Senate, what you're likely to have is, you know, an opportunity for some sclerosis at the national level.

DEWS: What is sclerosis? I've heard the term before ...

BUSETTE: So just paralysis, basically political paralysis. But also I think interestingly we have an opportunity for Trump to rethink some of the ways that he actually is going to operate at the national level. So I think that that's going to be very interesting. But overall, I mean from my perspective, the elections were about three words: health care, women, and turnout. And I think health care was really big even in states that were diehard trump states. Women did exceptionally well as you mentioned in your introduction, up and down the ballot and turnout was really very, very high for both parties.

DEWS: Across all demographics, right?

KAMARCK: Right. And one of the things to talk about health care that was amusing is towards the end of the campaign, we had Republicans out there who were from states where the attorney general in this state was suing the federal government to undo Obamacare. And they were out there talking about the importance of protecting preexisting conditions. So you know you could tell that that was really an overwhelming issue, it was breaking for the Democrats, so much so that you had Republicans trying to get in on the action. Whether or not that changes the position of the Trump administration, changes the positions of senators in a Republican Senate remains to be seen.

DEWS: But legislation to defeat or to overturn the Affordable Care Act is dead as far as ...

KAMARCK: No, that's not going to happen. But what is interesting that may happen now is that once they lost in the summer of 2017, once the Republicans lost their last best

chance to repeal Obamacare, what they started to do was to try to pick away at it in a series of administrative decisions. And now with the Democratic House, I think you're going to have the ability for them to exercise their oversight power and to really stop HHS and HCFA—it's not HCFA anymore it's CMS, I'm showing you my age—stop them from picking away at Obamacare and strengthen it.

DEWS: And some states expanded Medicaid after the election.

KAMARCK: Yeah and some states expand Medicaid. You're going to see a lot, I think, an expansion of Medicaid. I mean that is just clearly the health care safety net in our country that I think you're going to keep seeing it.

BUSETTE: You know what also struck me about this election is I actually think the outcome was fairly conservative with a small c. You know, people wanted to retain their health care or make sure that the safety net was in place. I mean, there's nothing radical about that because it's been around for over eight years. And I think in general, voters shied away from really progressive agendas and agendas that were also really rabidly anti-immigrant. And so I think if I had to say anything, the signal was probably, let's not go to the extremes and let's maintain the things that we like, particularly health care and other benefit, entitlement programs.

KAMARCK: You know, we found that in our research on primary voters, and it was kind of surprising, and we found that the Republican primary voters were much less rabid on immigration than Trump himself. And that kind of surprised us. And so I think that the country is out there, ready to be a more polite, centrist place. The problem is that we have a president who delights in aggravating the issues and the divisions that are already out there. You've sort of suggested at the beginning, Camille that he may change a little bit.

BUSETTE: I don't know if he's going to change his tone but his strategy might change.

KAMARCK: Well, I'll be interested to see that because I'm sort of beginning to think

of him as a one trick pony that can only do division, division, division, even when it doesn't really make any sense. That's why I was interested in the point you brought up, because that would be a real change for him.

BUSETTE: Well, you know, what I think is going to be interesting for him in particular: So he's excellent at being able to figure out how to get himself in front of the news every single day, almost every minute and he's a master at that. I think where he has more difficulty is really understanding how you work strategically with Congress. And now he's in a position where the Democrats control the House, there's going to be a lot of oversight. Republicans still control the Senate which means he's not going to be able to move a lot of legislation unless he's willing to do some compromises and he's going to have to pick and choose where he wants a compromise with an eye to the 2020 elections. And that requires a really skillful politician, particularly when you're dealing with the likes of Mitch McConnell and presumably Nancy Pelosi. So I think he has his work cut out for him and it may make for some really strange bedfellows depending on which issues we're talking about.

DEWS: So much of the focus in this immediate aftermath of the election is on things like, are the House Democrats going to investigate the president, who are new chairpeople are going to be in the House, who are the judges that Trump is now going to appoint and get through the Senate? It's Wednesday, as I mentioned, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions resigned today; who's his replacement?

