

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Beyond Election Night

*What will it all mean — for Obamacare, for the Senate, and for 2016?*

By Michael Tanner

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The midterm elections are finally over, pending runoffs, and it looks as if it was a good night for Republicans. And while this column is being written before the final results are in, there are several things that we can take away from this election.

**Voters have not fallen in love with Republicans.** A win is a win is a win. Still, Republicans will be making a mistake if they interpret this election as an endorsement of the Republican agenda. There is no doubt that this was a clear repudiation of President Obama and *his* agenda. But the Republican agenda — what exactly *is* that? Moreover, polls show that, as Rand Paul indelicately put it, the Republican brand still “sucks.” Even as they were pulling the lever for GOP candidates, voters held an unfavorable opinion of the Republican party, by 53 to 36 percent. It does appear that, by backing away from or downplaying their stance on divisive social issues, Republicans were able to improve their standing with women, young people, and even Hispanics, but the party’s long-term demographic problems remain. If Republicans want to build on last night’s success, particularly for 2016, they will have to come up with a positive agenda, and prove that they can govern without surrendering on basic principles. That’s a tough order.

**Obamacare is not getting more popular.** Throughout the fall, Democrats and the media have asserted that Obamacare was no longer an issue. Headlines like “[Obamacare Losing Power as a Campaign Weapon](#)” and “Repeal of Health Law, Once Central to G.O.P., Is Side Issue in Campaigns” from the *New York Times* became staples of the election coverage. In reality, however, opposition to Obamacare was a major issue for nearly every winning Republican candidate. In fact, Republicans ran more campaign ads about Obamacare than any other issue — more than 160,000, according to the Wesleyan Media Project. Since Labor Day alone, Republicans ran more than 51,000 anti-Obamacare ads. There is a reason for that: The RealClearPolitics average of polls shows the voters have an unfavorable opinion of the law by a 13.5 point margin. The health-care law is unlikely to be repealed in the next two years, but the evidence suggests that it will be an albatross for Democrats for some time to come.

**This was a very good election for Rand Paul.** Perhaps no politician earned as many IOUs as Kentucky’s junior senator, who appeared in at least 32 states on behalf of GOP candidates. It was more than just a question of building good will for a future presidential run, however. In contrast, Ted Cruz appeared in just eleven states and Marco Rubio in nine. Chris Christie appeared in 37 states, but mostly on behalf of gubernatorial candidates in his role as chairman of the Republican

Governors Association. Paul can argue, with some authority, that he was called upon so frequently because his brand of libertarian-tinged Republicanism was more in tune with voters — and more in demand by his fellow Republicans — than the harder-edged conservatism of some of his potential rivals.

**Mitch McConnell will not be a happy camper.** As majority leader, McConnell will face competing pressures from his newly empowered caucus. On the one hand, there will be pressure to prove that a Republican majority doesn't mean just more of the same. He will have to show that Republicans can accomplish something, *anything*. While continuing to block the president's worst initiatives is important, it will not be enough for Republicans to run on in 2016. At the same time, Senator Ted Cruz and his allies will be demanding that Republicans confront the president. If Republicans appear too quick to compromise, they face a revolt on the right. And, if balancing those competing demands isn't tough enough, McConnell will have to do this in a chamber where half of his caucus is either running for president or thinking about a vice-presidential nod. Paul, Cruz, Rubio, Jeff Sessions, Lindsey Graham, and others will have priorities that don't necessarily line up with those of the majority leader.

**Just 440 days until the Iowa caucuses.** It won't be long before every vote and every statement will be dissected for its impact on the presidential election. All the more so since, as noted above, virtually the entire Republican party is at least considering running. The window for getting anything done will be remarkably small.

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