

Readings for September 30 2018

For this Sunday, September 30, the Today's Issues group will discuss two articles from the September 27 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 52, Madeline Schwarz, "Pushing Against the Apocalypse," a review of a book about Doris Lessing.

Page 71, Andrew Hacker, "Hopeful Math," a review of *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation and the Rise of Donald Trump*.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings is attached:

Pushing Against the Apocalypse
Madeleine Schwartz SEPTEMBER 27, 2018 ISSUE
Free Woman: Life, Liberation, and Doris Lessing
by Lara Feigel
Bloomsbury, 323 pp., \$28.00

Isolde Ohlbaum

Doris Lessing at the Frankfurt Book Fair, 1981; photograph by Isolde Ohlbaum from her book *Lesen & Schreiben*, published by Ars Vivendi last year

What did Doris Lessing mean when she called Anna and Molly in *The Golden Notebook* "free women"? Certainly not that they were happy. The two friends, living in late-1950s and early-1960s London without men, supporting themselves through their art, devoting themselves to politics, still wish to be married. Regarded by generations as a bible of women's liberation, *The Golden Notebook* was Lessing's breakout work, a complex and shifting account of a woman making a life for herself among the competing ideologies of the 1960s. When it opens, Anna Wulf has written a novel that pays her bills, has had affairs and adventures, has fought racism in Africa, has a child. She knows that her independence comes at the price of her happiness, and that happiness, which for her means love, would cost her her mind. Lessing later said that "Free Women"—how she named the five chapters about Anna and Molly's lives, which are interspersed with excerpts from Anna's notebooks—was "an ironical title."

"Men. Women. Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love..." The themes of *The Golden Notebook* are introduced baldly, "with drums and fanfares," yet the conclusions Lessing draws from them are tangled, even fifty years after the novel's publication. Anna is self-sufficient but emotionally dependent. Sex is a bind. She hates the sense of reliance it creates but cannot avoid it. And what of the men she falls in love with? Even the intensity of her attraction to Saul Green, the American radical based on the writer Clancy Sigal, can't

obscure his awfulness: “He talked—I...realised I was listening for the word I in what he said. I, I, I, I, I—I began to feel as if the word I was being shot at me like bullets from a machine gun.” (Raging male insecurity was a specialty of Lessing’s.)

Molly and Anna have agreed to this life. They frequently confirm this to each other. “We’ve chosen to be free women, and this is the price we pay, that’s all,” says Ella to Julia in a novelization of their relationship that Anna writes in one of her notebooks. But political emancipation does not ensure joy:

Both of us are dedicated to the proposition that we’re tough.... A marriage breaks up, well, we say, our marriage was a failure, too bad. A man ditches us—too bad we say, it’s not important. We bring up kids without men—nothing to it, we say, we can cope. We spend years in the communist party and then we say, Well, well, we made a mistake, too bad.

Unlike *The Feminine Mystique*, published the next year, *The Golden Notebook* did not promise happiness for women in work or collective action. Molly and Anna get out of the house; they support themselves. They go to meetings and to parties. They don’t spend all day reading *House and Garden*. Still, they suffer from “the problem with no name.” “Women’s emotions are all still fitted for a kind of society that no longer exists,” thinks Ella. “It’s possible we made a mistake,” says Anna. They live the lives they want, which must be its own reward.

“It seemed that Lessing was a writer to discover in your thirties; a writer who wrote about the lives of grown-up women with an honesty and fullness I had not found in any novelist before or since,” Lara Feigel writes in the opening pages of her memoir *Free Woman: Life, Liberation, and Doris Lessing*. Feigel, the author of books about artists in London and Berlin around World War II, returns to *The Golden Notebook* during summer wedding season. After “white weddings, gold weddings; weddings in village churches, on beaches, at woolen mills,” she finds herself wondering: Is this it? Why do her friends seem so eager to throw their selves away for a man or a family? “They began by identifying as part of a couple and then once a child arrived they identified themselves primarily as mothers.” She is happily married and trying for a second child. Yet she begins to resent “the apparent assumption that this remained the only way to live.”

Lessing, Feigel hopes, will teach her how to find freedom, a word she leaves enticingly vague. Sitting under “a hundred metres of tasteful Liberty print bunting,” she hears Anna’s pronouncement from the beginning of *The Golden Notebook*: “I am interested only in stretching myself, in living as fully as I can.” Lessing wrote the novel in her early forties while living with her son and friends in London. She had recently left the Communist Party; her years fighting apartheid in South Africa were long behind her. Could the writer guide Feigel to a life outside convention? “I wanted to learn from her how to stand in the bush looking up at the sky and to liberate myself from the conflicting desires that stopped me being free.”

