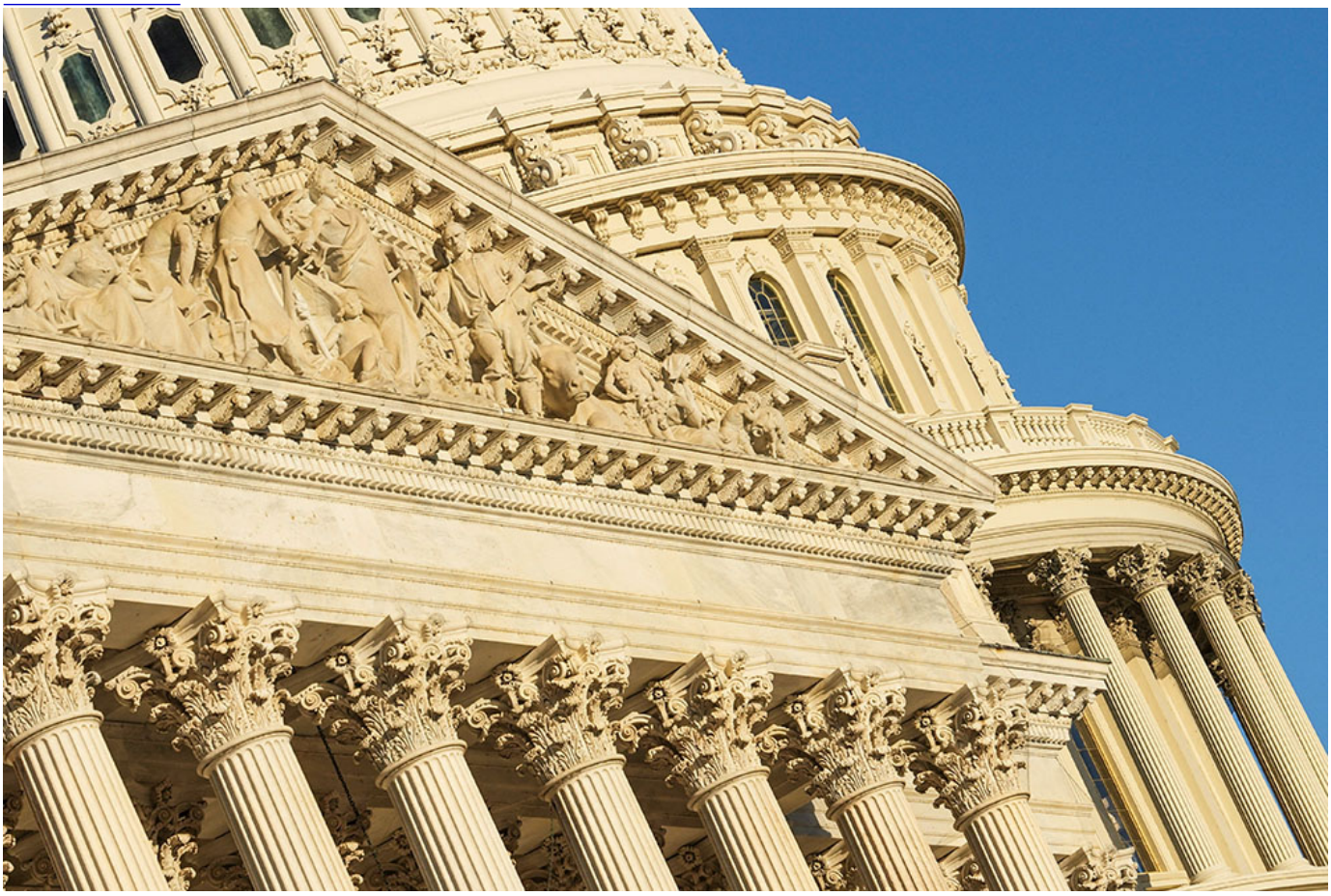
Opinion

NCR Voices



The U.S. Capitol Building is pictured in Washington Nov. 4, 2026, the morning after the U.S. midterm elections. (OSV News/Reuters/Eric Lee)



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After a historic victory, how should the Democrats use their control of Congress? Tuesday's election results were a repudiation of Donald Trump and Trumpism. They were a call for help from the American people who are struggling with inflation and who are concerned about corruption. The results felt like Dunkirk, a deliverance not a victory. Voters gave Democrats the chance to lead, but not a mandate for any particular policy. What, then, should they do?

First, Democrats must decide what HR1 will be. What is the first piece of legislation they will introduce and seek to pass? It must address the most salient issue in the campaign: affordability. There was a lot of talk during the campaign about inflation and rising prices, especially gasoline, diesel and home heating oil, but the government doesn't have a whole lot of influence over prices. Democrats can assert their constitutional right to determine tariffs, but that will take time in the courts.

The unpopular war in Iran is a principal cause of the higher prices, but what can the Democrats do about that? They can try to bring the war with Iran to an end, but ending a war is a lot harder than starting one, and there is no good way to pull out of Iran. The strategic consequences of this war are terrible for the U.S. no matter what. And the president retains enormous constitutional powers in both foreign and military matters. Do Democrats want to be tagged with the pullout, with all its dangers to troops and allies? There is no alternative. As in Vietnam and Afghanistan, this is not a winnable war and the nation simply has to pull out of it and let the chips fall where they may. But that won't bring down prices necessarily or anytime soon.

