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To: Interested parties

From: Stanley Greenberg, Greenberg Research  
Nancy Zdunkewicz, Democracy Corps  
Page Gardner, Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund

## **The Rising American Electorate & White Working Class Strike Back: Extended memo from post-election research**

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The Democrats had a very big election on November 6<sup>th</sup>, picking up 40 House seats – the biggest Democratic gain in House seats [since Watergate](#), electing a record-breaking [102](#) women to the House, and flipping six statehouses, at least 380 legislative seats and seven governors' mansions. Democrats now occupy nearly half of the 50 governors' mansions, including winning all the races in the Blue Wall states that allowed President Donald Trump to win the Electoral College. Democrats won control of the House with a national congressional margin greater than the 2010 Tea Party wave (8 points and growing), a shift of [10 points on average from 2016 and 21 points in the seats that flipped](#). The enormity of this cannot be understated.

Democrats also pushed turnout to a stunning [49.4 percent](#), compared to just 36.7 in 2014. This is thanks to a combination of special candidates, a surge in activism and fundraising catalyzed by the Women's March and Donald Trump's election, and the incredible efforts to register and turnout voters by the *Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund* and the *Voter Participation Center*.

On behalf of *Women's Voices, Women Vote Action Fund, Democracy Corps* has conducted an 'Election Night' survey of 1,250 registered and 2018 voters nationally, including of 900 voters in 15 battleground states in 2018 and 2020, in order to understand the shifts that changed the landscape and balance of power in the country.<sup>1</sup> Below are the key elements that came together to produce major gains for Democrats, despite malapportioned districts and suppressed votes.

- President Trump nationalized the election around himself, producing an intense anti-Trump reaction that consolidated the Democrats and the Rising American Electorate – unmarried women, persons of color and millennials – who demanded elected leaders be a check on Donald Trump.
- All varieties of women turned against Trump. The revolt was led by white millennial women, white working class women and white unmarried women – each of which played

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<sup>1</sup> An election phone poll of 1,250 registered voters, including 900 in a 15-state battleground was conducted November 4-7, 2018 from a voter-file sample. 1125 nationally and 800 in the battleground were voters in 2018. Two-thirds of respondents were contacted on cell phones in order to accurately reflect the American electorate. Votes and vote share for key demographics were weighted to the AP VoteCast. The margin of error for the full sample is +/- 2.77 and +/- 3.27 in the 15-state presidential battleground at a 95% confidence interval.

a bigger role than the white college women who have received so much credit for Democratic gains.