I imagine I am not the only reader who paused a little here. Single life, gay marriage: choices that would have seemed daring in Lessing’s time are unremarkable today. A life lived without a

partner is no longer a form of social defiance. For a large number of people, it's just the way things are. Still, even by today's standards, Lessing's life went against convention. She married twice and had many affairs. She wrote frankly about sex. Most pressingly for Feigel, she abandoned two of her children in Africa so that she could live and write in London.

Lessing never apologized for the choices she had made, but she never seemed quite settled with them either. "I did not feel guilty," she said about the eight- and nine-year-old she left behind in Africa. She also said, "I know all about the ravages of guilt, how it feels, how it undermines and saps. I energetically fight back. Guilt is like that iceberg, but I'd say with ninety-nine hundredths hidden." As she wrote in her memoir, she told her children that she was leaving for their own good:

I explained to them that they would understand later why I had left. I was going to change this ugly world, they would live in a beautiful and perfect world where there would be no race hatred, injustice, and so forth. (Rather like the Atlantic Charter.)... One day they would thank me for it.

She continues, "I was absolutely sincere. There isn't much to be said for sincerity, in itself."

Her own politics wavered, driven by anger, experience, and also self-righteousness. She was a staunch Communist. She became disillusioned and railed against the party. In *The Golden Notebook* she described in great detail women's state of confinement. When the book was praised by feminists, she called the concerns of the women's movement "small and quaint." Jenny Diski, who lived with Lessing as a teenager, describes in her memoir how Lessing shuttled from communism to psychoanalysis to Sufism, each time looking for a totalizing system to contain her thoughts. A fear of an imminent apocalypse often had something to do with it. ("She said I shouldn't tell a mutual friend of ours about the forthcoming end of the world," Diski writes, "because it would be hard for a 'young woman with a baby to take it.'") Lessing's works, wrote John Leonard in these pages, "add up to one big bill of indictment, one long history of disenchantments, and fifteen rounds with a heavyweight reality principle."* She believed what she believed and then she moved on.

Like recent literary memoirs such as Rebecca Mead's *My Life in Middlemarch* and Bee Rowlatt's *In Search of Mary: The Mother of All Journeys*, Feigel examines Lessing primarily through her own experiences, an approach that introduces Lessing to a new audience and dulls her edge. The genre of the "bibliomemoir" has grown in recent years, in part because its combination of close readings and contemporary inquiry often leads to new and lively interpretations of classic works. (Though just as often, this gives the impression that books only have literary value when the situations they describe closely match those of the memoirist's own life.)

Feigel reads thoroughly and carefully. In one passage she dissects Lessing's writing on her body. "There is no exultation like it, the moment when a girl knows that this is her body, these her fine smooth shapely limbs," Lessing wrote. But sex brought with it emotions that often

seemed to entrap her. "Does freedom lie in escaping biology or in succumbing to it? In having sex or avoiding it?" asks Feigel. "For me, as for Doris Wisdom, it was not enough to leave girlhood behind. Womanhood did not generously proffer the freedom it had promised."

She goes to see Clancy Sigal to ask him about his time living with Lessing. Dressed in shorts and a cap that says "Secret Agent," he tells her that he's never read anything Lessing's written. "She was a highly intelligent, highly literate, highly sexed woman, and here was I, this lumbering, non-writing Yank, the only thing going for me was I was sexy, but I didn't treat her any differently from how I treated women in America." His current partner offers her a possible consolation prize: "We have some of her ashes in the living room!"

Feigel reads about the Communist Party and marvels at Lessing's devotion to it. Lessing, active in the party long after revelations of Stalin's crimes, didn't leave until the invasion of Hungary in 1956. She felt "very shattered" by Arthur Koestler's revelations about Stalin's purges in *The Yogi and the Commissar*, but then concluded that he had been biased. "I was shocked by her attempts to defend Stalin and his regime in the face of such incriminating evidence," writes Feigel. "But I envied the love affair" with politics. By contrast, she feels that the politics of her generation are tame. "Radical politics had become less possible, and it seemed to make us less passionate." One suspects that she spends little time with environmental activists or leftists.

