

The New York Times

What if the Republicans Win Everything Again?

David Leonhardt

October 19, 2018

The end of Robert Mueller's investigation. The loss of health insurance for several million people. New laws that make it harder to vote. More tax cuts for the rich. More damage to the environment. A Republican Party molded even more in the image of President Trump.

These are among the plausible consequences if the Republicans sweep the midterm elections and keep control of both the House and Senate. And don't fool yourself. That outcome, although not the most likely one, remains possible. The last couple of weeks of polling have shown how it could happen.

Voters who lean Republican — including whites across the South — could set aside their disappointment with Trump and vote for Republican congressional candidates. Voters who lean left — including Latinos and younger adults — could turn out in low numbers, as they usually do in midterm elections. The Republicans' continuing efforts to suppress turnout could also swing a few close elections.

No matter what, Democrats will probably win the popular vote in the House elections, for the first time since 2012. Trump, after all, remains unpopular. But the combination of gerrymandering and the concentration of Democratic voters in major cities means that a popular-vote win won't automatically translate into a House majority.

In the Senate, the election already seems to be slipping away from the Democrats. Several of this year's close Senate races happen to involve Democrats defending seats in red states. As a result, Republicans may expand their current 51-49 majority, making it easier for them to win close votes on legislation and nominations.

If Republicans do manage to keep both chambers of Congress, it would cause a political shock. So far, much of the speculation has focused on what a Democratic House takeover might mean — attempts to rein in Trump's executive actions, subpoenas, investigations, maybe even impeachment. But it's important to understand that a Republican victory would also change Washington.

It would be validation for Trump, who could then brag that he had defied the experts once again. It would mean he had outperformed Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Lyndon Johnson and Harry Truman, all of whom suffered drubbings in the first midterm election of their presidency. It would embolden Trump to push even harder toward the America he wants — where corporate oversight is scant, climate change is ignored, voting rights are abridged, health care is a privilege, judicial independence is a fiction and the truth is whatever he says it is.

I obviously find this prospect alarming. I'd much rather spend time imagining the ways the Congress could act as a check on Trump after the Democrats gain some control. And the polls say that's still likely. The political website FiveThirtyEight put the Democrats' odds at around 84 percent on Friday.

Yet all of us should have learned by now that there is a big difference between the unlikely and the impossible. Political polls are like weather forecasts or medical diagnoses. They are a much better guide to the future than random guesses, but they inevitably involve uncertainty. "84 percent" is not just a careful way of saying "100 percent." The Republican Party of Donald Trump really could win the midterms.

That's why I spent a good portion of this past week doing reporting about what two more years of unified Republican rule might look like. The following preview is based on those conversations.

The Russia investigation

Members of Congress don't usually turn against a scandal-marred president from their own party until they believe that supporting him jeopardizes their own careers. That fear helped lead Republicans to abandon Richard Nixon, at long last, in 1974. A lack of fear helps explain why Democrats stuck by Bill Clinton through his sex scandal.

For today's congressional Republicans, the election will be a measure of how worried they need to be about Trump and Russia. As Susan Hennessey of the Brookings Institution says, the midterms "are the last best hope for Republicans in Congress to grow a backbone." A Democratic takeover may make congressional Republicans less willing to make excuses for Trump. A Republican victory would suggest that the party does not need to be very scared about the politics of Russia.

Yes, Mueller — the special counsel overseeing the investigation — could change that by issuing an explosive report after the election. But a midterm victory could also give Trump the confidence to shut down the investigation, through firing some combination of Mueller, Rod Rosenstein (who oversees Mueller) and Jeff Sessions, the attorney general. In their place, he could install loyalists unconcerned with the quaint notion that no one is above the law. An expanded Senate majority could ease the confirmation of those loyalists.

Even if Mueller's findings eventually became public, an unfinished report is different from a completed investigation that could include indictments of people close to Trump. It's easy to imagine Trump waving it away as a "witch hunt." Congressional Republicans may go even further and hold hearings investigating the investigators — the current and former law-enforcement officials whom Trump has unjustly blamed for the investigation.

Altogether, an election victory would probably give Trump the confidence to do what he has already signaled he wants to do: use the law as an instrument of political power rather than one of justice.

Health care

The Republican agenda on health care is deeply unpopular. It revolves around less insurance for the middle class and poor, to pay for tax cuts. In response, many Republicans have begun telling flat-out falsehoods about their positions on health care.

Now imagine if the party nonetheless won the midterms. “They will have learned a very specific lesson,” Jacob Leibenluft of the liberal Center for American Progress said. “They can get away with lying about what their actual policy is.”

There is every reason to believe Republicans would then try to cut health care funding more deeply. People in Republican circles told me that they did not anticipate a new attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act. “I would expect them to make some kind of run on health care again,” Ryan Streeter of the conservative American Enterprise Institute said, “but I would be surprised if they tried for full repeal.” Douglas Holtz-Eakin of the American Action Forum called repeal “a political rallying cry” and “not a legislative agenda.”

I’m not so sure. Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, suggested on Wednesday that Republicans would reconsider repeal if they kept Congress. Last year, it failed by only a single vote in the Senate — the vote of John McCain, who has since died.

“We should always assume that as soon as they have the votes, they will repeal the rest of the A.C.A.,” said Andy Slavitt, who ran Medicare and Medicaid under Obama. Even if they don’t, Slavitt added, they will probably make other cuts. Medicaid — which serves the poor, working class, disabled and elderly — is a likely target.

Other legislation

For decades now, the No. 1 Republican policy priority has been tax cuts that mostly benefit the rich. The only major piece of legislation signed by Trump was such a tax cut. Next year, there could be more cuts. One possibility would be the repeal of the estate tax, which applies to only a tiny fraction of the wealthiest households, said Jeffrey Miron of Harvard and the Cato Institute. Another possibility would be a technical change in inflation measurement, resulting in a large cut in investment taxes.

Apart from taxes, the party could try to go further to block corporate regulation. Right now, regulation tends to swing back and forth, depending on who holds the White House, but some congressional Republicans want to change that. They support a bill that would constrain future presidents from imposing regulations, in the name of reducing consumer costs. Liberal analysts have nicknamed it the “License to Kill Bill,” citing its effects on pollution, consumer safety and worker safety.

The most tempting Republican legislation may be one that involves political power rather than any specific policy area. Over the past decade, the party has become much more aggressive about restricting voting access, especially for Democratic-leaning groups like African-Americans and Native Americans. So far, these laws have been passed in states, rather than at federal level. But Myrna Pérez of the Brennan Center for Justice told me that she was worried that the state laws — like those requiring new forms of identification or reducing voting hours and polling places — could become a model for a federal law.

The goal would be as obvious as it is nefarious: Keep Republicans in power, even when they lack the support of most Americans.

The list here is clearly speculative, and not comprehensive. A Republican sweep would also ease the confirmation of federal judges, and it might encourage still harsher treatment of immigrants. Beyond any specific piece of legislation, though, a Republican victory would send a message. It

would be an endorsement (albeit a flawed one, probably based on a popular-vote loss) of Trump's vision for America.

In that America, congenital liars and sexual harassers don't get punished. They can become president. In that America, people with dark skin aren't guaranteed the same rights as people with white skin, and a violently warming planet is less important than corporate profits. In that America, the federal government protects the wealthy and powerful, often at the expense of everyone else.

By now, no one should have any illusions about how Trump will behave if he faces no restraints.