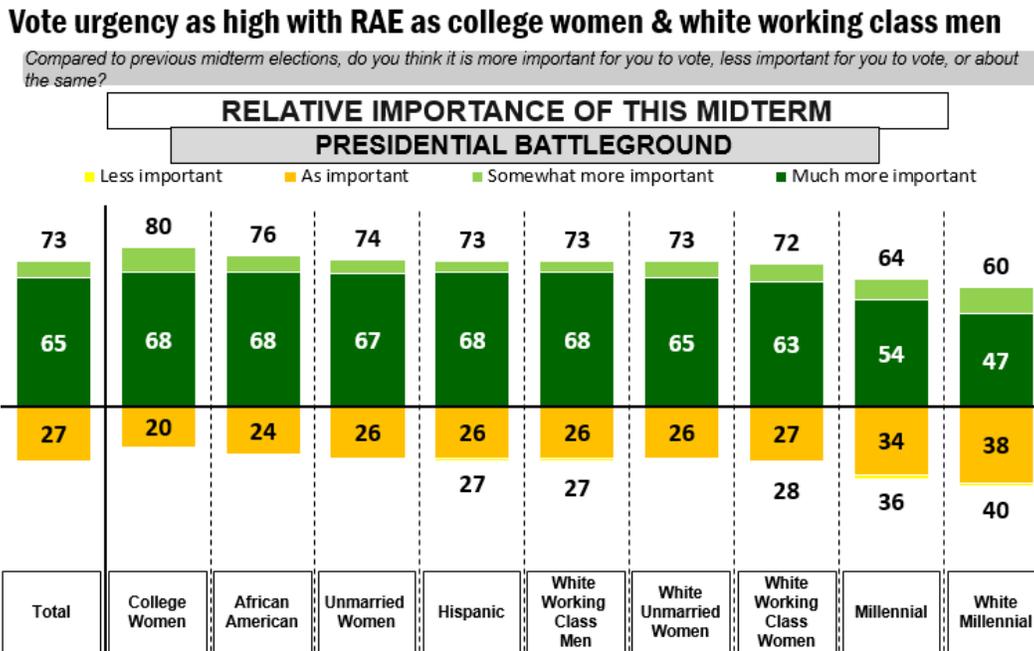
- African Americans and unmarried women pushed the promise of the Rising American Electorate (RAE) close to its full potential with their highest off-year vote share and strongest vote for Democrats ever. Millennials and Hispanics also managed to raise their share by one point each in a high turnout midterm, but all progressives will press for more in elections ahead. (For more, look to the upcoming report on *WVWVAF*'s ongoing panel of RAE in the battleground.)
- A significant portion of male and female white working class voters abandoned Mr. Trump and his Republican allies. White working class voters, the men in particular, were the “forgotten Americans” at the heart of the Trump base. Democrats raised their vote margin with white working class men by 14 points and with the women by 13 points. They still lost these voters by 34 and 14 points, respectively, and need to run far better, but 2018 was a big start.
- President Trump declared war on immigrants and on multicultural America, and succeeded in making immigration a voting issue for the GOP base, but it backfired among other voters. Trump and the GOP lost the national popular vote by eight points, but lost the debate over whether immigrants are a strength or a burden by 20.
- Democrats powerfully attacked corruption – including the GOP tax cut for the rich and corporations that threatened Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid – and demanded an economy that works for all, as well as a health care system that protects those with pre-existing conditions.
- Democrats picked up many House seats in 2018 because they raised their share of the suburban vote by four points to give Democrats a 53 to 45 percent majority. But they also cut the Republicans’ margin in rural areas by 13 points, according to the Edison exit poll and by seven points in one by Catalist. Democrats lost rural America by somewhere between 14 and 18 points as Trump pushed his supporters to vote down ballot, and Democrats need to do better to win decisively, especially in Senate races.
- Trump energized his GOP base and they voted, but his rallies and entreaties did not work for the GOP moderates. They are one-quarter of Republican identifiers and an even greater share of the GOP outside the South, and 40 percent either voted for the Democrat or stayed home. They clearly played some part in the off-year losses.

### **The anti-Trump backlash**

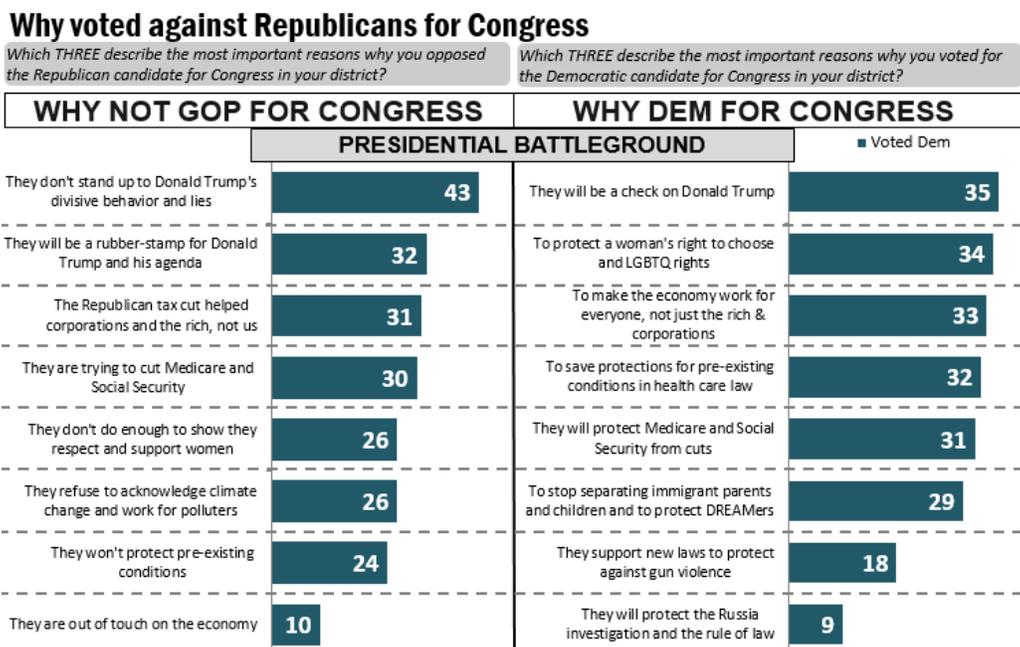
The shift towards the Democrats was produced in the first instance by an intense anti-Trump reaction among women, particularly those in the Rising American Electorate (minorities, millennials and unmarried women) and in the suburbs, as the President nationalized the election around himself. Fully 46 percent of the country strongly disapproved of Trump – compared to only 34