Feigel calls herself "old-fashioned" and marvels at her own timidity in the face of possible experimentation. A passing reference to "the queer world" makes it seem very distant indeed. She writes:

Once sex before marriage, abortion and divorce had become more widely accepted, once women had greater opportunities for education and employment and were aided domestically by the input of "new men," there was less need to seek freedom in radically different forms of life of the kind proposed by communism or by the first forms of feminism.

Yet it is because of progressive movements that households have changed and new forms of coupling are possible. The transformations of family structure since the 1960s go largely unaddressed in *Free Woman*.

More than Lessing's adventures, what comes across most strongly in the book is Feigel's sensitivity and thoughtfulness. She seems disappointed that she could not live the life that Lessing led and that she does not even want it. Curious about Lessing's friendship with the psychoanalyst R.D. Laing, she decides to try talk therapy. She quits after two sessions. She is interested in drugs but doesn't take any. "I was too anxiously attached to the present configuration of my brain to try LSD in the interests of research." She talks about divorce with her husband, but doesn't act on it. Polygamy turns her off. "I might have been more enthusiastic if I'd been living in California," she jokes. She buys a house in Suffolk with a friend and spends time there, writing alone. "I was amazed that life should turn out to be this simple; that freedom should reside in so bourgeois an acquisition as a second home." One unspoken source of

freedom: money. Lessing bought a house in central London on the royalties from *The Golden Notebook*. Could a writer of literary fiction do the same today?

In the end, Feigel finds she can no longer see “freedom as an attainable goal in life.” What she wants instead is honesty and peace. Writing may be the best and most reliable source of personal emancipation, better than any specific life choice. Lessing wrote: “I was able to be freer than most because I am a writer, with the psychological make-up of a writer, that sets you at a distance from what you are writing about.” Feigel, too, has learned to write about herself without inhibition. In a brief, sad afterword, she writes that while she was finishing the book, her husband left her for another woman shortly before she became pregnant with their second child:

I am tied to this new creature by the kind of love that makes freedom seem less urgent.... Now, unable to leave the house without my child, unable to quest after new places or new lovers, I do feel freer than I did in the period described in this book. I think this is because I have become more honest and because I have discovered that it's possible to live and to write honestly even in the public sphere, even at the risk of shame.

Her life as a free woman has finally begun.

One handicap of the bibliomemoir is that it rarely delves into the books at hand. The pages must compete with the ups and downs of lived experience. Yet to my mind what's most interesting about *The Golden Notebook* is its shape: how it moves and twists through the notebooks that Anna keeps, so that the ground always seems to be shifting. It's a form that, to me, seems particularly well suited to writing about women. As Anna regularly thinks, women in a male society often find themselves cast into “roles”: the “leader's girl friend,” “the free woman.” It is perhaps for this reason that the book seems to anticipate so much of the novelization of women's lives in the past several decades by authors like Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk, and Annie Ernaux, in whose works a precise accounting of emotions suddenly crashes against the sharp edge of social status.

In one scene, Molly and Anna marvel that men call them up whenever their wives are out of town: “Free,” says Julia. “Free! What's the use of us being free if they aren't? I swear to God, that every one of them, even the best of them, have the old idea of good women and bad women.” It reminds me of a scene in *Happening*, Annie Ernaux's novel about her abortion in the early 1960s. The pregnant protagonist goes to the home of a man she knows to get his advice. He is married and a member of an underground contraceptive group. While his wife is out of the house he gropes her: “Jean T kept pressing into me while he was drying the dishes. Then suddenly he resumed his normal tone of voice and pretended he was just testing my moral strength.”

Félix Vallotton

Unlike much autobiographical fiction, however, *The Golden Notebook* never gels into a single alternate account. Lessing's formal innovation means that there is no "real" Anna to compare to the social Anna. No single intimate self challenges her outward presentation; there's no one mind, simmering against the aggressions of the world, that is finally released here. In one notebook we have political Anna, then in another Anna the lover and in a third Anna the writer and then Ella as Anna, who thinks that "obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself." Which is the real one? All of them and none of them:

That Anna, in that time, was such and such a person. And then, five years later, she was such and such. A year, two years, five years of a certain kind of being can be rolled up and tucked away, or "named"—yes, during that time I was like that. Well now I am in the middle of such a period, and when it is over I shall glance back at it casually and say: Yes, that's what I was. I was a woman terribly vulnerable, critical, using femaleness as a sort of standard or yardstick to measure and discard men. Yes—something like that.

