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What these 'ominous numbers' should be telling the GOP

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Republicans are exuberant after a banner election where they surprisingly won the presidency, both houses of Congress, almost certainly guaranteed a majority on the Supreme Court and improved their standing in the state houses. But even with this outcome, Republicans may want to pay some attention to the ominous numbers in their results and to a few historic election reversals. As the past has repeatedly shown, the public is quite willing to turn on the party in power.

Midterm elections usually represent a bad result for the party holding the presidency — Obama's first midterm saw the Democrats lose the House and his second saw them lose the Senate. Due to the fact that the Democrats are the ones defending Senate seats — 25 of the 33 seats up are Democrats or their independent allies, the Republicans can feel the wind at their back.

The GOP may feel that they can defeat the historic trends. It has been done before — George W. Bush managed to have a great mid-term result in 2002 after also winning the White House while losing the popular vote. But it is against the historic norm. Most times, the party in power does poorly in the midterm.

But there are two particular midterm elections that should serve as flashing warning signs for any party coming off big victories — 1894 and 1994. Both rank among the two most important midterm elections in American history and came two years after one party won a seemingly sweeping mandate for power. Both saw historic reversals. And, perhaps more importantly, both completely reshaped the political landscape for decades to come.

In 1892, the Democrats, led by Grover Cleveland, managed to gain control of the Presidency and both houses of Congress for the first time since before the Civil War. The Democrats looked like they were finally ascending back to the role as the major party in government. But their success hid some critical party divides. While every political party has its cleavages, the Gilded Age Democrats were attempting to merge support for immigrants and big city residents with rural southerners and segregationists.

The big issues of the day for the party were trade policy and whether to promote inflation in the form of the coinage of silver. Comparatively, the Republicans of the day had a unified policy front. A severe recession in 1893 helped split the party and crush its hopes. In 1894, the Democrats lost 116 in the House and five in the Senate. In 1896, they lost the presidency, and except for the brief time when the Republicans split helped elect Woodrow Wilson, the Democrats were effectively completely out of power until the Great Depression hit.

In 1994, the Democrats were also coming off a high. After being out of the presidency since 1980, the party had once again consolidated total federal control. The Democrats were in a stronger position than a century before — they had controlled the House since 1954 and they had been in charge of the Senate for all but the first six years of the Reagan administration since 1954.

As a century before, the Democrats were divided on a number of key policies — trade, social issues, gun control and healthcare. But in 1994, the Republicans came roaring back, shattering the Democrats New Deal coalition and taking control of both branches of Congress and many state legislatures. Since then, the Republicans have controlled the House for all but four years.

With all their political strength, the Republicans of today are staring at a stark policy divide. The Republican Party leadership and long-standing ideological positions are almost completely opposed to the ones that got Donald Trump into office. Their president-elect ran as neo-isolationist, calling for a pull back on many foreign alliances. He was also an extreme protectionist, who would crack down on Wall Street, the carried interest tax and may be open to numerous social policy positions similar to the Democrats. During the Republican primaries, Trump was basically alone on stage in espousing these views.

The GOP has for years been very strong proponents of free trade agreements. The largest wing in the party has also been in favor of an extremely activist foreign policy — they've attacked Barack Obama for not being more supportive of action. The party has opposed tax increases, including changing the carried interest, and many have been opposed to same sex marriage laws and many of the social policies that Trump has made noises on adopting.

And the House Speaker just called for a radical revamp of Medicare, a position highly unlikely to be taken well by the party's largest base — senior citizens. The head of Trump's social security transition team has in the past called for privatizing social security. None of these positions jibe with the stated philosophy of the party leader.

The Democrats may have their own divides, but they are relatively small. Trade has been one issue that has divided Democrats, but following this election, there is an excellent chance that the Democrats will find a way to unify on the subject.

In addition to these facts, there is the basic numbers that should concern Republicans. For the sixth out of the last seven presidential elections, the Republicans lost the popular vote. While it is not costing them the White House, counting on the Electoral College and gerrymandering to repeatedly save the day may be completely unsustainable.

Just look at the Republicans practical margins of victory in the presidential elections — the shift in voters needed for the election to flip. In the three Republican triumphs, this shift was significantly smaller than in the four Democratic ones. A shift of a little over 200,000 voters in three states in 2012 would throw the election to Romney. While the numbers are still out for the 2016, we can see that it would have likely have taken about 100,000 — that number may go down a bit — to give Clinton the election. It seems that the Republican margin for error in keeping the White House is significantly less than the Democratic one.

The Republicans had a great Election Day. With total control over the federal government, anyone would rather have the cards they are playing. But any party that continually fails to win the popular vote and that has such a deep schism in political policy between the president and the established leadership ignores the lessons of history at their peril.

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