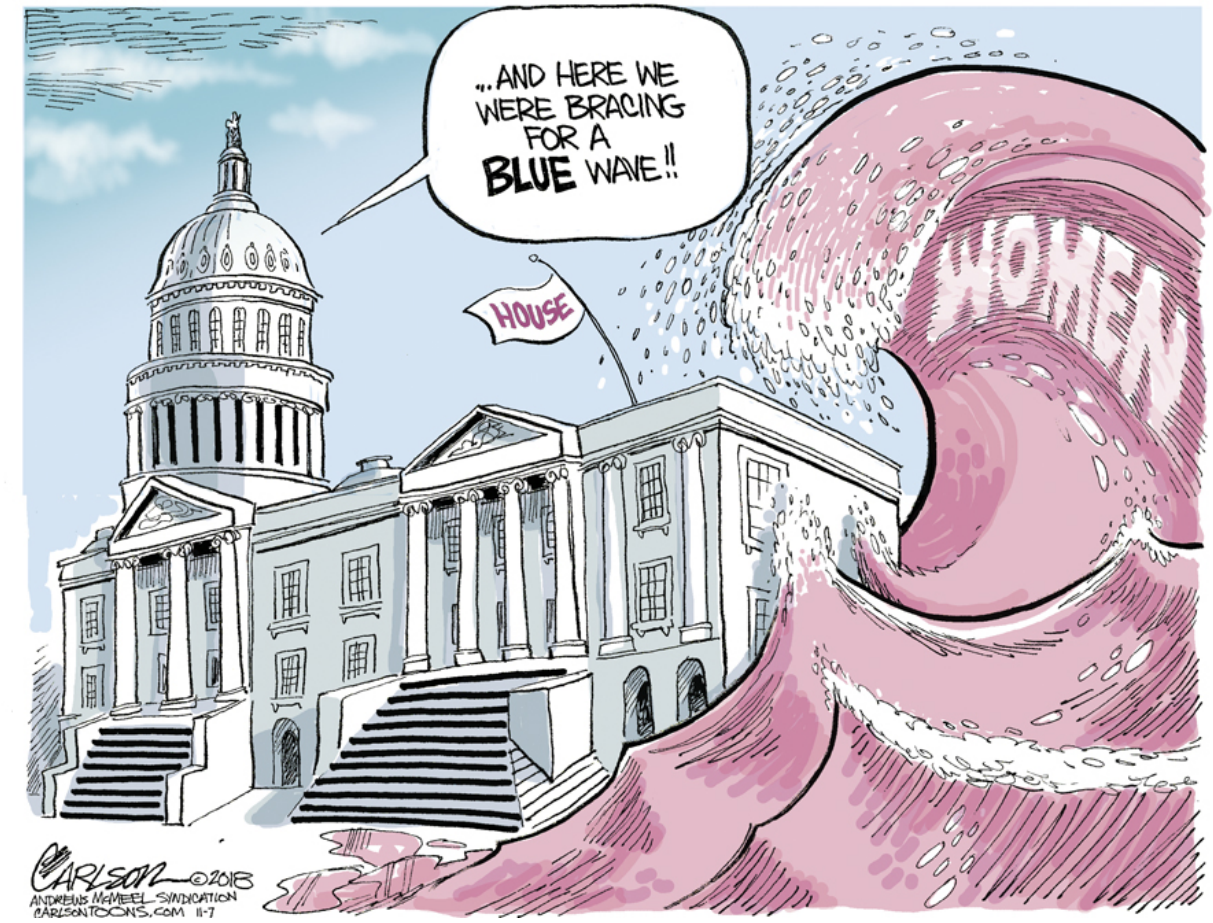
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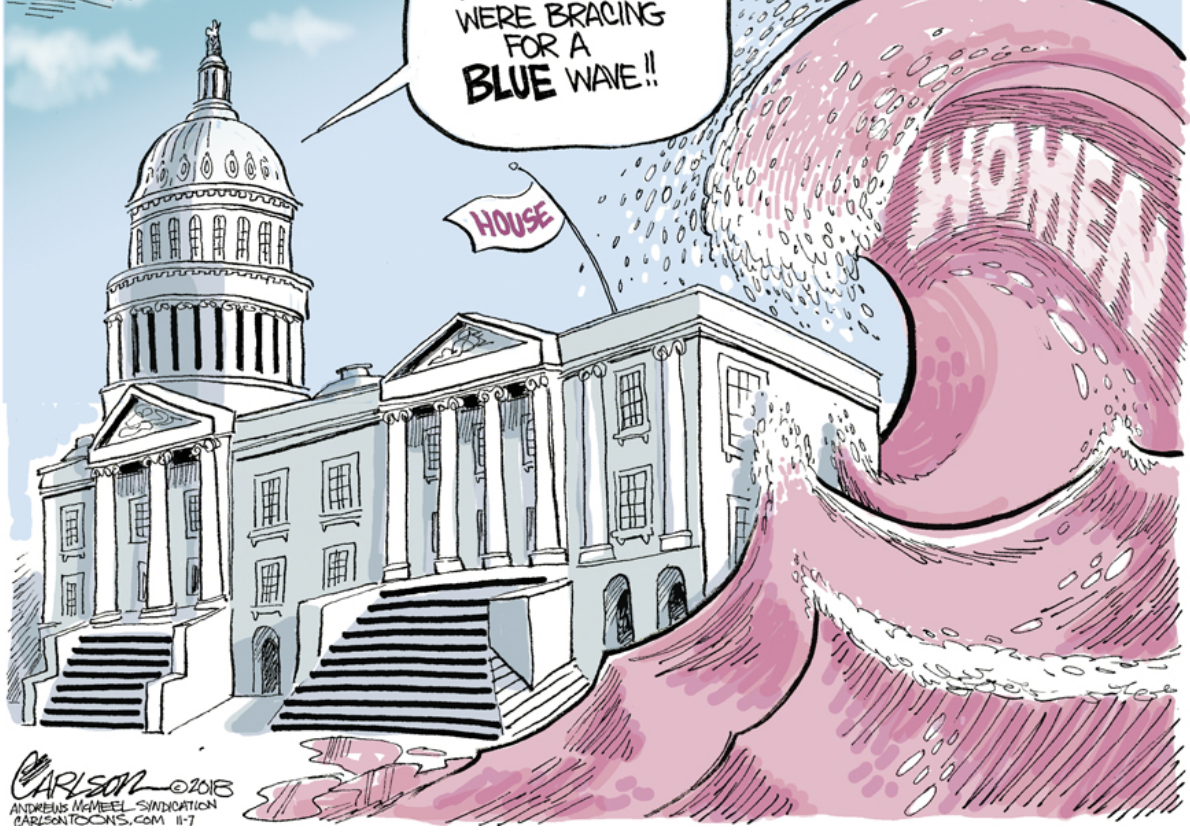
by NCR Editorial Staff