Lessing would later say that with the form of the book she wanted to fight atomization, the division of the novel and of life into discrete parts that distorted the whole. "The book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion only when its plan and shape and intention are not understood," she wrote. For the reader, it has a more immediate and less theoretical effect: the ability to capture the odd experience of being a person in the world.

Rereading *The Golden Notebook*, I noticed some ugliness I had not remembered. For one thing, there was Lessing's homophobia, her insistence on "real men," and her cruel descriptions of the two gay men whom Anna keeps as lodgers. There were her odd, rigid views about sex. She believed, as Feigel discusses, that only a vaginal orgasm could prove a deep connection between a man and a woman, a view shared by Freud. Clitoral orgasms, by contrast, were "a substitute and a fake."

Yet so much remained fresh, often surprisingly so. Moving as it does from one Anna to the next, the book allows for a strangely generous form of coexistence. The inconsistencies of the self splay out without muddling into a single story. Freedom and loneliness are both present. Radicalism and personal isolation are too. It is true that Anna and her friends have been disillusioned with what they've been able to accomplish. Yet Anna believes that

every so often, perhaps once in a century, there's a sort of—act of faith. A well of faith fills up, and there's an enormous heave forward in one country or another, and that's a forward movement for the whole world. Because it's an act of imagination—of what is possible for the whole world. In our century it was 1917 in Russia. And in China. Then the well runs dry, because, as you say, the cruelty and the ugliness are too strong. Then the well slowly fills again. And then there's another painful lurch forward.

Moments later, the character she's been talking to tries to kill himself.

What to make of such moments? Freedom in Lessing's novels "is allowed to be contradictory," as Feigel writes. It can remain unresolved without losing any of its urgency. Activism is usually progressive and idealist; personal lives are often grasping and reactionary. Both have their own logic. The Golden Notebook allows for the fact that the hope for progress, and the work it requires, can clash with the realities of life and still have worth.

After all, politics is a slog and often feels pointless. Meanwhile, time passes and you get older. The problems of the world seem to hover in a frightening and scary way. "It could be a Chinese peasant," says Anna when explaining her writer's block. "Or one of Castro's guerrilla fighters. Or an Algerian fighting in the FLN.... They stand here in the room and they say, why aren't you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?" But good work takes a long time, even if every day the outside world gets a little darker. What can you do? Love, work, and live as fully as you can.

*

"The Adventures of Doris Lessing," The New York Review, November 30, 2006. ↵

Hopeful Math

Andrew Hacker SEPTEMBER 27, 2018 ISSUE

The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump

by Alan I. Abramowitz

Yale University Press, 196 pp., \$35.00

Mark Peterson/Redux

Protesters in front of the White House, August 2018

1.

"I expect a Democratic landslide in 2018," George Soros told an audience at Davos in January. His listeners were eager to agree. There are some grounds for this forecast. Since the president's early weeks in office, his Gallup disapproval ratings have been consistently higher than the approval figures. The fact that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in 2016 by a margin of 2,984,757 suggests that the Democrats have strength in numbers. Millions of Americans have been stirred by separation of migrant families, evidence of payoffs, and a host of other calamities, including Trump's apparent eagerness to estrange the United States from the rest of the world.

Yet at this point, it's best not to be too confident. Republicans know they are the nation's second-largest party. They have lost the popular vote in six of the last seven presidential elections. This, however, has motivated them both to develop strategies for shrinking the Democratic electorate and to consolidate their own supporters to an extent the Democrats have not. That Republicans come to the polls more reliably, and more often vote for their party's candidates all the way down the ticket, will make some midterm races difficult for the Democrats to win.

In *The Great Alignment*, Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University, offers a number of insights into why Republicans might prevail again this year. To start, he argues that they feel more intensely about issues, indeed about politics, than Democrats usually do, which spurs them to turn out regularly. He also explains that their support doesn't depend as much on Trump as is often thought. Trump has his fans, but they are mostly the same stalwarts who rallied to both Bushes, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. Abramowitz found a .907 correlation between votes for Trump and Romney, about as high as one can get. According to Pew's exit polls, 93 percent of Trump's supporters in 2016 were Republicans or Republican-leaning voters who would probably have turned out had Marco Rubio or John Kasich headed their ticket.