Rather than, Camille, what you're saying about legislation, I'm thinking now about "Infrastructure Week." It's going to come up again and many times probably in the new year, so that will be a fascinating thing to watch, as how the process of governance actually plays out under President Trump with Democratic control of the House.

BUSETTE: Well I think it will be low on legislation. I mean, Elaine don't you agree?

KAMARCK: Oh yeah it will be low on legislation. I mean, you know, look the 800

pound gorilla for the next two years is the Mueller Report, right? We don't know what's in that. We don't know if there's the proverbial smoking gun where the political infrastructure, and then the citizens will say, "uh oh, this is bad." Or whether it's something that's kind of murky and maybe there's some more indictments maybe there's some more convictions, but it doesn't touch the president himself and therefore it doesn't end up in impeachment.

So that's the 800 pound gorilla. If it's kind of a wash, then I think there's a shot at maybe doing an infrastructure deal, maybe putting Obamacare sort of back on track from where this White House is taking it off track. But if that is a big, big, big explosion, that's all we're going to do.

DEWS: So in the last couple of weeks leading up to the midterms we saw President Trump out on the proverbial campaign trail giving scores of his campaign style rallies, supporting a lot of candidates for office, especially a lot of Republicans in the Senate. And a lot of Republican Senate candidates who are senators either won or retained their seats and a lot of those senators, obviously, owe their victories to President Trump. What does the outcome say about the phenomenon of Trumpism in terms of issues like polarization and ginning up the base?

KAMARCK: Look, he's very good at ginning up his base. The problem is if you look at this in the demographics of the country, what he has never shown an ability to do is expand his base. And so while he was solidifying his support in small red states, rural populations—not many members of Congress, therefore not many Electoral College votes—he was losing in what had been traditionally Republican suburbs right across the country. And so that's not a good sign, okay? It's not a good sign.

You can have 90 percent approval among 25 percent of the public and that doesn't take you very far in the electoral system. And if you look at the latest numbers of who identifies as Republicans in this country, 27 percent of the population identifies as Republicans. So this business of Donald Trump being the leader of the Republican Party

is fine. He is, except that there's a lot of evidence that it's a shrinking Republican Party.

BUSETTE: I think that's right. I mean, I think you know when you look at the exit polls of people who did end up voting for him and where Trumpism is really, really still popular are white, rural males. Almost every other demographic went for somebody other than really strong Trump candidate. So, I would agree with Elaine, that, you know, that's a pretty small base from which to launch a 2020 campaign.

KAMARCK: And I'd add one factor that his base is white, rural, male, and old. Okay? So in the exit polls that I was just looking at, and we've written about this for the Brookings website tomorrow, the under 50, people under 50 are overwhelmingly Democratic. The younger you get, the more Democratic you are. Over 50, you're Republican. So while that's certainly good in a midterm election, especially because older people vote in midterms in greater numbers than younger people, it's not a good metric going forward, and it's not a good metric for a presidential election where younger people do get energized and do turn out to vote.

DEWS: Our colleague, E.J. Dionne, senior fellow in Governance Studies, he made what I think is a fascinating observation in his column in *The Washington Post* today in that while there were 33 Senate races, the House elections were the only truly national elections that occurred yesterday and previously, and that more than what happened in the Senate is a better gauge of sort of the national mood of the electorate. What are your thoughts on that?

BUSETTE: You know I do agree with that, but I also think there's a little asterisk there and I think you need to have some caution. I mean, one of my takeaways, particularly if you look at the results in Florida, the state house level, one of my takeaways is that I'm not sure the American electorate is ready for really progressive candidates that are either at the State House or Senate or national level. They might be fine with that for the House level. And so when I think about a state like Florida, I think that Democrats will

have to really think hard about who their 2020 presidential candidate is going to be, what that platform looks like, how far left of center they really want to be without alienating people who are very centrist, voters who are very centrist. I think that's going to be an interesting challenge for Democrats and so I'm not I'm not sure that there was much of a message for a large appetite for something really progressive.

