



## Digital Activism

### Internet and Politics in the 2018 Midterm Elections

#### Executive Summary

Over the past 20 years, digital culture and tools have drastically changed the ways that politicians interact with the public in the United States. Online tools – ranging from social media platforms to apps designed to pinpoint swing voters – have radically changed how activists organize and candidates campaign. While many new technologies are wholly online, some of the most important ones facilitate in-person canvassing, a tried and true method to engage voters.

This Columbia University case study focuses on the experiences of student groups that participated in the 2018 midterm elections as voters, canvassers, and organizers. One group, Columbia Democrats, went door-to-door in New York and several Southern states, whereas the Temple University College Republicans focused locally, canvassing outside Philadelphia. This new generation of “Digital Natives” have helped create and popularize new campaign methods, and in 2018 they were unexpectedly engaged for a midterm. This case includes interviews with Michael Nutter, former Philadelphia Mayor; Basil Smikle, Executive Director of the New York State Democratic Party; Ross Wolfe, chairman of the Philadelphia Young Republicans, and Anya Schiffrin, director of director of the Technology, Media, and Communications program at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA).

The case includes the following elements:

- a) Video Intro and Discussions – Available Online
- b) Written Case Study (This Document)
- c) Annex A – Original Documents
- d) Annex B – Selected Interviewee Bios and Interview Transcripts (not needed for core case, presented for research purposes)

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## The Coming of Digital Natives

In the days leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, the Republican and Democratic parties scrambled for control of key federal and state offices. For two years since Donald Trump took office in 2016, Republicans had controlled not only the presidency but both chambers of Congress. Democrats were eager to take control of the House of Representatives, thereby checking Trump and his party's legislative power.

At the state level, the stakes of elections were just as high. Republicans held twenty-six trifectas, in which they controlled both legislative chambers and the governorship, whereas Democrats had only eight (counting Nebraska as a de facto Republican trifecta despite its technically nonpartisan unicameral legislature).<sup>1</sup> While many seats would be up for reelection in 2020, this disparity, if maintained, would give Republicans a marked advantage in Congressional redistricting after the 2020 Census.

Colleges and universities in the U.S. had long been hotbeds of political activism, but students were particularly engaged in the 2018 elections. Roused by the divisive politics of the Trump administration, they volunteered to campaign in races across the country. Students belonging to Trump's loyal conservative base flaunted Republican "victories" since 2016. These included typical party priorities such as tax cuts, deregulation, and ideological court appointments, in addition to Trump priorities, such as curbing immigration from Latin American and majority-Muslim countries.

On the other side of the aisle, Democratic students were alarmed by the same developments their Republican peers championed. But they also focused particularly important to their generation: global warming, growing inequality, college debt, access to health care, and uncertain employment prospects in a globalizing, automating world. While not the case everywhere, Democrats maintained an edge among most student bodies. In 2016, 35.5% of students considered themselves left-of-center, compared to 22.2% on the right.<sup>2</sup>

For many students, 2018 marked their debut in civic engagement. Generation Z—those born between 1995 and 2010—brought a progressive attitude and tech-savvy skill set to politics. As the first "digitally native" generation, 21st-century college students were comfortable sharing their views on social media, browsing the internet for their information, and consuming news at a faster pace than ever. Digital technology was also integral to the school, work, and social lives of most of Gen Z. As they got involved in politics, they embraced new tech tools to manage the nuts and bolts of campaigns—tracking canvassing, identifying target areas, and managing feedback collected both online and offline.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Rabinowitz and Ashlyn Still, "Democrats are dominating state-level races." *The Washington Post*, Nov. 17, 2019 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trifecta>).

<sup>2</sup> Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E.B., Zimmerman, H.B., Aragon, M.C., Sayson, H.W., and Rios-Aguilar, C., "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016," p. 42. UCLA Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 2017. (<https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2016.pdf>).

In 2018, Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X (ages 18 to 52, collectively) outvoted Baby Boomers and other older generations for the second straight election (by 62.2 million to 61 million). Millennials and Gen X accounted for 21.9 million more votes in 2018 than in the previous midterm election of 2014, even though their cohort only grew by 2.5 million.<sup>3</sup>

Generation Z also embraced direct, grassroots politics in 2018. Driven by a sense of crisis, they plunged into local and national organizing, protests and demonstrations, and volunteering for political campaigns. Some even took on leadership roles in organizations and ran for public office themselves.