For Democrats, November will be a chance to cut away at the Republicans' legislative majorities. In the House, the most vulnerable GOP seats, at least on paper, are in twenty-three districts that Clinton carried in 2016. If all of them flip this fall, Democrats will need only two more for control of the House. Even that won't be easy, however. In total, Clinton drew 3,473,937 voters in these districts. Yet 549,254 of them failed to support Democrats running for the House. This was once called "ticket splitting" and seen as a sign of independence by voters who vote across party lines. But it's also an indulgence, one that kept Clinton's majority from regaining the House for her party. Even as Clinton was winning votes for herself nationally, 4,436,198 fewer Democratic ballots were cast in House races, which must mean those voters either chose a Republican or simply skipped that line (see Table A). By contrast, Republicans overwhelmingly voted dutifully down the ballot. (The parties had similar numbers of uncontested seats.)

In the Senate, twenty-six Democrats or Independents who caucus with Democrats are seeking reelection this year, in contrast to only nine Republicans. A first step toward their taking control of the chamber would be to defeat Republican candidates in Arizona and Nevada, which is possible. A far more difficult task is that all twenty-six Democrats (or Independents) must keep their seats—and ten of them are running in states that Clinton managed to lose. In 2012, when these senators were last elected, they proved that their states could assemble Democratic majorities. But now they face midterm elections, when fewer people, especially Democrats, are usually motivated to vote. In the last such cycle in 2014, taking the ten states together, 11,292,503 Republicans turned out, while only 8,841,970 Democrats did. Not surprisingly, Republicans won across the ballot.

To be sure, incumbency often helps candidates keep their seats. More important is whether Democratic voters will overcome their historical midterm insouciance. This is crucial not least because in the Senate, with two seats per state, the GOP has in recent years had a majority out of proportion to the popular support it enjoys. I added up all the votes cast in 2012, 2014, and 2016 (plus a 2017 special election) that gave the current fifty-one Republicans and forty-nine Democrats their seats. These figures can tell us, for example, how many back-home voters supported each party on December's tax bill. By my count, the fifty-one Republican senators

spoke for only 41 percent of the voters who chose that body. The forty-nine Democrats, who lost on the roll call, were speaking for 59 percent. To tilt the Senate this fall, Democrats may need an even higher popular margin than that.

If Democrats can capture only one wing of Capitol Hill, they should concentrate their resources on the Senate. The reason is simple: to avert the prospect of a solidly Republican Supreme Court, which will upend the nation for at least a generation. I've used a party designation, rather than the customary "conservative," because I'm persuaded by Abramowitz when he writes that "the justices now divide along party lines on major cases with greater frequency than at any time in decades." Trump will have two years to name new justices—and after Anthony Kennedy is replaced, two more vacancies are entirely possible, since Ruth Bader Ginsburg is eighty-five and Stephen Breyer is seventy-nine—and a Republican Senate would likely confirm Trump's nominees with alacrity. There's no doubt that all of them will be reliable conservatives in the mold of Neil Gorsuch. Democrats should hope to avoid this outcome at all costs. Clarence Thomas, now seventy, may also find it expedient to retire while Trump is in office, sure that his simulacrum is on a list of possible nominees.

2.

The pool of possible Democratic voters is easily measured: it consists of the Americans who lined up for Barack Obama in 2008, showing a disposition toward the party, and toward a new kind of candidate. Factoring in growth of the electorate, that phalanx would have 75,128,851 adults today. But Clinton's total vote count, again adjusted to account for the growth of the electorate, was equivalent to 9,275,129 less than that of Obama's first bid. Relatively few in that deficit were defectors to Trump. More pertinently, the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey found 1,456,774 Bernie Sanders supporters who voted for third parties or stayed at home. Had those supporters residing in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania chosen Clinton, she would have won those states' electoral votes. This suggests that among at least some Democrats, party loyalty doesn't run very deep.

Just as striking, the Republican column shows only a 1,821,140 shortfall from McCain to Trump—a 97 percent party loyalty rate. The drop from Romney in 2012 to Trump in 2016 totaled only 142,904, a minute fraction of the 3,067,914-vote gulf between Clinton's total and Obama's four years earlier. Even though most Republicans supported someone other than Trump in the primaries, the numbers affirm that they overwhelmingly showed up for him in the fall. It's hard to find stronger evidence of party fealty.

Recent midterms tell a similar story. Slightly less than half of 2012's Democratic voters did not vote in 2014. This nonchalance on the part of the 33,022,234 who stayed at home is not easily fathomed. But at least a few were deterred by obstructive measures, notably in Republican states, that set high hurdles, such as government-issued IDs, for casting ballots. True, not all of Romney's supporters voted in 2014. But close to two thirds of them did, giving control of Capitol Hill to their party, which retains it.

