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Democrats Outrun by a 2-Year G.O.P. Comeback Plan

By JIM RUTENBERG and JEFF ZELENY

The PowerPoint slides presented to House Republicans in January 2009 seemed incongruously optimistic at a time when the very word “hope” belonged to the newly ascendant Democrats and their incoming president, [Barack Obama](#).

“If the goal of the majority is to govern, what is the purpose of the minority?” one slide asked.

“The purpose of the minority,” came the answer, “is to become the majority.”

The presentation was the product of a strategy session held 11 days before Mr. Obama’s inauguration, when top Republican leaders in the House of Representatives began devising an early blueprint for what they would accomplish in Tuesday’s election: their comeback.

How they did it is the story of one of the most remarkable Congressional campaigns in more than a half-century, characterized by careful plotting by Republicans, miscalculations by Democrats and a new political dynamic with forces out of both parties’ control. The unpredictable [Tea Party movement](#), the torrent of corporate money from outside interests and an electorate with deep discontent helped shift the balance of power in Washington.

The White House struggled to keep Democrats in line, with a misplaced confidence in the power of the coalition that propelled Mr. Obama into office. Republicans capitalized on backlash to the ambitious agenda Mr. Obama and his party pursued, which fueled unrestricted and often anonymous contributions to conservative groups, some advised by a nemesis Democrats thought they had shaken, **Karl Rove**. That money so strengthened the Republican assault across the country that an exasperated Democratic party strategist likened it to “nuclear Whac-a-Mole.”

Most of all, Republican leaders had the foresight to imagine the possibility of winning again. Even now, they believe they could have taken back the Senate if they had just managed to block at least two Tea Party candidates who proved unelectable.

At that Republican retreat in January 2009, gathering inside a historic inn in Annapolis, Md., the group — led by Representatives **John A. Boehner** of Ohio, the Republican leader, and **Eric Cantor** of Virginia, the whip — did not tolerate the hand-wringing that consumed so many Republicans that dark winter.

Instead, they walked through a by-the-numbers picture of Democratic vulnerability that had been lost in the excitement over Mr. Obama’s election. Some 83 Democrats held seats in districts that once supported President **George W. Bush**; more than two dozen won their last elections by wafer-thin margins, according to a Republican document provided to The New York Times.

In their quest to reach a majority, the Republican leaders imposed tough party discipline, warning incumbents that the party would no longer act as a “welfare state” for those who were lax fund-raisers. They began an aggressive recruiting effort for top-flight candidates in districts that seemed to be virtually owned by some of the longest-serving Democrats in the House. And they were keenly aware of the anti-establishment mood, rarely engaging with Tea Party challengers, as Senate leaders did, fearful that any efforts to influence primary races could backfire.

They also tried to push Democrats into retirement, using what was described in the presentation as “guerilla tactics” like chasing Democratic members down with video cameras and pressing them to

explain votes or positions. (One target, Representative Bob Etheridge of North Carolina, had to apologize for manhandling one of his inquisitors in a clip memorialized on YouTube. Only this week did Republican strategists acknowledge they were behind the episode.)

Improbably, Mr. Boehner's team turned the notion that Republicans could not afford to be the "Party of No" — or, in his words, the party of "Hell no" — on its ear, successfully portraying it as a virtue in the face of Mr. Obama's legislative priorities. But even that team never predicted the sort of victory they experienced Tuesday night.

"I remember people laughing at me back when they thought Republicans were a lot like dinosaurs," Representative Pete Sessions, the Texan who leads the National Republican Congressional Committee, said in an interview. "Our mission statement was to retire [Nancy Pelosi](#). That was the whole mission statement."

Borrowed Playbook

They may not have liked [Rahm Emanuel](#)'s policies, but they envied his tactics.

The Republican leaders had watched and studied Mr. Emanuel, the former White House chief of staff and congressman who engineered the Democratic takeover of Congress in 2006, and they had his playbook in mind as they plotted a course to win back their own majority.

The first step was recruiting candidates, a task that fell to Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, one of three self-titled Young Guns of the House.

Mr. McCarthy, who often saw Mr. Emanuel during workouts at the House gymnasium, admired his aggressive political style and adopted his approach by persuading Republicans to challenge Democrats who seemed far less vulnerable at the time.

A top recruit came in the Northwoods of Wisconsin, where Sean Duffy, a county prosecutor and former reality show star on [MTV's "Real World,"](#) agreed to take on Representative [David R. Obey](#), who had

won 21 straight races and was elected two years before Mr. Duffy was born.

Over the last two election cycles, Democrats had gained 55 seats in the House, many in districts deep into Republican territory. And that is where the Republican leaders began, hoping to cut that daunting number by forcing out longtime Democratic incumbents.

They ran advertisements in their districts, hoping to scare them into retirement, given that even Democrats knew that the Congressional campaign of 2010 would be difficult. Only twice in the last 75 years has a president's party not lost seats in an off-year election.

Several Democrats did retire. And many of those who did not — including Representative John M. Spratt Jr. of South Carolina, the chairman of the Budget Committee, who received a personal appeal from the president to run for a 15th term — ended up losing on Tuesday.

Comfort and Confidence

Democrats were no less aware of their vulnerabilities.

But they had succeeded in beating back challenges in a string of special elections earlier in the year that gave them a false sense of confidence. “We are going to maintain our majority,” Representative [Steny H. Hoyer](#) of Maryland, the House majority leader, declared when Mark Critz, a Democrat, beat his Republican opponent in the May race for the seat vacated by the death of Representative [John P. Murtha](#), Democrat of Pennsylvania.