### **A Brief History of Digital Activism**

While the internet had existed in early, limited forms since the 1960s, it did not become widely commercially available until the late 1980s, with the creation of e-mail. The personal uses of instant, large-scale communication quickly became clear, and the World Wide Web began entering households in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> One of the earliest prominent internet enthusiasts was then-Senator Al Gore, who in 1978 coined the term “information superhighway” for a proposed high-speed information technology network connecting all Americans.<sup>5</sup> Later, as Vice President from 1993 to 2001, Gore pushed to expand the Internet beyond its original users in the military, academia, and science. Optimists hoped that the Internet would inaugurate a utopic new age of “digital democracy.” With desktop computers, citizens would be able to get whatever information they needed, engage in high-level debates, use sophisticated data to devise smart policy, and make decisions in elections and referenda. Perhaps the first major instance of popular civic action online was during the 1998 battle over Bill Clinton’s impeachment, when MoveOn.org was created to petition Congress to “censure President Clinton and move on.” It gathered over half a million signatures.<sup>6</sup>

Soon, the internet’s fundraising potential in politics came to the fore. Vermont Governor Howard Dean, in his 2004 presidential campaign, rallied a base of liberal activists on across the country with Meetup, an online organizing platform. He raised over \$50 million in small donations that averaged less than \$80. Though he ultimately lost the lead he once held in the Democratic primary, Barack Obama successfully used similar tools in his 2008 campaign, catapulting him to the presidency. With a team of tech-savvy consultants, Obama used websites, videos, social media, and constant outreach and follow-up to create an online avalanche.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Cilluffo and Richard Fry, “Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X outvoted older generations in 2018 midterms.” Pew Research Center, May 29, 2019 ([pewrsr.ch/2WwQE3W](https://www.pewresearch.org/2019/05/29/gen-z-millennials-and-gen-x-outvoted-older-generations-in-2018-midterms/)).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Aaron Dennis and Robert Kahn. “Foundation of the Internet.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Skyler Lewis and Brett Anderson, *Mobile IP: Design Principles and Practice*, p. 50. Scientific e-Resources, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Brownstein, “Internet, Polarized Politics Create an Opening for a Third Party.” *The Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 25, 2005. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-apr-25-na-outlook25-story.html>)

Once in office, he had amassed a database with millions of names that he could use to rally his supporters on a wide range of issues; he also gathered massive amounts of fine-grain data, which he could use to “microtarget” his policy and electoral appeals. Obama promised to make digital tools central to his presidency;<sup>7</sup> in 2015, he issued an executive order directing the government to “use behavioral science insights to better serve the American People.”<sup>8</sup>

With every election cycle, the sophistication of digital tools advanced. “They became that much more intricate and that much more sophisticated,” said Basil Smikle, the Executive Director of the New York State Democratic Party and a lecturer at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. “So, while you have the growth of Google as a search engine, you have Facebook that’s collecting a lot of data on the usage of its of its members.”<sup>9</sup> The Obama campaign used data from these sites and over a dozen social media platforms for sophisticated microtargeting to sway voters and drive turnout.

### **2016 and the “Twitter President”**

By 2016, electoral campaigns were not the only ones taking advantage of online organizing. Popular movements like the Arab Spring (2010-2012) and Occupy Wall Street (2011) relied heavily on social media, hence its praise by many as a democratic equalizer. This positive perception, however, soon faced the realities of a bitter 2016 presidential competition between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The Trump campaign spent more money online than on television advertisements. Trump’s personal Twitter following grew by over ten million in the year leading up to the campaign, and his oft-untruthful tweets received constant media coverage.

Perceived as candid and accessible due to his personal presence on social media, Trump built a strong base of hardline conservatives.<sup>10</sup> But Trump’s strategy was far from the roseate vision of people like Al Gore. Cambridge Analytica, a conservative tech firm, provided the Trump campaign psychological profiles of up to 87 million Facebook users without their knowledge, with limited knowledge from Facebook and in a potential breach of the law.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the Russian government had been interfering in the election at Russian president Vladimir Putin’s bidding. Using Facebook advertisements and posts from fake Facebook accounts to promote Trump, denigrate Clinton, and divide voters, they reached tens of millions of people.<sup>12</sup> In the long term, “digital tools set up and harden[ed] these silos ... in

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<sup>7</sup> David Carr, “How Obama Tapped into Social Networks’ Power,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2008 ([bit.do/sm-carr](http://bit.do/sm-carr)).

