

Bill Kaplan: 2026 midterm elections, what's needed

Posted on Monday, Feb 17, 2025

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Trump narrowly won the popular vote in November (less than 50 percent) and the Electoral College (less than 30,000 votes in Wisconsin). The GOP won 4 more seats in the Senate, gaining control, but the GOP-led House lost 1 seat net. In Wisconsin, Democrats gained 14 state legislative seats. This was not the 1964 or 1972 blowouts, when LBJ and Nixon claimed mandates. Voters got an escalated Vietnam War and Watergate. Both presidencies ended in failure. Lesson for Trump. With upcoming 2026 congressional and gubernatorial elections, Democrats must heed the lessons from the November elections. It's always the economy. Voters need to know that Democrats are listening and have their backs on unemployment, inflation, delinquent car loans, rising credit card debt with exorbitant interest rates, unaffordable housing, healthcare coverage and not enough savings for emergencies. Moreover, Democrats waited far too long to end open borders, and were caught flat-footed on crime.

Makes winning difficult. Then there's identify group politics. Trump's increased margins among Blacks, Latinos and women who favor reproductive rights show the folly of identity group appeals. Economic fears are always paramount. In addition, Democrats can't win nationally without a big tent party (Gaylord Nelson taught me that basic rule of politics). Instead of DEI and pronouns why not emphasize civil rights and the Golden Rule. Furthermore, Democrats must embrace religious Americans without litmus tests.

Finally, Democrats must reconnect to rural-urban working class voters. What sustained the Democratic Party for decades was that it had their backs. The party of FDR must offer an economic program that bring these voters home. Time to listen and drop the lectures. It was appalling when some Democrats criticized Wisconsin GOP Governor Scott Walker, like most Wisconsinites, for not having a college degree. Democrats must engage rural-urban working class voters, emphasizing that government must always have their backs. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony

Evers does this well. And, the common sense down-to-earth Evers wins.

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Luckily, Wisconsin has a Democratic leader, Rebecca Cooke, who is “seriously” considering running again for the 3rd Congressional District seat. Cooke ran one of the best campaigns in the nation, almost winning despite difficult headwinds. Cooke overperformed Vice President Kamala Harris and Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin. To overperform Baldwin, Wisconsin’s strongest Democrat, is something else! Cooke raised the necessary funding and won her primary handily.

Most importantly, she connected to rural-working class voters. More than half of Congress are millionaires (Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson is in the top 30). Cooke, raised on a dairy farm, most certainly is not. Why not someone like her in Congress? Cooke avoids “purity tests”, while always maintaining that the economy is the number one issue. She knows the billionaires in Washington, D.C. don’t care about regular folks and that their trade wars will hurt Wisconsin farmers and workers. Cooke will work with anyone, including Republicans, as long as it helps regular folks. She is the real deal, and will check Musk and Trump, standing up for regular folks. Cooke’s approach is the future.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.