The ten special elections that have been held since 2016, to fill nine House vacancies and one in the Senate, also bear out this concern. Democrats lost eight of them (see Table B). A common solace has been that at least the losers fared better than Democrats ordinarily do in these districts, implying that the defeats were to be expected—an attitude borne out by coverage such as CNBC’s upbeat depiction of them as “a string of results in which Democrats beat their 2016 performance.” Closer study of the figures, however, has convinced me that, apart from Utah, seven of the losses weren’t inevitable. In the Kansas district, for instance, 90,541 of its constituents had voted for Clinton. Yet only 56,435 of them turned out for the special election, where the Republican edged in by a 7,609 margin. That wouldn’t have occurred had just 7,610 of the 34,106 Democratic nonvoters come through.

There were similar stories in Georgia and Arizona. More worrisome were South Carolina and Texas, where fully 76,315 and 71,390 of the districts’ Clinton voters stayed at home. Montana is decidedly a two-party state. Its current Democratic senator won in 2012, and its Democratic governor was reelected in 2016, both with respectable majorities. Nor will it do to argue that some Democratic candidates were unappealing, or, as in Georgia, newcomers to their district. In Arizona, the Democrats fielded a novice politician, Dr. Hiral Tipirneni, against Debbie Lesko, a well-known state senator. In Montana, their House contender was a debt-ridden, septuagenarian bluegrass singer, Rob Quist, whose opponent, Greg Gianforte, was charged with assaulting a journalist. Yet Republicans support their candidates regardless of their lack of experience or personal shortcomings. If Democrats want to win elections, they may have to similarly modify their standards for their own candidates.

That said, Table B has some good news for Democrats: the potential votes are there, even in Republican terrain. In the Pennsylvania district, which Republicans carried by twenty points in 2016, a young, energetic, and hugely outspent Democrat, Conor Lamb, squeaked in by 627 votes. But it wasn’t a solo act; fully 80 percent of Clinton voters turned out for him. With those numbers, even Republican reliability can be overcome. Lamb proved that deeper pockets needn’t turn the tide. Billboards, TV spots, Internet banners, even paid callers reading from scripts are no match for voters who start feeling that an election is worth their time.¹

The victory in Alabama’s Senate race was a special case, since the Republican candidate, Roy Moore, was such a pariah. Still, Doug Jones’s win was his party’s first in statewide elections for Federal office in twenty-five years. An incredible 92 percent of Clinton voters came out for him, while only 49 percent of Republicans showed up for Moore. There’s never been a race where so many Republicans—684,668 by my count—sat it out.

The sources of Jones’s strength can be inferred from the exit polls, which revealed that his principal bloc was 375,484 black Alabamans, who were joined by 267,047 whites. No other statewide contest, in any region, has had anything like this racial breakdown. It should also be noted that almost 70 percent of whites voted for Moore. That Jones’s win was solidly due to

black voters is a landmark. But it was also an anomaly. After all, this is a state that gave Jeff Sessions 63 percent of its votes in his last contested election.

3.

The problem is not only that Democrats show too little enthusiasm for voting. It is also that Republicans display little devotion to the idea of a universal franchise. In recent years they have undertaken strategies for voter suppression, especially targeting active or incipient Democrats. One tactic by Republican government officials is to preserve laws denying the ballot to citizens with past convictions. According to the Sentencing Project, more than six million adult Americans are barred from voting due to felony records. In Kentucky and Mississippi, for instance, one in eleven residents lack full citizenship.² Republican lawmakers think they know how most of them would vote.

A newer tactic has been to cull registration rolls, ostensibly to remove people who have moved or died. Republican officials in Ohio pioneered the practice, sending nondescript postcards to voters that had missed recent elections—some were veterans who had not voted while on tours of duty, and a disproportionate number were low-income voters and racial minorities—with prepaid return cards asking them to confirm their address. Needless to say, these were mostly sent in Democratic wards, and as expected, many cards weren't returned, and those voters were removed from the voting rolls. A Reuters study of the counties containing Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati located some 144,000 citizens who had had their registrations expunged. When oblivious citizens showed up to the polls, their ballots were set aside and excluded from the initial count. In mid-June, the five Republican members of the Supreme Court upheld the practice—setting a troubling precedent for future attacks on the franchise.