percent who strongly approved. That intense negative reaction reached 84 percent with African American women, 64 percent with millennial women, and 59 percent with unmarried women and college women.

President Trump’s personalization and nationalization of the election succeeded in raising the stakes with white working class men, two-thirds of whom said this election was much more important than prior midterms. But Trump’s provocations also led college women and African Americans to assign more importance to the election than his working class base and pushed African Americans, Hispanics, college women, and unmarried women to the same level of urgency.



The pro- and anti-Trump sentiment was so strong that three-quarters of those voting in the House and nearly 90 percent of Senate voters never considered voting for another candidate.



The top reason that Democratic House voters gave to vote *against* the Republican and *for* the Democrat across the presidential battleground was to have leaders who will be a check on President Trump. That was also the strongest reason to vote for the Democrat in the U.S. Senate election in those contested states.

**The shift across all types of women**

Democrats won not just because white college women rebelled against Trump’s misogyny and disrespect of women. Every possible category of women rebelled. Yes, House Democrats increased their vote margin nationally among white women with at least a four-year degree by 13 points compared with the Clinton-Trump margin in 2016. But Democrats also pushed up their vote margin among white millennial women by 18 points, white working class women by 13 points, and white unmarried women by 10 points.

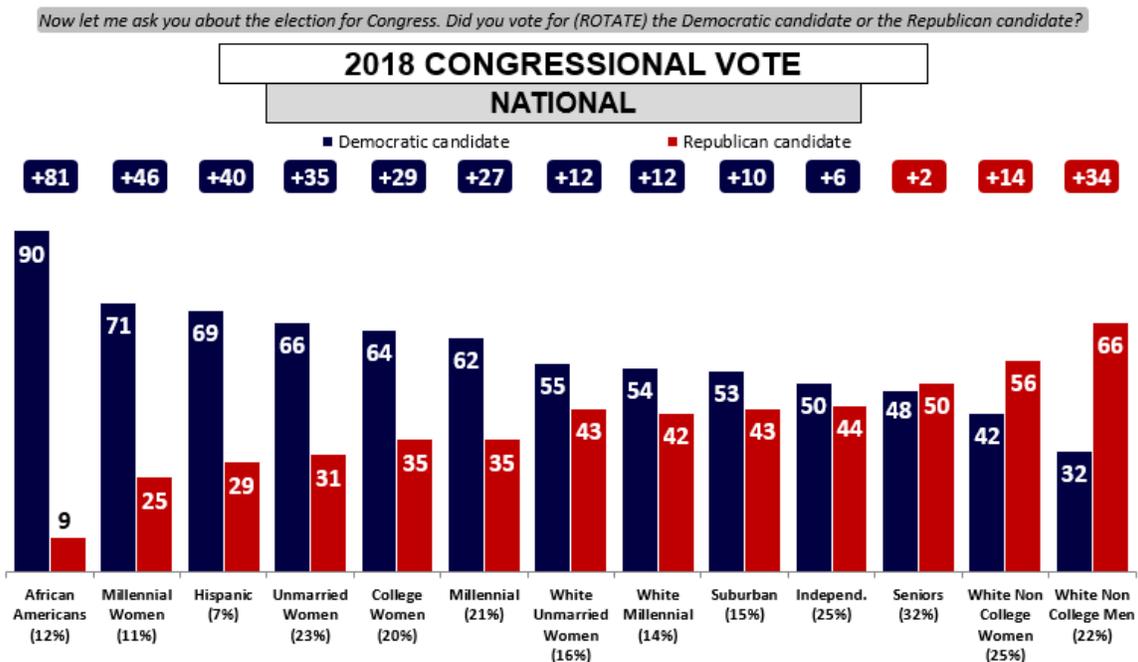
In fact, the white college women who were supposed to be the “fuel for this Democratic wave” played a smaller role in the Democrats’ increased 2018 margin than white, working class women, because the former were 15 percent of midterm voters and the latter 25 percent.