<sup>8</sup> Exec. Order No. 13707, 3 C.F.R., p. 1 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Basil Smikle on February 26, 2019, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City. All further quotes from Smikle, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>10</sup> “@realdonaldtrump (Donald J. Trump).” Trackanalytics, 2020 ([trackalytics.com/twitter/profile/realdonaldtrump](http://trackalytics.com/twitter/profile/realdonaldtrump)).

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Confessore, “Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far.” Apr. 4, 2018 ([nyti.ms/2GBQ4Lm](http://nyti.ms/2GBQ4Lm)).

<sup>12</sup> Craig Timberg, “Russian propaganda may have been shared hundreds of millions of times, new research says.” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 5, 2017 ([4](http://washingtonpost.com/news/the-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

our personal lives and our social lives,” according to Smikle. “It’s kept people from reaching across the aisle to compromise.”

For many, online politics had lost its luster and was marked by acrimony. But at the same time, grassroots digital activism made a rebound in reaction to Trump’s countless controversial policies. Most notably, an estimated 4.6 million Americans participated in the Women’s March the protest Trump’s perceived misogyny. The event originated and was planned on Facebook, and it “was widely believed to be the largest single-day demonstration in [U.S.] history.”<sup>13</sup> And while politicians from the left and right spoke about greater tech regulation to avoid repeating 2016, they did not deliver, at least not in time for the 2018 midterms.

### **Behind the Curtain: PAC’s**

Highly motivated by the partisan political environment, impressive numbers of youth campaigned for Republican and in particular Democratic candidates in 2018. While social media and digital tools were central to their organizing, political action committees (PACs) also played an important part in youth engagement. PACs had become dominant sources of campaign finance in the wake of several Supreme Court cases.

In 2010, in *Citizens United v. FEC*, the Supreme Court had ruled that corporations and unions could spend unlimited amounts on elections so long as they did not coordinate directly with campaigns. This ruling also overturned previous restrictions on how close to elections corporations and unions could run ads, and laws against these entities running ads to vote or not vote for candidates. In 2014, in *McCutcheon v. FEC*, the Court overturned limits on individual donations to political parties.

These and other cases in the early 2010s dramatically changed campaign finance jurisprudence. The most important consequence was the rise of super PACs, which unlike normal PACs did not contribute directly to campaigns. Super PACs could accept unlimited funds from wealthy donors, corporations, and special interest groups to spend helping chosen candidates. Further, they often were bankrolled by “dark money,” donations that could be kept anonymous by funding them through nonprofits.<sup>14</sup> Despite opposition to *Citizens United* from about three quarters of Americans, PACs and Super PACs, became a

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switch/wp/2017/10/05/russian-propaganda-may-have-been-shared-hundreds-of-millions-of-times-new-research-says ).

<sup>13</sup> John P. Rafferty, “Women’s March.” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Tim Lau, “Citizens United Explained.” Brennan Center for Justice, Dec. 12, 2019 (brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained).

strong force in politics.<sup>15</sup> In the 2018 election cycle, outside Super PACs raised over \$1.5 billion and spent over \$800 million.<sup>16</sup>

Among the largest organizational contributors in the 2018 midterms, NextGen America had a uniquely focused mission: “When we get young people to show up and vote, we win.”<sup>17</sup> In 2013, the Super PAC was founded as NextGen Climate by Tom Steyer, the billionaire founder of Farallon Capital and a top Democratic donor. In 2017, the Super PAC had rebranded itself as NextGen America, with a focus on an array of liberal policy issues. NextGen America was the 37<sup>th</sup>-largest organization contributor in the 2018 cycle.<sup>18</sup> It was funded mostly by Steyer, who in turn was the second-largest individual donor, spending over \$50 million.<sup>19</sup> Among NextGen America’s many get-out-the-vote efforts engaging youth was funding Columbia University students to travel to Florida to canvas, as detailed below.