KAMARCK: And I would add to that that the Senate race, E.J. is just completely right, these Senate races were strange yesterday because they were in such small, conservative states. But the Electoral College actually gives great weight to rural areas because everybody gets two senators and everybody gets one congressman. So that means that Wyoming has three electoral votes and it represents almost no one compared to California. And so every once and a while on the web you can find a map of the United States by the strength of its electoral votes. And there's all these states that have very few people in them, but very large impact on the presidential election process because of the two senators. And of course this was done originally by the founding fathers because the small states didn't want the big states, at that time Massachusetts and Virginia, to run the country. Well that's why we're stuck with this Electoral College because the small states are not going to want California to call the shots. But it does create a weird imbalance in our politics, and in our lifetimes we've had two presidential elections where the winner of the popular vote lost in the Electoral College, both times due almost exclusively to the vote in California.

DEWS: There's also the factor of gerrymandering which affects the House of Representatives and we have a phenomenon where Democrats had to get, people were estimating somewhere north of 7 percent more of the overall vote to capture enough seats to take the majority. I think the latest figures are something like they've captured over 9 percent more votes total than Republicans did.

BUSETTE: Yes, that's correct.

DEWS: And then they've netted maybe 30 seats. What's going to happen with the phenomenon of gerrymandering moving forward? Are more and more states, especially states where Democrats won statehouses, are going to try to do away with it leading up especially to the 2020 census?

KAMARCK: They're going to do the same thing is my guess. My guess is they're going to try to draw safe Democratic districts. And there is a change that has happened in the views about gerrymandering from the 70s and 80s to the present. And that change is taking place within the African-American community. So I'm curious to hear what you say about this, Camille. It used to be that you drew majority minority districts because the assumption was that in order to get African-American or any minority representation, you needed a majority-minority district. Well we've now seen in many, many instances that African-Americans can in fact win white votes. And if you break apart those African-American districts that are like 80, 90 percent Democratic, you can pick up two or three more Democratic votes and still have a huge African-American population running in the primaries. So that's been a big change in attitudes from the 70s to the present. And that's why I think that you'll see Democrats drawing some pretty interesting districts.

BUSETTE: I agree with that. I actually think that that is a huge change. And I do think that, you know, African-American politicians, as well as people who are counting on the African-American vote, realize that they can mix these voters and constituencies in ways that really favor more candidates.

DEWS: What about the problem that we saw, particularly in Georgia where laws and regulations around who can vote possibly prevented disproportionately large number of African-Americans and other minorities from being able to cast ballots, from voter lists purges to more restrictive ID laws to closing polling stations across the state. You know North Dakota also had its restrictive voter ID law that affected Native Americans. Can you speak to what happened in Georgia?

BUSETTE: So, my observation of what happened in Georgia is that you had fairly egregious efforts to suppress voting, particularly in the African-American population. But I think what is really interesting about Georgia is that despite that we have an extremely close election and I think given the history of politics in Georgia and who the governor tends to be there and the party that holds it, since the obviously the realignment of the 1990s, I think that is what has happened there with Stacey Abrams—and even if she doesn't win—and Kemp is really a very significant change and it does speak very much to the power of the African-American vote in spite of the voter suppression. That said, you know, efforts to suppress African-American votes and Native American votes I think will probably continue, but I think what is really interesting about this election is that it became a semi-central issue, and people were I think made much more aware of it than you typically have in a midterm election.

DEWS: Were there any outcomes or any races that particularly surprised you, Camille?

BUSETTE: Not really, I think the one that for me was the most remarkable was the Wisconsin governor's race. I do think that was a really tough one for Scott Walker. And I think it was a referendum not only on his attitude towards unions and working folks but also his attitude towards health care, and I think the confluence of health care plus his record, I think was really detrimental to him and I thought that was a really interesting state race.