This gender dynamic produced a House Democratic caucus [that will be 38 percent female \(equal to the number of Democratic Members who are white men\)](#). It produced a House GOP caucus that is at least 90 percent white men.

**The promise of the Rising American Electorate realized**

The Rising American Electorate of African Americans, Hispanics, unmarried women, and millennials stepped up in every possible way, from their impressive turn out to their unprecedented midterm vote for Democrats.

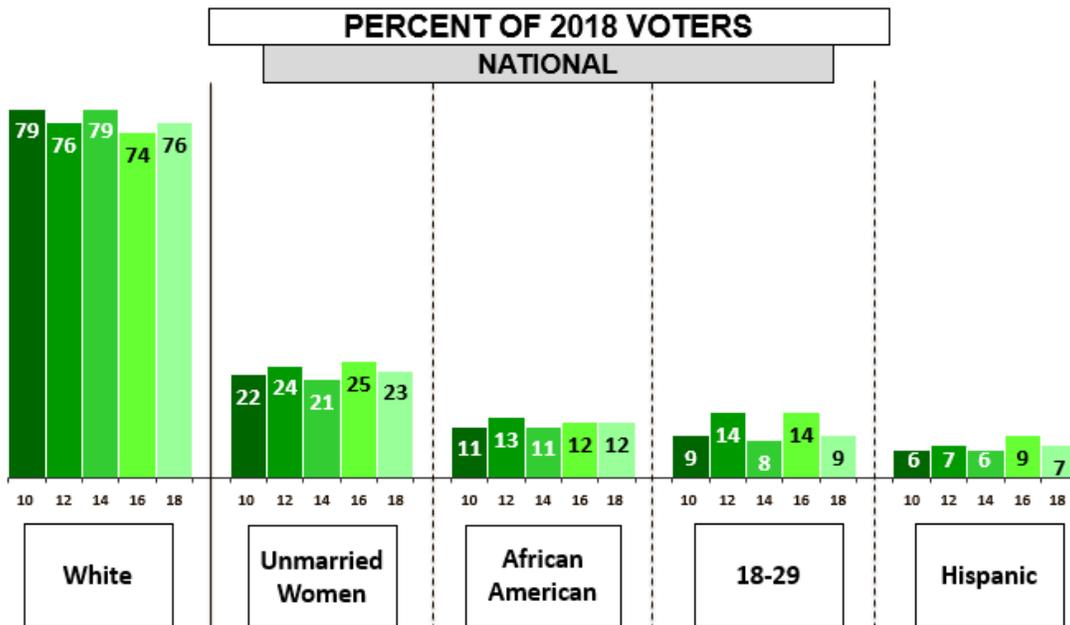
**How the House vote breaks down**



African Americans continued to play their big off-year role with their near universal support for Democrats (90 percent). Seven-in-ten millennial women and Hispanic voters supported Democrats, putting them at the center of the base with the two-thirds of unmarried women who supported Democrats.

African Americans and unmarried women deliver their highest midterm vote share ever, thanks in no small part to the work of *WVWVAF* and the *Voter Participation Center*. Millennials and Hispanics also managed to raise their share by one point each in a high turnout midterm, but all progressives will press for more in elections ahead.