### **Campaigners from Columbia**

In 2018, former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter and a professor at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) taught a course on politics in the digital age. He challenged his students to understand transformative power of voting in politics, especially that of the youth vote. Nutter recalls his excitement and his students’ combination of digital savvy and civic engagement: “They’re utilizing big data. They’re engaging with each other virtually in a variety of places again across the country ... Columbia University students and in particular SIPA students got involved in campaigns ... all across the country ... You’ve got this pent-up interest and activism on college campuses students willing to travel and let their voices be heard and be engaged with candidates and campaigns.”<sup>20</sup> Nutter’s class even led to the creation of the SIPA Civic & Voter Engagement Coalition.

Alongside SIPA, Columbia University Democrats hosted a panel with a progressive candidate who would become a symbol of the 2018 “blue wave.” Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, and Professor Anya Schiffrin, director of SIPA’s Technology, Media, and Communication program, conversed with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a democratic socialist who had primaried a seasoned incumbent and would later win the race for her Bronx Congressional district.

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<sup>15</sup> Ashley Balcerzak, “Study: Most Americans want to kill ‘Citizens United’ with constitutional amendment.” *The World*, May 10, 2018 ([pri.org/stories/2018-05-10/study-most-americans-want-kill-citizens-united-constitutional-amendment](http://pri.org/stories/2018-05-10/study-most-americans-want-kill-citizens-united-constitutional-amendment)).

<sup>16</sup> “2018 Outside Spending, by Super PAC.” The Center for Responsive Politics, 2018 ([opensecrets.org/outsidespending/summ.php?cycle=2018&chrt=V&disp=O&type=S](http://opensecrets.org/outsidespending/summ.php?cycle=2018&chrt=V&disp=O&type=S)).

<sup>17</sup> “Who We Are.” NextGen America, 2020 ([nextgenamerica.org/about-us](http://nextgenamerica.org/about-us)).

<sup>18</sup> “Top Organization Contributors: All Federal Contributions.” The Center for Responsive Politics, 2018 ([opensecrets.org/overview/toporgs.php](http://opensecrets.org/overview/toporgs.php)).

<sup>19</sup> Natalie Jones, “Midterm big spenders: the top 20 political donors this election.” *The Guardian*, Nov. 2, 2018 ([theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/02/midterm-spending-top-political-donors-sheldon-adelson](http://theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/02/midterm-spending-top-political-donors-sheldon-adelson)).

<sup>20</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Michael Nutter on December 5, 2018, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City. All further quotes from Nutter, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

It was “one of the most emotional events I’ve ever seen, Schiffirin said. “I’ve really never seen students so engaged. People were in tears, people were snapping, people were just moved.” After the event, Ocasio-Cortez explained how social media allowed her to use “microtargeting” — sending messages specially tailored to the interests and opinions of recipients — to build her campaign. In addition, she frequently used personal social media, such as interacting with followers in real time via Instagram Live, to build a loyal following that endearingly referred to her as “AOC.” Amid a wave of publicity on social and traditional media alike, she would enter the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress as its youngest member.

Meanwhile, Columbia’s Civil Engagement Club organized voter drives in Harlem and the Bronx that fall, in addition to sending 18 students to canvass for Democratic candidates in upstate New York. Students even canvassed for candidates in the South in nationally followed races: Stacey Abrams for governor of Georgia, Beto O’Rourke for senator from Texas, and Andrew Gillum for governor of Florida.

Andres Chong-Qui Torres, co-founder of the Civic & Voter Engagement Coalition, led the Florida group to Miami. As a battleground state, Florida was the ideal place to make an impact. “This is a tossup state,” says Chong-qui. “Sometimes it comes down to 500 votes, a thousand votes ... [Student’s] impact is going to be incredibly powerful.”<sup>21</sup> Many canvassers faced closed doors and being called “communist” halfway through their pitches, in part due to Miami’s large population of Republican, anti-Castro Cubans.

Columbia students worked with election strategists in Miami to identify neighborhoods for traditional door-knocking and canvassing. The Democratic Party used a database called NGP VAN, which assembled and analyzed data gathered over 14 years of campaigning in the state. Since 2004, NGP VAN had been the primary data system for Democratic campaigns and labor union efforts in the U.S., with canvassing apps like Ecanvasser, Ground Game, and i360 also employed.

The Columbia students used paper printouts of the NGP VAN data to guide their street-level work. Students not only used NGP VAN data to direct their canvassing, but also generated data on door-to-door efforts. Smikle detailed how great an improvement digital methods were in answering strategy questions: “How do we go out and touch voters who we need to touch? Where do they live? ... All of that stuff we used to do by paper and have to carry it back to the campaign office, and put it in an Excel spreadsheet. But now you can very easily collect that data on a portable device and be able to relate to the campaign very quickly.”