KAMARCK: I was fascinated by Texas. I was just enthralled by Texas and by the map on Texas and I hadn't realized, and I think even John King on CNN as he was doing it was surprised, I hadn't realized that the growth in the population in the southwestern part of Texas along the border. There's a lot of congressional districts there, whereas the rest of the state, the big red part, stays very sparsely populated. And so every time in the last ten years people talk about Texas getting purple, I basically laughed at that and said no,

not going to happen. Last night as I watched that vote come in in Texas and watched how Beto O'Rourke did manage to pull in a couple of congressional seats that were on nobody's list, I thought wow, this is an interesting transformation. I mean, these things happen all the time. I'm pretty old, so I can remember when Vermont was a rock-ribbed Republican state as opposed to the Socialist Republic of Vermont. Okay? So I've seen lots of states change their political complexion and I was amazed to see that vote in Texas even though O'Rourke did ultimately lose.

DEWS: I saw figures that in the district right next to or Rourke's now former district, represented by Will Hurd, who's kind of a centrist-ish Republican incumbent, he had a really close race. I think he won. But it was really close. Probably his Democratic opponent was buoyed by Beto O'Rourke.

KAMARCK: Oh yeah, and the thing also about demographic changes is that first of all, they always happen more slowly than people think they're going to happen. But one of the things that we forget about Hispanics, African-Americans to a lesser extent, but all the people of color that are in this country that are voting against Donald Trump really is how young they are. So for instance for years people have been talking about Latinos, Latinos, Latinos. And you know, they were five years old, they were 10 years old. Okay. So this is a young cohort which bodes well for the Democrats and their policies in the future, but they're still young, many people aren't voting, and young people have some structural reasons for not voting. They move a lot. For one thing they go into school, they're coming back, they're moving for a new job, et cetera. So it's a little bit harder to mobilize a young vote.

DEWS: There's over 100 women who are going to be coming to Congress. Women won statehouses across the country as well. There's also some of those women coming to Congress are Native Americans, first Native American women in Congress, first Muslim women coming to Congress. How does the composition of Congress changing with more

women coming in and how is that going to affect what Congress does, what it says to the country?

BUSETTE: So, I think certainly the people who are coming in will ultimately, if they have some staying power past this election, will ultimately have an effect on the types of issues and legislation that are pushed forward, but not before 2020. They're going to be the junior members. And so the senior members are really going to control, I think the agenda there. But I think it is very helpful to have that level of diversity because it will put a check on probably the instincts of the most conservative members in the Democratic caucus at least.

KAMARCK: And there's a wide variety of different women, even in the Democratic caucus. So you have Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who is a self-avowed Democratic Socialist. You also have a former Navy pilot who won as a Democratic woman. Okay. You have the first Native American member of Congress, but you also have a former Air Force officer. The women themselves, I mean among the women coming in, there's great diversity.

Now, we know two things about women in legislatures from political science. One is that they do tend to put on the agenda more family-centered kinds of issues. Secondly, there's some evidence that they are actually better at reaching across the aisle than men, regardless of what party or what conservative or liberal, they seem to be a little better at doing that. Who knows if that stands up in legislatures where there are large numbers of women or not, but I thought it was interesting.

DEWS: Let's finish this conversation just by hearing your closing thoughts on the 2018 midterms. How you think it played out, where you think we're going from here as a nation, what the policy agenda might even look like, you touched on it a little bit earlier? What are your thoughts?

BUSETTE: You know one thing we haven't talked about is race in politics, and I wanted to bring that up a little bit. And love to get your thoughts on this, Elaine. But I do

think that the Florida gubernatorial race, the Georgia gubernatorial race, those were instances in which the topic of race was really front and center. And in ways that it hasn't been before, meaning people were really calling out, you know, this is partly what this contest is about. And while it doesn't look as though either of them have succeeded, we don't know what's happened in Georgia for sure, it doesn't look like either of the African-American candidates have succeeded, or the Democratic candidates succeeded. I do think it was really interesting the way in which race was raised in these contests and the absolute inability of Republicans to really take that topic and show how they have evolved on it.