### Unmarried women and African Americans showed up big!



### Republicans facing stunning losses with white working class voters

In 2016, the white working class men that Trump spoke most forcefully to as the “forgotten Americans” gave him 71 percent of their votes and gave only 23 percent to Hillary Clinton. This year, the Republicans won their votes with a still-impressive margin of 66 to 32 percent. But what was essentially a three-to-one margin was deflated to two-to-one. The Republicans’ loss of 14 points among white working class men, and 13 points among white working class women, affected a lot of races.

Working people are no fools, and Mr. Trump [promised](#) them a Republican president who would never cut Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid; who would repeal Obamacare but provide “insurance for everybody”; who would get rid of bad trade deals and “drain the swamp,” as he never tired of saying. Instead, had Trump’s effort to replace Obamacare passed, it would have imposed vast cuts in retirement programs and driven up health insurance costs. His tax reforms were heavily weighted to large corporations and the top 1 percent.

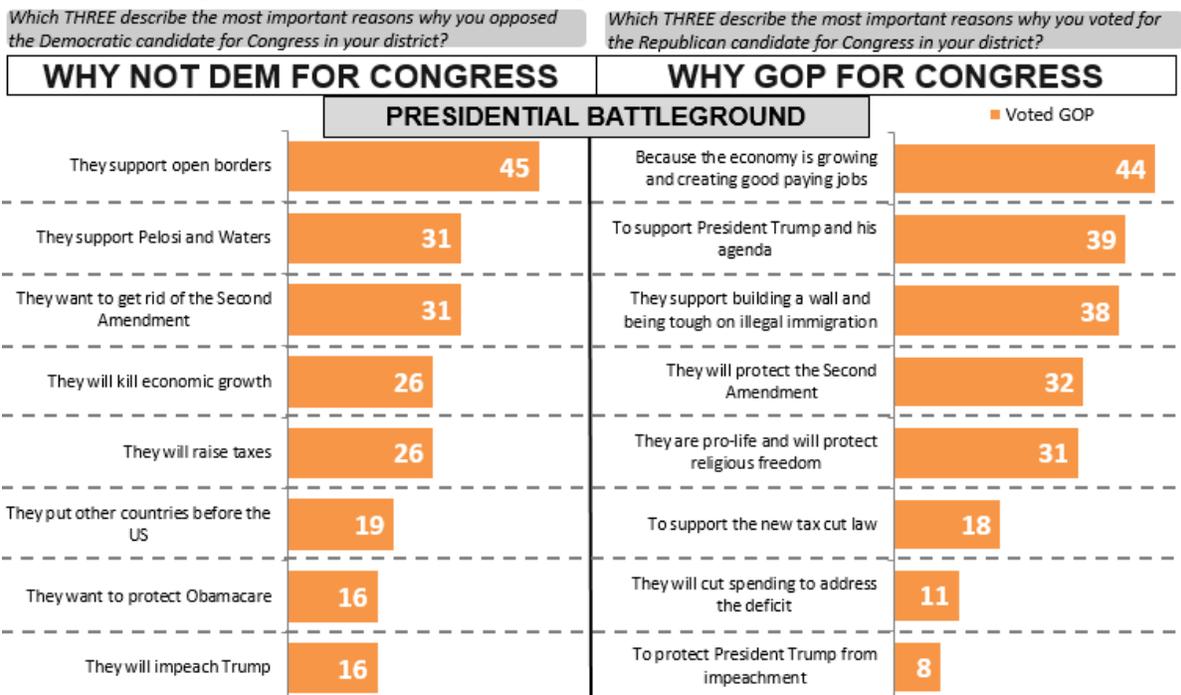
So, it is no surprise that more than half of white working class men now say, Trump is “self-dealing and looking for himself.” The Democratic Senate candidates delivered that critique and romped to victory across the Midwest. The Republican’s House margin was cut in half in the Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio races, and Democratic Senate candidates won these states by double digits.

Democrats still lost the white working class men in 2018 by 34 points and the women by 14, so they have a lot to do, but 10 percent of 2016 Trump voters supported Democrats this year, and 40 percent of moderate Republicans either voted Democratic or stayed home. This setback will be corrosive unless a post-wave President Trump decides to acknowledge the “shellacking” and starts to actually “drain the swamp.” Don’t hold your breath.