“Face-to-face engagement with voters is still the most effective way to communicate,” explains Nutter. “There is something about knocking on someone’s door and engaging with that person in a conversation.” Completely online strategies such as microtargeted ads and an active social media presence simply did not make the same impression on voters. The preferability of canvassing over other campaign methods was borne out not only by the Columbia students’ experiences, but by the bulk of

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Andres Chong-Qui Torres on December 11, 2018, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City. All further quotes from Chong-qui, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

research on the subject.<sup>22</sup> Thus, digital tools were most useful for facilitating, not replacing, in-person campaign methods.

The Columbia group also used more creative tactics, driving around Miami in a *chiva*, a colorful party bus originating in rural Colombia and spread as far as New York and Miami. As the decorated bus crawled through neighborhoods, dancers and musicians performed and engaged people on the street. Driving the bus through the streets, the students used a loudspeaker to tell locals to be sure to vote. “We emphasized the importance of voting, whichever side you’re on,” said Chong-Qui. “This is about democracy, not just winning.”

In Texas, digitally informed canvassing efforts were accompanied by an aggressive social media strategy. O’Rourke, then a member in the U.S. House of Representatives, visited all 254 counties in Texas, frequently livestreaming to a national following. His popularity allowed him to raise \$80 million, a record for a Senate candidate, while eschewing PAC money.<sup>23</sup> Though O’Rourke used digital tools liberally for strategy and outreach, he prioritized door-to-door efforts from 20,000-strong network of volunteers like the Columbia students.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, the three southern Democratic candidates all lost their races. But students were not completely discouraged. The Florida race for governor was decided by .4 percentage points, so close a recount was required. The Georgia gubernatorial race was won 1.4 percentage points, amid accusations of voter suppression by the Republican candidate, who as Secretary of State was overseeing his own election. Though the race in Texas was not quite as close, the 2.6-point loss was exceptional for traditionally deep-red Texas – this was its closest Senate race in 40 years.<sup>25</sup> Given these narrow losses in the South, on which Republicans once had a stranglehold, students were disappointed yet motivated to keep fighting.

### **Temple Republicans Look Locally**

As Democratic students at Columbia worked in majority-Republican strongholds in the South, Republican students at Temple University focused on gaining a voice on their majority-liberal campus in Philadelphia. Temple’s College Republicans complained that the liberal campus suppressed conservative voices, with professors and peers allegedly not taking their views seriously enough. One on-campus club particularly vocal about its perceived suppression was Temple’s chapter of Turning Point USA, a national

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<sup>22</sup> Green, Donald P., and Gerber, Alan S., *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, p. 9. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Brookings Institution Press, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Svitek, “Beto O’Rourke raised \$80 million total for Ted Cruz challenge, left little in bank.” *The Texas Tribune*, Dec. 7, 2018 ([texas Tribune.org/2018/12/07/Beto-ORourke-80-million-raised](https://www.texastribune.org/2018/12/07/Beto-ORourke-80-million-raised)).

<sup>24</sup> Justin Miller, “He May Not Be a Candidate, but Beto O’Rourke is Rebuilding His Texas Organizing Machine for 2020.” *The Texas Observer*, Jan. 24, 2020 ([texasobserver.org/beto-orourke-organizing-texas-2020](https://www.texasobserver.org/beto-orourke-organizing-texas-2020)).

<sup>25</sup> Chris Essig, Ryan Murphy, and Brandon Formby, “Where Ted Cruz’s close victory over Beto O’Rourke stands among Texas’ historical election results.” *The Texas Tribune*, Nov. 7, 2018 ([texas Tribune.org/2018/11/07/ted-cruz-beto-orourke-texas-history-election-results](https://www.texastribune.org/2018/11/07/ted-cruz-beto-orourke-texas-history-election-results)).



nonprofit for conservative youth. Founded in 2012, the organization was known for maintaining a list of “professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.”<sup>26</sup> Temple Republicans defended Donald Trump, whose conservative taxation and regulation they stressed over norms of office.