David Dee Delgado/The New York Times/Redux

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez celebrating with her campaign staff after defeating incumbent New York City congressman Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary, June 2018

A better-known practice is to demand that voters show an official identification document. The requirement is most often for a driver's license, based on the awareness that fewer Democrats than Republicans have one. In 2016, the Department of Transportation calculated that 16 million adults don't drive, including 17 percent of adults in Georgia and 22 percent in Oklahoma. Although such states will issue a stand-in card, getting one requires finding a motor vehicles office, having a picture taken, and filing a lengthy form. In Wisconsin, where 419,116 adults lack licenses, nondrivers who want to vote must give their weight, eye color, and Social Security number. Republicans wouldn't pursue all these regulations if they didn't think they were effective. It's likely they keep at least some voters from the polls. In 2016, Trump won Wisconsin by 22,748 votes.

Then there is the matter of gerrymandering. As Michael Tomasky has noted in these pages, the chief obstacle to shifting the House of Representatives is its district maps.³ In 2012, Democrats garnered more House votes nationwide, but came away with only 201 of the chamber's 435

seats. Computerized cartographers now decide district lines—a process that can be exploited by the party in control of the state legislature. One technique used by Republicans in several states has been to redraw the lines to concentrate likely Democrats in a few districts, so their votes can't be deployed in competitive races. In North Carolina in 2016, algorithms ensured that 86 percent of Republicans ended up supporting a winner, while only 35 percent of Democrats did. Tomasky cites a Brennan Center analysis concluding that Democrats “would need a near record 11-point national margin” to come out just one seat ahead in the House. That was last achieved in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson routed Barry Goldwater. In June, the Supreme Court postponed deciding gerrymandering cases from Wisconsin, Maryland, and North Carolina. But during oral argument, several justices expressed unease over being asked to assess actual or possible maps. In Pennsylvania, the state's supreme court gave that task to a Stanford law professor.

4.

On a scale that gauged the intensity of political views, Abramowitz found that Republicans scored 82 percent higher than Democrats. A higher proportion of GOP voters know precisely where they stand on issues like abortion, guns, and immigration. Democrats often need whole paragraphs to spell out their positions on, say, foreign trade, fossil fuels, or income inequality. I asked subscribers to several Republican websites to tell me what drew them to the party. In short order, I received over a thousand replies, from terse to expansive. There were ritual allusions to limited government and self-reliance. But by far the most recurrent were firearms and abortion. There's also a third reason, one that barely a handful of my respondents admitted to. Here's one who did: “They are the only party looking out for white America.”

These three issues, Republicans have found, are the ones that drive their voters most reliably to the polls. They were instrumental in 2010 and 2014, and there is every reason to think they will be so again this fall.

At the first GOP convention after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, with Nixon's downfall and the accession of the hapless Gerald Ford, the party was nervous about its waning base. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, always alert to a divisive issue, suggested taking a stance on abortion. Catholics, who had long opposed such tactics, were already being courted with appeals to “white ethnics.” An anti-abortion plank was readily added. Evangelicals had been permissive on the procedure into the early 1970s, as the historian R. Marie Griffith deftly shows in her recent book *Moral Combat*.⁴ But that changed once *Roe* was applied nationwide, and Republicans saw a chance to pick up more of the evangelical vote.

Since 1976, every GOP platform has demanded a broad ban on abortion, ideally enshrined in the Constitution. A Pew survey last year found that 65 percent of Republicans want the procedure to be made illegal in all or most cases, while only 22 percent of Democrats do. What the figures cannot convey is the fervor that Republicans bring to the issue. Many told me it comes first for them in judging candidates. The Democrats have so far not managed to mobilize such a large and impassioned body of single-issue voters around the defense of the right to

choose. With Trump's appointments, a judicial volte-face is more likely than ever; it remains to be seen how much this prospect will impel people to the polls. And *Roe v. Wade* will not be on the ballots for House and Senate seats. Voters will have to do their own research on where candidates stand, plus how to react to Democrats who may take ambiguous positions.

Nor, perhaps until now, had Democrats been able to mobilize around the issue of gun control. In December 2017, CBS asked a sample of Americans how they felt about firearms. Partisan lines were pronounced. Seventy-one percent of Republicans called possession a "vital" right, while only 24 percent of Democrats did. Six times as many Republicans as Democrats said the country would be safer if more citizens had guns, and eight times as many said that the Second Amendment is "part of what makes the country great."