**A multicultural America pushed back on immigration & diversity**

Third, Democrats made big gains because Trump declared war on immigrants – and on multicultural America – and lost. Trump got his shrinking bloc of voters focused on immigration by sending 5,500 troops to put barbwire at the border, warning repeatedly of the immigrant “invasion”, and running a Willie Horton-type ad featuring a Mexican who had murdered two U.S. law enforcement officers. His ugly campaign succeeded in making immigration and the border a voting issue for the Republican base and “open borders” was the top reason given for voting against a Democratic candidate by GOP voters. But it backfired among other voters.

**Why voted against Democrats for Congress**

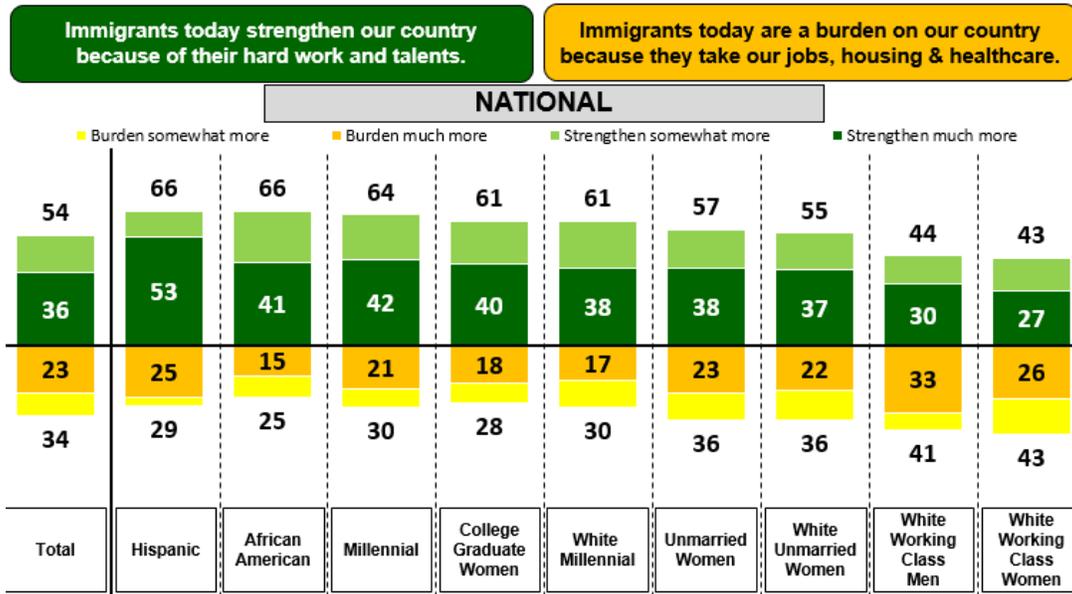


On Election Day, a stunning 54 percent of those who voted said immigrants “strengthen our country.” The GOP lost the national popular vote by eight points, but Trump lost the debate over

whether immigrants are a strength or a burden by 20 points. Trump got more than half of Republicans to believe immigrants were a burden, but three quarters of Democrats and a large majority of independents concluded that America benefits from immigration.

**2018 voters believe immigrants strengthen the country, not a burden**

*Which one of the following statements comes closer to your point of view, even if neither is exactly right?*



For their part, the Democrats owned their diversity. They supported comprehensive immigration reform and the Dreamers, opposed Trump’s border wall and opposed the separation of children from their families. They nominated African-American candidates for governor in Georgia and Florida and fought the suppression of minority voters. When it was over, the Democrats got more votes and created a new Democratic House majority that is roughly 40 percent women, 40 percent white men, and 40 percent people of color. It also has more LGBTQ members than ever before.

In short, the Republicans lost badly in the House by running as an anti-immigrant party, while the Democrats made major gains as a self-confident diverse party.

**Powerful attacks on the GOP tax cut for the rich & assault on pre-existing conditions**

The Democrats also shifted the vote in the midterms because they attacked the Republican tax cut for corporations and the rich that threatens Medicare and Social Security, demanded an economy that worked for all, and vowed to protect health care for those with pre-existing conditions.