KAMARCK: Well, in fact I think they're going backwards on it. I mean there's a lot of discussion about something called whiteness, which is a lot of Americans feeling that the people who are now discriminated against are white people, and the Republicans it seems to me—and they disavowed this—but there are various associated groups ran some pretty explicitly racist campaigns and phone banks and robocalls against Stacey Abrams, calling her Aunt Jemima, and against Andrew Gillum where they actually had robocalls with monkeys sounds in the background. Now they went way, way in the other direction. And what's interesting to me is how desperate that was. Right? Okay. How absolutely desperate and how people were appalled at how the racist ad that Donald Trump cut, even Fox News wouldn't run it. So it gives me hope that there's some evolution. It gives me hope that those two states were so close.

BUSETTE: Exactly.

KAMARCK: Okay. So very, very close. And again, there's a generational aspect to this. The older you are, the more you believe in whiteness, the younger you are the less important this is. And so I think that there is some generational change going on. It may not be enough in 2020, and it may not be enough to push either of these people over the finish line in 2018. But I do think there's some generational change.

BUSETTE: You know I have a question for you, Elaine. So immigration was clearly a big issue in the midterms and we've already talked a little bit about how Donald Trump will probably need to expand his base in order to do well. So how do you think immigration is going to play out in you know with this Congress, this Senate leading up to 2020?

KAMARCK: That's a really tough question. I think it will remain a wedge issue. We used to have wedge issues in this country. They were crime, abortion, gays. Those have kind of gone by the by. The new wedge issue is immigration. I think as long as the Republicans believe, which I believe they believe this morning, that immigration saved their bacon in some of those red Senate seats that they're not going to have any interest in compromising on a comprehensive immigration bill. Period, end of sentence. I just think they want to keep it around.

You know, now the problem with that is it's a long term it's a terrible strategy because every time you get a new cohort of Latino voters turning 18, turning 20, paying attention to politics, the first thing they learn, oh that party doesn't like us, I mean, and they're wham! In the arms of the Democratic Party. And you know what? They tend to stay there. People tend to stay in a party that they initially identify with as young people. So I think it's kind of a good short term politics for them, but I think it's really bad in the long run.

BUSETTE: Well, you know, it's interesting, I was listening to Spanish language radio today in the Washington D.C. metro area and the level of anger at Donald Trump and others who espouse the really anti-immigrant message is really at a fever pitch and with a lot of states having an increasing Latino population, I do think over the long run that's going to be very, very difficult.

BUSETTE: Well, remember a couple of minutes ago I talked about seeing states change. Pete Wilson, who was you probably don't even remember, he was well-known as the governor of California, is solely responsible for turning California from a solid Republican state to a solid Democratic state on this very issue, because of course the

demographic change happened in California first. And so it's a dangerous thing the Republicans are playing with. And I think in the long run, it really is going to be bad for them. But in the short run, they've got some gains from it.

BUSETTE: What do you think are some of the prospects for the Senate and Senate strategy now that the Senate is more, more Republican than it was prior to this election?

KAMARCK: I think the Senate is going to play to the base. The new senators from some of these states, look how red those states are.

BUSETTE: Oh yeah.

KAMARCK: You know how red and white, those white in their population, rural, very, very Republican. Fans of the president, et cetera, states lacking in many big cities. I just think that the Senate will side with Trump, and I do not think Trump is going to be very, even if somebody tells them it's time to reach across the aisle, I don't think he is temperamentally able to do it.

BUSETTE: You know I would agree with that. I think the one problem for everybody, but not for Democrats, will be health care and this lawsuit that's moving forward.

KAMARCK: Yes.

BUSETTE: And I do think that at some point, Republicans are going to have to declare where they are on health care in a way that will not allow them to reverse course. And I think that that's going to be a really important issue as we move forward to 2020.

KAMARCK: Absolutely.

DEWS: Any final thoughts from either of you? It feels like we're already thinking about the 2020 election ...

KAMARCK: We're thinking about 2020, we always do.

DEWS: Well I thank you both for taking the time to talk about the 2018 midterms. I appreciate your insights on this.

BUSETTE: Thank you, it's been great.

KAMARCK: Thank you.

DEWS: You can find out more about the 2018 midterms on our website Brookings.edu/2018midterms.

“The Brookings Cafeteria” podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our interns this semester are Churon Bernier and Tim Madden. Finally, my thanks to Camilla Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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