Since 1968, Republican platforms have affirmed the right "to collect, own, and use firearms." The party's most sweeping victory came in a 2008 Supreme Court decision, when its Republican majority sanctioned close to universal possession. Clarence Thomas, in an animated opinion in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), noted that "roughly five million Americans own AR-style semiautomatic rifles." There are now closer to eight million in circulation. He added that they "do so for lawful purposes, including self-defense and target shooting." He omitted that ARs are military weapons, primed for rapid fire. Rather, they are favored for mass murder—AR-15s were used by the mass shooters in Newtown, Aurora, San Bernardino, Sutherland Springs, and Parkland. Over half of Republicans told CBS that shootings "are something we have to accept as part of a free society."

But gun control has become a flashpoint for a new generation of Democrats reacting to Parkland and the mounting pattern of school shootings. Getting young people registered to vote is a clear first step. But the midterms won't have familiar names like Obama or Trump heading the ballots. So a college sophomore in Florida's Seventh District may need to be told to look on the ballot for Stephanie Murphy, who is defending a vulnerable seat, or in California's Tenth to search for Josh Hardner, who is taking on a Republican incumbent.

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Finally, there is the question of racial identity. Since the early days of the New Deal, the GOP has been overwhelmingly Caucasian. Americans who view themselves as white have averaged 87 percent of its turnout in recent elections; most of the rest have been Hispanics who also identify themselves as white. "The politicalization of racial resentment among white voters," Abramowitz reminds his readers, "began well before 2016." It dates back at least to Nixon's "Southern strategy" and its adoption nationwide. Unlike abortion and guns, white disquiet hasn't been explicit in party platforms and manifestos, although allusions to drugs, urban crime, and terrorists all carry racial connotations and play on the anxieties of many whites.

Every so often, a survey question uncovers apprehensions that usually stay under wraps. The Public Religion Research Institute put a statement before a sample of white Americans and parsed the responses by party affiliations.⁵ The partisan divide was striking. Seventy-three

percent of Republicans agree with the position that “discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities” (my italics). Only 30 percent of Democrats believed this. In other words, close to three quarters of an established party feel they endure social inequities on a par with a heritage of bondage.

To be white in America has been to possess a substantial asset. Recent Republican idioms, such as Trump’s references to “shithole countries” and “illegals,” and his impugning the patriotism of black athletes, intimate that whiteness has been devalued—first by civil rights advances and now by immigrants, especially those with darker complexions. So the party casts itself as a refuge for a besieged race. Republican donors have long financed lawsuits by white people who felt they had lost a position or promotion to someone of another culture or color, like Allan Bakke and Abigail Fisher, who sued colleges on the grounds that their admissions applications were rejected due to affirmative action.

The survey found that race doesn’t loom as large for white Democrats. Apparently more of them have adapted to a multiracial nation, as well as to a diverse party. At their 2016 convention, a quarter of the delegates were black, twice their share of the population. (Republicans managed to attract just eighteen black delegates, not even one percent.) Many Democrats are committed to racial justice and a diverse society, often on a philosophical level. Republican feelings about race tend to be more fervid, often with undertones of fear or despair.

In November 2006, halfway into George W. Bush’s second term, 42,082,311 Democrats took the time and trouble to vote, well outmatching 35,674,808 Republicans. Both chambers of Congress changed to Democratic control, presaging Barack Obama’s sweep in the next cycle. Can this turnout be repeated? It was generally agreed that what spurred people to the polls in 2006 was outrage over the morass in Iraq. Democrats have no less reason for outrage this year. Republicans will point to low unemployment, tax cuts, and Trump’s gestures on North Korea to justify keeping Congress in their hands. But there are plenty of issues to rouse energy on the Democratic side. Insensitivity, cupidity, and cruelty are hallmarks of the Republican enterprise, and they come now from a terrifying figure without precedent in American public life.

The question is whether Democrats will be able to channel that outrage into support for sometimes little-known state and local candidates, some of whom will veer toward the center. The two chambers on Capitol Hill will stand a chance of shifting only if hitherto uninvolved voters are willing to turn out for whatever Democrats are on their ballots. So if there is drenching rain across the country on November 6, the future of the nation may turn on how many citizens deem it more important to stay dry.

1

Richard L. Hasen makes a strong case that “money does not buy votes or elections” in *Plutocrats United: Campaign Money, the Supreme Court, and the Distortion of American Elections* (Yale University Press, 2016). ↵

2

Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon, "6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016," The Sentencing Project, October 6, 2016. ↵

3

"Ratfucked Again," The New York Review, June 7, 2018. ↵

4

R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (Basic Books, 2017). See Laura Kipnis's review in these pages, May 24, 2018. ↵

5

Unpublished figures from a poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, October 2016. ↵