

Tipping Point for Trade

By Harold Meyerson
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The architect built his house of straw. The foundation -- the Republican base -- may have retained its brick-like solidity in support of its candidates Tuesday, just as Karl Rove predicted. But the house itself -- and the House itself -- was blown to smithereens, with massive shifts among moderate and independent voters to the Democratic column. And for all the talk of coming Democratic dissonance within their expanded congressional delegations, it's clear that on economic policy, a new progressive center has formed.

The Democrats' pickups came largely in the Northeast, Midwest and Mountain West. In the South, outside of Florida, they won just a couple of new seats. Moderate Northern Republicans in both houses -- including the most moderate, Rhode Island's Lincoln Chafee in the Senate and Iowa's Jim Leach in the House -- went down to defeat. The Republican Party that limps away from this election is rooted more firmly in the South -- which is precisely the party's problem. It was the Southernized GOP from which both moderates and mountain-state libertarians ran screaming in this election. The results from Arizona are particularly instructive. Not only did Democrats pick up two House seats there, but Arizona voters also became the first in the nation to reject a ban on gay marriage. The gap between Goldwater libertarianism and Southern religious traditionalism widened to a gulf this week.

But what of the Democrats? Is the incoming congressional majority a powder keg of veteran liberals and rookie moderates just primed for explosion? Can Nancy Pelosi navigate the treacherous shoals of gay marriage and school prayer?

Well, sure. It will be Pelosi who will control the agenda in the House, which means the issues that unite Democrats will be the ones that come to a vote. And the Democrats are far more united on a range of key issues than is commonly believed.

Ironically, one issue that unites the new majority is an issue that has historically divided Democrats perhaps more than any other: trade.

Since the passage of the North American Free Trade Act in 1993, House Democrats have been moving steadily away from a trade policy that benefits globe-trotting corporations and investment funds while depressing wages here in the States. Senate Democrats, on the other hand, have split fairly evenly on trade legislation over the past decade.

Tuesday's election changed all that. Looking at the Democrats who picked up formerly Republican House seats, Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch tallies 27 who defeated (or replaced resigning) free-trade Republicans and who campaigned against the kind of trade deals that Congress has ratified. The fair-trade 27 insist instead on deals that stress labor rights and environmental standards. In North Carolina, Democrat Heath Shuler -- ostensibly one of the new conservative Democrats -- attacked his opponent, Republican Charles Taylor, for backing off his commitment to vote against the Central American Free Trade Agreement. "It's not right when Congress passes trade bills that send our jobs overseas," said one Shuler ad.

In the incoming Senate delegation, the contrast is even sharper. The Democratic pickups -- Missouri's Claire McCaskill, Montana's Jon Tester, Ohio's Sherrod Brown, Pennsylvania's Bob Casey, Rhode Island's Sheldon Whitehouse and Virginia's James Webb -- all unseated free-trade incumbents with campaigns that stressed the need to pay far greater attention to the downward leveling that globalization entails. Tester ran ads attacking trade agreements for putting "our jobs and the viability of family farms and ranches across Montana in jeopardy." Webb's Web site states, "We must reexamine our tax and trade policies and reinstitute notions of fairness."

Exit polling made clear that the fair-trade Democrats have tapped into a profound national anxiety. When asked whether life for the next generation would be better, worse or about the same as life today, 40 percent

responded "worse," while just 30 percent answered "better." That's a stunning figure to emerge from what has historically been perhaps the most optimistic of nations.

The Senate in particular will see real changes. The addition of Sherrod Brown and Vermont's Bernie Sanders will give fair-trade forces some passionate voices to go with their increased numbers; Brown is poised to emerge as a national leader in this fight.

When the president's fast-track authority expires next summer, it is plainly not going to be renewed. "Congress is done with ceding all trade authority to the president," Brown said Friday. A new majority on trade issues has formed. And having lost both houses in 1994 in part because of Democratic voters' discontent with NAFTA, the Democrats now seem to have won them back after a campaign in which they charged that our corporate-led globalization hardly seems to be building the best of all possible worlds.