Olivia DeMarco, executive director of the College Republicans, says the campus club has created a “safe haven,” a “therapeutic” space, where conservatives can support each other and find their voice.<sup>27</sup> “We tend to be censored because the professors might not like what we have to say—or fellow students give us looks,” she claims. “It’s good to have your views affirmed by your peers once in a while.” One member, who found the club through Twitter, called the organization a way “to keep my sanity.”<sup>28</sup> Another member opined, “Everyone even on both sides, they shout each other down, but the place where I can have a meaningful discussion ... is usually not with the opposite side. It’s usually just with my own party.”<sup>29</sup>

To foster conversation among students, the Temple Republicans created a “free speech ball”—a six-foot wide ball they rolled around campus. They invited students of all political stripes to write messages on the ball. The more the ball rolled, the greater the diversity of views it accumulated.

In addition to their symbolic work on campus, Temple College Republicans forayed into the rough-and-tumble of real-world politics. With the help of outside GOP organizations, they joined September 11 Memorial programming, National Voter Registration Day, and canvassing for local candidates in nearby suburbs, a frequent partisan battleground.

The role of the students was to get as many of those voters to the polls as possible. “Elections are a game of turnout,” said Ross Wolfe, chairman of the Philadelphia Young Republicans, which worked with the Temple GOP group.<sup>30</sup> Rather than persuading undecided or opposite-party voters, “it’s all about turning out voters who are going to vote for you.”

Temple students canvassed nearby for U.S. Congressman Lou Barletta’s campaign against Senator Bob Case, Jr. The Temple students faced an uphill battle, however, and the Democratic senator was reelected for a third term by a 13-point margin.

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<sup>26</sup> Professor Watchlist, “About Us.” Turning Point USA, 2020 ([professorwatchlist.org/aboutus](http://professorwatchlist.org/aboutus)).

<sup>27</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Olivia DeMarco on November 3, 2018, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Matt Brazil on November 4, 2018, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Vincent Devlin on December 2, 2019, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Stepan’s interview with Ross Wolfe on December 2, 2019, at Columbia University SIPA, New York City.

## Midterm Results Come In

Despite their performance in Pennsylvania, Democrats fared poorly in the 2018 Senate races. Faced with a disadvantageous set of seats up for reelection, the Democratic Party was fighting to twenty-six seats, in contrast the GOP's nine. Ultimately, vulnerable Democratic incumbents lost in Indiana, North Dakota, and Missouri, in addition to the Florida seat that Democratic students at Columbia had fought to hold. However, Republicans lost a Senate seat in Nevada and Arizona each. Thus, the GOP strengthened its majority from 51-49 to 53-47, including the two Independents who caucus with Democrats.

Meanwhile, with all House seats up for reelection, Democrats had more favorable prospects. In a common trend, voters checked the president's party, and Democrats took back the House, breaking the GOP's unified government. The scale of their victory, however, was remarkable. Democrats had not flipped so many seats in Congress since 1974, in the wake of Watergate.<sup>31</sup> In total, they won by 9.7 million votes – the most ever in a midterm.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of Democrats' gains were in suburban districts, with Democrats and Republicans holding onto their respective urban and rural advantages.<sup>33</sup>

Democrats' results in state elections were equally significant. They flipped seven governorships, whereas Republicans took control from one conservative, Independent governor. Republicans' heavy advantage in trifectas – where a party controls both legislative chambers and the governorship – was closed somewhat. The Democratic Party netted six trifectas, and the GOP lost a net four. Though the GOP still maintained more trifectas, Democrats came out better positioned for 2021 redistricting – which state governments typically undertake every ten years.

Another major change from the 2018 midterms was the acceleration of a closing gender gap in U.S. Congress. Historically boys' clubs, both the House and Senate gained all-time record-breaking numbers of women in their ranks, even if they still comprised only a quarter of Congress. In the Senate, 15 women were elected, bringing the total number serving to 26, up from 23 in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress. In the House, 102 women were elected, up from 92 in the previous Congress. Nor were gains in diversity limited to gender: Congress seated its first two Muslim women, a record ten LGBTQ members, and unprecedented 120 racial minorities.

Overall, the 2018 midterms had the highest voter turnout rate in a century. It was also the first time over 100 million votes were cast, with 50% voter turnout across the United States. This rate was slightly higher

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<sup>31</sup> Christal Hayes, "Democrats won House midterms by largest margin since Watergate scandal, report says." *USA Today*, Nov. 21, 2018 ([usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/11/21/democrats-won-house-midterms-largest-margin-since-watergate/2084052002](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/11/21/democrats-won-house-midterms-largest-margin-since-watergate/2084052002)).