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HR1 should focus on wages, not prices, and on breaking up monopolies. Raising the federal minimum wage, making it easier for workers to unionize, and requiring low-wage employers to cover the health care costs of their employees, all these could be wrapped into a bill aimed at improving the economic circumstances of the working and middle classes. It should include steps to protect Social Security, which will only be able to pay 75% of benefits within 10 years.

Measures to shore up the three major entitlements — Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid — should be linked explicitly to higher taxes on the rich. Since the Reagan years, there has been a massive transfer of wealth to the richest Americans. It is time to renegotiate the social contract and transfer wealth back to all Americans. This will require a great deal of education, contrasting the postwar economy that built the middle class with the post-Reagan economy that has hollowed it out.

Breaking up monopolies pays two political dividends. First, it allows Democrats to stand up for small businesses against large corporations. This will help defeat the charge that Democrats, under the influence of Democratic Socialists, are hostile to market economies. Secondly, unfair business practices fall under the larger umbrella of corruption, and fighting corruption should remain a key focus for Democrats.

Trump may veto any Democratic economic proposals. Let him be the naysayer. Let the American people see that Democrats, from both the more progressive wing and the more centrist wing, are working together to bring relief to the American people. Let them get what they can from negotiations with the president, but start with a set of policies that demonstrate Democratic values of fairness and solidarity, even if he vetoes them.

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The second thing the Democrats should do is focus on public corruption, and here they must tread carefully. The country has no appetite for witch hunts. Impeachment should become the "i" word, never spoken of in mixed company. A series of congressional hearings that look like payback would not serve the country nor the Democratic Party well. Incoming House Oversight Committee Chairman Rep. Robert Garcia was wrong to tell administration officials to "lawyer up." People pity Captain Ahab; they do not desire to emulate him.

There are two immediate steps the Democrats can take to highlight and address corruption. First, they should take Rahm Emanuel's advice and ban stock trading by members of any of the three branches of government. Including themselves in the ban shows they mean it about ending corruption no matter where it is found. Make this HR2. Second, open congressional investigations that target the misuse of public funds. I do not doubt that there are many more incidents of corruption in the current administration, some even more grave than misusing public funds. Starting small and on an issue that would not be a direct attack on the president, but would start a

process of accountability, is the way to proceed.

Congress can only refer criminal conduct to the Justice Department for prosecution or impeach members of the administration. Attorney General Todd Blanche isn't going to prosecute anyone in the Trump administration, and impeachment is only advisable if the Democrats know they have the support of enough Republican senators to win a conviction.

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The third thing the Democrats should do is inoculate themselves on culture war issues. There is always a danger of overinterpreting a victory. Republican attempts to defeat Democrats by focusing on culture war issues failed this year for two reasons. First, when the economy is the principal issue, other issues fall by the wayside. And in 2028, if the economy is still in the tank, voters may blame Democrats who control Congress as much as they blame Republicans in the executive branch, neutralizing the issue and permitting culture war issues to regain some salience.

The second reason culture wars issues did not carry the day for the GOP is that many Democratic candidates effectively distanced themselves from even their own more extreme positions from a few years back. James Talarico called some of his prior comments "cringeworthy" and Josh Turek confronted a GOP attack ad on transgender issues with his own ad explaining his opposition to allowing biological males to play in women's sports and to taxpayer-funded sex change operations.

In the post-*Dobbs* era, transgender issues have replaced abortion at the totem in the culture wars. Democrats should fight unjust discrimination against transgender persons as part of their core commitment to fairness and inclusion. They should shame Republicans who are mean and bigoted toward trans individuals. But they should also support limits on irrevocable medical procedures or prescriptions for minors, as many European countries have done. On the contentious issues of sports and locker rooms, the Dems should advocate commonsense solutions at the local level. What works in a large high school might not work at a small one. What works for one family may not work for another. In any event, it should not become a federal issue. Overall, the Democrats should adopt the Pope Francis approach to trans issues: love and compassion, but no gender ideology either.

There are a lot of deep-pocketed activist groups who will view any moderation on the issue as a sellout. Confronting it risks an intraparty civil war. Former presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, the most successful gay politician in the nation's history, should step up and lance the boil of extreme orthodoxy on the issue. Recognizing that a great deal of research remains to be done before anyone can claim certainty about gender transitioning as a minor should not be seen as throwing anyone "under the bus." Recognize that parents of young female athletes get to worry about fairness for their kids too. The Democrats need to get their culture war flu shots, and the sooner the better.

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We should note that in Colorado Tuesday, when voters were electing a Democratic governor, reelecting a Democratic senator, both by large margins, and flipping at least one and possibly three congressional seats, they also supported two more conservative ballot measures. One required schools to follow the biological sex of a student in assigning them to sports teams and the other banned surgery for minors that altered biological sex characteristics. Both ballot measures were supported by the Catholic bishops of Colorado.

The Democrats need to think big. The goal for the party is not to hold on to the seats they won Tuesday, nor simply to win the White House in 2028. The goal should be to build a governing coalition around the ideas of a new social contract, fighting corruption, and not letting the culture wars consume our political life. Long-term policy fixes like universal health care cannot be implemented in the current political cycle of changing control of Congress every four or six years.

The Republicans could take years to recover from Trumpism; the Democrats can start building a lasting governing coalition now. Looking for narrow political advantage is what politicians do, but if the Democrats focus on binding the nation's wounds, they will discover a wider, long-term political advantage as well.

This story appears in the **2026 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.