Democrats had also taken comfort that their Congressional candidates had raised more money than their Republican challengers, believing it would help them withstand the hostile political atmosphere in the country.

Mr. Emanuel, before stepping down from his White House post to run for mayor in Chicago, often produced a spreadsheet when reporters asked if Democrats were ready for the final push of the campaign. The document, which circulated between the White House and Capitol Hill, included a

candidate-by-candidate list pointing to Democratic strength.

And while the White House was keenly aware that Mr. Rove and others were out looking for unlimited corporate cash to help them take on Democrats, a report by one of the main groups he helped start, American Crossroads provided more false reassurance. Filed in June, it showed a paltry monthly fund-raising total of \$200.

At the time, it seemed the group had collected far less than the \$52 million it vowed to raise. That figure, officials with the group now say, was something of a confident bluff — they hoped they could hit the mark, but were by no means certain. The number was the invention of Jim Dyke, a former [Republican Party](#) strategist who was on the American Crossroads board and believed the group needed to send a signal that it intended to have a major impact.

“We needed to raise a good bit of money to be credible,” Mr. Dyke said. “So when I thought about ‘credible,’ I figured raising and spending what at the time would have been the same amount of money as the unions was credible.” (Labor unions ultimately spent much more than that on behalf of Democrats.)

In truth, the group had early commitments of \$30 million, but its chief executive overseeing day-to-day operations, Steven Law, said in an interview that he was not initially sure all of those would materialize.

On a fund-raising trip with Mr. Rove through Tennessee and Texas, Mr. Law found donors expressing hesitation, telling him, “Other groups have a track record, you don’t.”

Crossroads had yet to get involved in a race and now needed an opportunity to show it could have an impact.

It found one, he said, in [Sharron Angle](#), the Tea Party candidate in Nevada who unexpectedly won the Republican primary for the seat held by Senator [Harry Reid](#), the majority leader. Ms. Angle had emerged as the nominee virtually broke, and the rest of the Republican establishment was shunning

her, worried that some of her extreme statements — suggesting, for example, that rape victims should make “lemonade” out of unwanted pregnancies — made her a weak candidate.

Within days, American Crossroads flooded the state with anti-Reid ads. Donors noticed. “It was like turning on a light switch,” Mr. Law said.

And so began what became the largest financial involvement from outside groups in American midterm elections. American Crossroads and a sister organization, Crossroads GPS, went on to raise more than \$70 million.

Rush of Advertising

Making the groups all the more potent was that they were coordinating with each other and several more, all with an eye on dumping money into seats where the party committees were not helping financially struggling Republican candidates who might have a shot.

“We had the intention of expanding the field all along,” Mr. Rove said in an interview. “The idea was to keep broadening the field and to make them fight in more places.”

Around Labor Day, Democratic leaders in the Senate worried that their candidates were overwhelmed by the outside money, and asked the White House to publicly raise it as an issue.

It was not until Mr. Obama began mentioning the name of Mr. Rove that loyal Democratic voters took notice. So the president began singling him out again and again, which may have energized those liberal voters with a particular ire for Mr. Rove, but did not stop the ads.

Frustrated Democratic candidates complained that the White House was spending more time talking about the outside money, an issue they did not believe was as important to voters as job creation and spurring the economy.

While Republican officials say they now believe they would have won control of the House without the

groups, they do not believe they would have won by the same margins — or that they would have had the same gains in the Senate.

“We’ve had cavalry showing up on hilltops that have never shown up before to help us,” said Representative Greg Walden of Oregon, a vice chairman of the Republican Congressional committee.

Bill Miller, the national political director of the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#), recalled how his team ran an advertisement against Representative [Joe Sestak](#), running for the Senate in Pennsylvania, claiming that he voted with Ms. Pelosi 100 percent of the time — knowing it might be a slight exaggeration.

He said his team was thrilled when Mr. Sestak raised a public objection, arguing that, in fact, he voted with Ms. Pelosi 97 percent of the time. In a climate where Ms. Pelosi was toxic, “I was like, ‘Jackpot,’” Mr. Miller said. (Mr. Sestak lost in a close race.)

Democrats had a different reaction to the rush of advertisements, at times bordering on panic.

In early October, Chuck Wolfe, the chief executive of the Victory Fund and Leadership Institute, a group that supports gay candidates, offered some startling news to the campaign of Representative [Barney Frank](#) of Massachusetts, who represented what had for years been considered a reliably safe district.

Mr. Wolfe had been at a Capitol Hill restaurant the evening before and overheard a Republican advertising strategist discussing his new assignment, to attack Mr. Frank with an expected budget of \$1 million and a strategy to “piss him off, because you know how Barney gets.” Mr. Wolfe said afterward, “That anybody thought Barney could be vulnerable in his district seemed surprising.” Mr. Frank survived.

Others were not so lucky.

Representative [Alan Grayson](#), Democrat of Florida, stood outside his home in Orlando two weeks before the election and marveled at the scope of the attacks and the candidates they were backing.

“They think they can elect a ham sandwich,” he said.

He expressed relief that the barrage against him had come to an end, noting that his attackers appeared to have concluded that their work with him was done and moved on to another member.

They were correct. He was one of the 60 Democrats who lost their seats on Tuesday.



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