<sup>32</sup> Chris Cillizza, "House Dems just had their best election since Watergate." *CNN Politics*, Dec. 6, 2018 ([cnn.com/2018/12/06/politics/2018-house-democratic-gains/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/06/politics/2018-house-democratic-gains/index.html)).

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Skelley, "The Suburbs — All Kinds Of Suburbs — Delivered The House To Democrats." *FiveThirtyEight*, Nov. 8, 2018 ([fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-suburbs-all-kinds-of-suburbs-delivered-the-house-to-democrats](https://www.fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-suburbs-all-kinds-of-suburbs-delivered-the-house-to-democrats)).

than the 1966 elections amid division due to the Vietnam War; the last time a higher proportion of voters turned out was over a century prior, in 1914.<sup>34</sup> This uptick, though not near turnout in presidential election years, was especially impressive in view of a long-term trend downward in voter participation. For example, the previous midterms in 2014 had one of the lowest voter turnouts in American history, at 36.4%.<sup>35</sup> In addition to political impetus, turnout was so high in 2018 due to more widespread use of absentee ballots and early voting; 39.8% of voters used these methods in 2018, the most of any midterm.

But there was more behind 2018's impressive voter turnout than displeasure with the GOP or its president. Advertising via digital media reached record highs for midterms, at around \$1.8 billion, or a fifth of overall spending.<sup>36</sup> Digital ads were most effective in turning out youth, and young voters (ages 18-29) increased their participation more than any other group, from 20% in 2014 to 36% in 2018.<sup>37</sup>

Yet candidates were aware that the most effective use of their cash was facilitating personal interactions. 2018 was historical in this regard to. According to NGP VAN, the dominant technology provider for Democratic campaigns, more groups used its tools in 2018 than ever before, including in presidential elections. They facilitated knocking on over 150 million doors, making about 200 million phone calls, and sending nearly 200 million texts.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, the 2018 midterms had been historic by many measures. Digital technology grew in importance as candidates used their social media to reach constituents and advertised to users with ever more precise microtargeting, continuing a decades-long trend. Collection and analysis of large datasets was equally crucial to strategic canvassing to get out the vote.

Use of technology in this way combined new with old: cutting-edge data tools with the old-school wisdom holding in-person efforts as the gold standard. Similarly, monied interests and popular demand for more diverse and progressive both factored in heavily. On the one hand, Super PACs like NextGen America continued to wield outsize influence; maintaining an upward trend, outsize groups spent more in 2018 than any other midterm. On the other hand, grassroots energy catapulted candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez into Congress. American youth, some Republican but most Democratic, turned out to vote in historical numbers. Many engaged even more actively in the elections, volunteering for

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<sup>34</sup> Emily Stewart, "2018's record-setting voter turnout, in one chart." *Vox*, Nov. 19, 2018. ([vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/19/18103110/2018-midterm-elections-turnout](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/19/18103110/2018-midterm-elections-turnout)).

<sup>35</sup> Domenico Montanaro, Rachel Wellford, and Simone Pathe. "2014 midterm election turnout lowest in 70 years." *PBS*, Nov. 10, 2014. ([pbs.org/newshour/politics/2014-midterm-election-turnout-lowest-in-70-years](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/2014-midterm-election-turnout-lowest-in-70-years)).

<sup>36</sup> Rob Lever, "Despite restrictions, digital spending hits record in US midterms." *Phys.org*, Nov. 11, 2018 ([phys.org/news/2018-11-restrictions-digital-midterms.html](https://phys.org/news/2018-11-restrictions-digital-midterms.html)).

<sup>37</sup> Jordan Misra, "Voter Turnout Rates Among All Voting Age and Major Racial and Ethnic Groups Were Higher Than in 2014." United States Census Bureau, Apr. 23, 2019 ([census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html)).

<sup>38</sup> Amanda Coulombe, "Organize Everywhere: How Technology Powered Grassroots Engagement in 2018." NGP VAN, Nov. 8, 2018 ([blog.ngpvan.com/2018-takeaways](https://blog.ngpvan.com/2018-takeaways)).

candidates and taking advantage of their digital prowess. But if they helped deliver a resounding call for change in 2018, the question remained: With an even more consequential election cycle in 2020, would their enthusiasm persist into the next decade?