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The significance of this year's midterm election is not that Democrats regained control of the House, though that will provide a welcome brake on the reckless and dangerous impulses of the Trump administration. Given the historical reality that the president's party usually loses congressional seats in this election — and sometimes experiences massive losses — and the passionate opposition President Donald Trump has inspired in some quarters, the surprise would have been if the Democrats had done anything less.

And while retaking the House is widely seen as a repudiation of the Trump agenda, we remain a government and country divided, with the Republicans increasing their grip on the Senate and thus on important foreign policy matters and judicial appointments.

The real significance of the midterm results — as well as some hope for the future — lies deeper in the details of who won, where the Democratic wins occurred beyond the national offices, and how it all happened. The repudiation of Trump is significant

in that it occurred at a time when all the economic indicators would invite voters to be complacent and unwilling to roil the status quo.

The opposite was the case, and important wins occurred often against record amounts of dark money. Another more important factor that evidenced itself in state after state was unusually high turnout for a midterm election. That basic component — despite undisguised attempts by some Republicans to suppress the vote, particularly among minority communities — was essential in some of the significant wins for Democrats.

The adjustment effected by voters was significant particularly at the level of state house races and governorships, offices that have failed to draw the interest of Democrats in recent years. Yet they are the offices, as Republicans have demonstrated, upon which national success is predicated. In governor's races, the Democrats won seven seats and the Republicans lost seven.

The Democratic Party's efforts were undergirded by grassroots fundraising that well outpaced traditional fundraising means and by newly energized volunteers and candidates, especially women.

It is tempting to overstate the value of the adjustment that occurred. The Washington Post, for instance, hailed the Democratic takeover of the House as a sign of "health for American democracy," as well as a sign of "political health" in general. That is true only to a point.

The body politic is certainly in failing health when the president relies on race baiting, diminishing the institutions of the democracy he leads, bullying and persistent lying to project a narrative that inspires hate and is simply false.

The illness approaches contagion when members of the party he leads give assent by their silence to such behavior. Trump, regardless of what his authoritarian tendencies might suggest, will one day be gone from that office. The question for Republicans is "What will be left of us?"

Perhaps the antidote lies not only in the fact that the Democrats took back control of the House but that they also did it with a record number of women, who represent but one of the constituencies whose activism was seeded by Trump himself. The backlash that began the day after his inauguration, when at least 500,000 mostly women showed up at his White House door to say they didn't like what he

represented, wasn't a fluke or a one-off moment.

The big question for Democrats, of course, is can they bring a new sense of gravity and dignity to the governing process. Or will we just see a toggling back and forth between extremes?

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The heartland might suggest an answer. Sam Brownback's disastrous term as Kansas governor (2011-18) could well prove a harbinger of what we're seeing play out on the national scene. If that's the case, the GOP is in for a rough ride in 2020.

Brownback, in what he once infamously described as his "red-state experiment," slashed taxes for the wealthiest, nearly destroyed public education by underfunding schools, reduced access to affordable health care as well as access to abortion and ultimately was one of the primary reasons the state turned blue in the midterms. Brownback resigned the office earlier this year after Trump appointed him ambassador at large for religious freedom.

Kansans this time around elected Democrat Laura Kelly and soundly rejected Republican Kris Kobach, a candidate in the Brownback/Trump mold, who closely allied himself with the president and whose rhetoric was aimed at raising fears about immigration and election fraud.

The Kansas State House, which went hard right in the initial years of the Brownback tenure, has also moderated over the past eight years as voters in the solidly red state rejected his extreme approach.

"There will be a lot of talk around America about the blue wave," Kelly said in her victory speech, "but I don't believe that's what's happened here in Kansas. What happened in Kansas was a wave of common sense, a wave of bipartisanship."

That wave included the election of Sharice Davids, the first Native American woman to serve in Congress — she shares that distinction with Deb Haaland of New Mexico, another Democrat who won. Davids, the first openly LGBT person to represent Kansas, toppled four-term incumbent Republican Kevin Yoder in the state's 3rd Congressional district.

There is more than a little truth to Kelly's claim about bipartisanship. A Democrat win in Kansas doesn't happen without Republican support. Republicans there, including office holders past and present, have crossed party lines to yank the state back from the extremes of the Brownback era to a more centrist position.

If such a realignment can happen in Kansas, one is tempted to imagine it could happen anywhere. And that would be a real sign of returning health.

This story appears in the **2018 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 16-29, 2018** print issue under the headline: We can restore health to democracy.