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It's a mess, but history shows that the US can rebound

By **HENRY ERGAS**, COLUMNIST
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The American people spoke on Tuesday, but quite what they said will remain contentious for years to come. What is certain, however, is that American politics will be as tumultuous in its next phase as it was in the last.

In part, that is because the mid-terms confirmed that the US is in a period of unprecedented institutional instability. Since the 1890s, American politics has involved an alternation between lengthy spells in which a single party has dominated the three major elective branches (the presidency, the House of Representatives and the Senate) and lengthy spells of split control.

For example, the Republicans enjoyed full control of the federal government for 24 of the 34 years between the 1896 and 1930 elections, while the Democrats controlled all three elective branches for 18 of the 20 years between the 1932 and 1952 elections.

But those periods of relatively stable single-party dominance were followed by a prolonged phase of split control, with 13 of the 20 elections held between 1954 and 1962 leading to one party controlling the presidency and another commanding a majority in at least one chamber of congress.

However, since 1992, almost every election cycle has seen a shift between full and split control of the three branches. The consequence is that at each contest, everything seems up for grabs. That, in turn, reduces the incentives for co-operation between the parties, as party leaderships are reluctant to concede any wins to their opponents. The result is a gridlock that frustrates voters and perpetuates instability.

Historically, phases of institutional instability — such as the so-called Period of No Decision, which stretched from the 1886 elections to those in 1894 — have occurred when rapid social change collides with the rigidities of the two-party system, opening a breach between parties and their electorates. As the turmoil plays itself out, internal and external pressures eventually force realignments on the parties, but the adjustment is invariably long and painful.

This time will be no different — and the mid-terms have done nothing to make it easier.

Yes, the Democrats did well, with an overall swing even larger than the one the Republicans obtained in 2010. But the fact that it has resulted in a much smaller gain in seats reflects the tight geographical concentration of the Democrats' newly energised base.

It is true, for example, that the Democrats received the votes of 56 per cent of white women with a college education. But because they are most productive when they work with other highly educated people (a phenomenon economists refer to as “economies of agglomeration”), the highly educated are much more concentrated geographically than are white voters with low levels of education.

The growing gap between the Democrats and less highly educated white voters will consequently make it difficult for them to secure the presidency and win control of the Senate, since both require a geographically widely dispersed base of support.

Moreover, the Democrats' victory in the house is only likely to aggravate the problem. As well as entrenching the existing leadership, notably that of Nancy Pelosi, it will lead them to concentrate on deepening their hold over seat-rich states such as California by stressing immigration reform, the environment and the claims of racial and sexual minorities. Yet poll after poll shows those issues are starkly at odds with the concerns of the voters whose support the party requires to extend its gains.

Years ago, those tensions could be managed by nominating candidates whose positioning closely matched the local electorate, even if it differed from that of the

party as a whole. But with the voting decisions of Americans increasingly driven by their view of the national parties, rather than of individual candidates, that strategy no longer works, forcing the Democrats to choose between meeting their base's combative expectations and broadening their constituency.

That is a choice the Democrats show no sign of being able to make. And control of the house will not ease their dilemmas. They seem to place great store on the power to investigate Donald Trump's affairs, but it is hard to believe there are undiscovered scandals that can seriously dent Trump's reputation. And while investigations may damage his standing, they will also impassion Republican activists, making the overall impact ambiguous.

In the meantime, the Democrats are unlikely to secure any legislative victories, leaving them with little to show at the next election.

As for the Republicans, their long-term problems are no less severe. Despite Trump's rhetoric about migrants, they managed to attract almost a third of the Hispanic and Asian vote (as compared with 54 per cent of the white vote); but looking forward, that is far from being sufficient to offset the rapid decline in the white share of the electorate, which will fall from 70 per cent in 2016 to just over 60 per cent in 2028. Moreover, with non-white voters increasing their share of the suburban electorate from insignificance 20 years ago to 30 per cent today, much of that fall will occur in the suburbs, which the Republicans need to dominate if they are to remain a major force.

Adding to their woes, the Republican leadership remains badly divided over Trump. That he galvanised Republicans, saving marginal seats, is beyond doubt; but it is equally undeniable that he cost the party the support of many independents, worsening the threat that hung over those seats in the first place. And whatever Trump's electoral impact, the leadership still finds it hard to accept his personal style and his economic and social views.

None of that will worry Trump himself. On the contrary, the Great Disrupter emerges oddly triumphant, with his support among the faithful at rock star levels. His relationship with congress was never harmonious; now he can blame the Democrats

for the strife, while continuing Barack Obama's approach of governing by executive order.

Given that, his incentives are to radicalise his position, escalating the permanent campaign as 2020 approaches. The sacking of Jeff Sessions, which throws down the gauntlet to both the new Democratic leadership of the house and the Republicans in the Senate, is merely a first step in that direction.

It may seem hard, under those circumstances, to be optimistic about the prospects for the US. But this is a country which, perhaps to a greater extent than any other, reflects seriously on itself and learns in the process.

Walt Whitman dedicated his *Democratic Vistas* to those "within whose thought rages the battle, advancing, retreating, between Democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the People's crudeness, vice, caprices". As it struggles with the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the people's voice, American democracy will need all the poetic inspiration it can get.