Elites, pundits, and the GOP trumpeted the best economy in living memory, yet they were totally out of touch with how much ordinary voters are on the edge and struggling financially. The majority of voters said that their wages were not keeping up with rising costs, particularly rising health care costs. Republicans failed to understand just how “out of control” health care costs had become for working families and how they were causing them the greatest uncertainty. The

fear that Republican would take the country back to the days when people could be denied insurance for pre-existing conditions or face unbearable premiums was made real by the Republicans ideological assault on the Affordable Care Act, Medicare, and Medicaid. Democratic candidates’ support for protections for pre-existing conditions was the second most important reason to vote for the Democrat for Senate in the battleground.

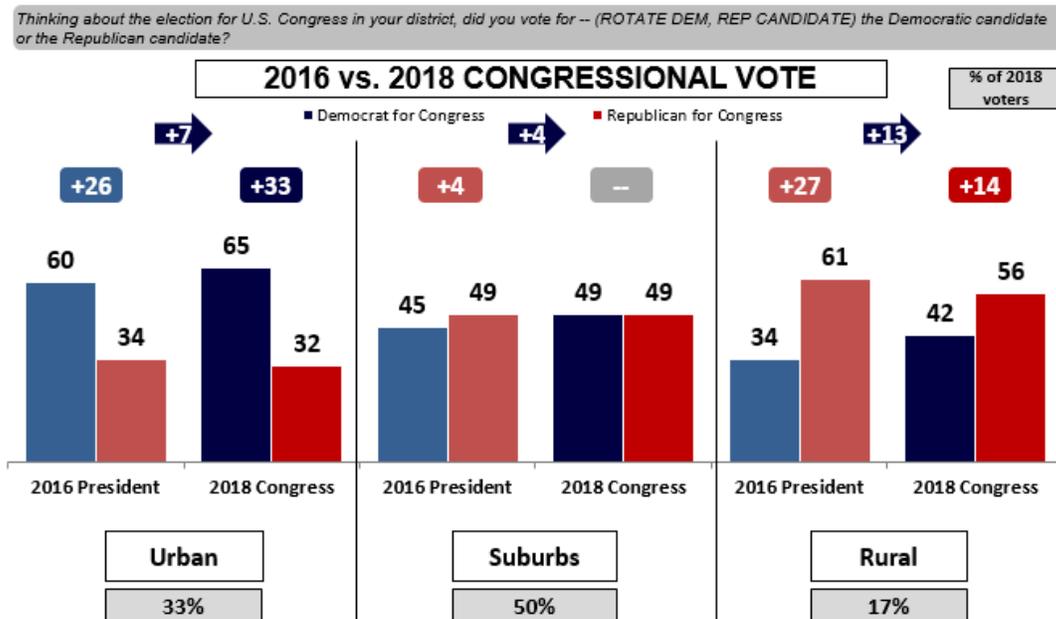
Meanwhile, majorities reported that the so-called “middle class tax cut” had not benefitted them personally, and indeed, benefitted the rich and corporations at their expense. No wonder six-in-ten voters said Donald Trump is “self-dealing and looking out for himself” – including two-thirds of independents, half strongly.

The Democrats ran against the Trump economy and opposed the Trump tax cut for the rich that threatened Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. That became the core content of national Democrats’ closing argument, and voters’ desire for an economy for all became one of the top reasons to support them on Election Day

**Suburban gains key, but don’t miss the surprising rural pull back**

Democrats could not have picked up as many House seats as they did in 2018 without raising their share of the vote by four points in the suburbs, which have grown to encompass 50 percent of voters. Hillary Clinton had won many of these districts in 2016, so it was clear that any further shift in the Democrats’ direction would prove consequential. But counter to the prevailing narrative, Democrats made their biggest gains not there, but in the rural parts of the country.

**Broad geographic shift, with rural strongest: Edison exits**



Democrats cut the Republicans’ margin in rural areas by 13 points, according to the Edison exit

poll and by seven points in one by Catalist. Democrats still lost rural America by somewhere between 14 and 18 points as Trump pushed his supporters to vote GOP down-ballot. That leaves Democratic office holders there exposed, with implications for the Senate, and Democrats still need to run stronger there. But it shouldn't conceal the fact that Democrats actually made progress in rural areas.

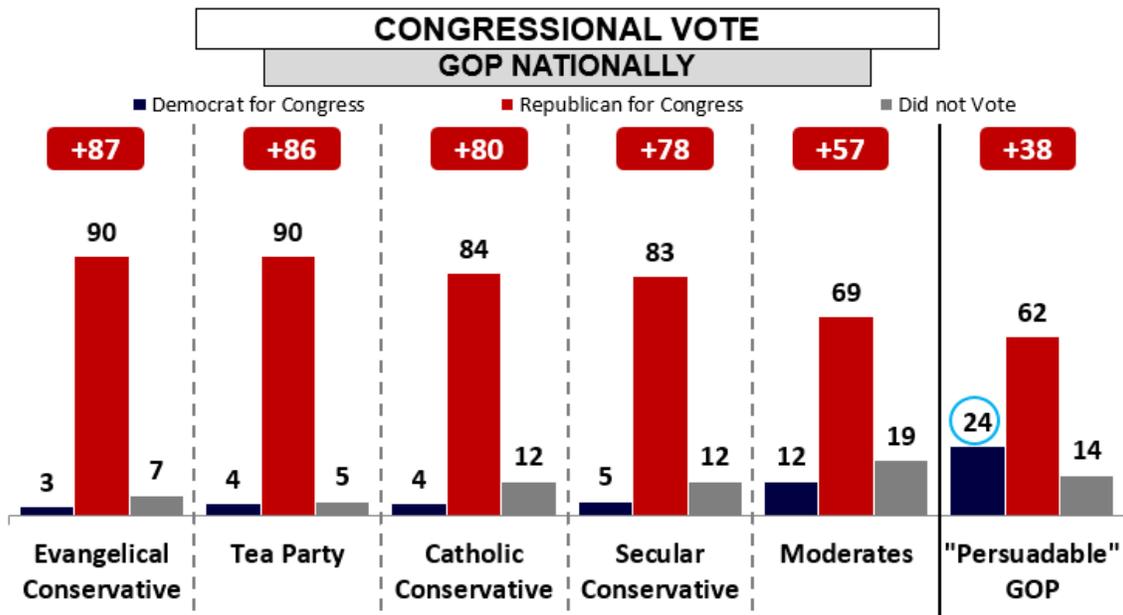
**The demoralization and defection of factions of the GOP**

Democratic candidates got a further edge from the moderate GOP vote, which might surprise them. GOP Moderates are one-quarter of Republicans and just 69 percent voted Republican: 12 percent defected to the Democrats and 19 percent stayed home. That might have played a bigger role outside the South and in the suburbs where they are more likely to live.

The “persuadable GOP” – a group of targetable Republicans developed by *Democracy Corps* — are 40 percent larger and may have played an even bigger role in this wave: one-quarter voted for Democrats and 14 percent stayed at home instead.

**Defections in GOP, including 40% of moderates**

*Thinking about the election for U.S. Congress in your district, did you vote for -- (ROTATE DEM, REP CANDIDATE) the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?*



President Trump understands the importance of immigration to the Republican Party, and he was able to consolidate the other parts of the GOP base.

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This post-election study shows that Democrats were able to create a powerful brew that produced major gains in the House and states, despite apportioned districts rigged to be unassailable and

election laws engineered to suppress minority votes. It was powered by shifts in vote and turnout among women and the diverse Rising American Electorate. Outside of the RAE, the Democrats may have permanently changed their base and the voters open to them, particularly when Donald Trump leads an anti-immigrant Republican Party. In the face of his divisive campaign, parts of rural and working class America peeled off.

The Democratic wave exposed President Trump's vulnerability and suggests a less polarized country. Democrats still need to run stronger in the rural areas that President Trump won in a landslide and with the working class men and women at the core of his base, but that task is for another day.