

# Democrats Face Failing Russia-gate Scheme

National Democrats thought they could slough off their stunning election defeat last year by blaming Russia rather than looking in the mirror, but that strategy may be collapsing, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

The plan for Democrats to run against Russia may be falling apart.

After squandering much of the last six months on faulting Russians for the horrific presidency of Donald Trump... After blaming America's dire shortfalls of democracy on plutocrats in Russia more than on plutocrats in America... After largely marketing the brand of their own party as more anti-Russian than pro-working-people... After stampeding many Democratic Party-aligned organizations, pundits and activists into fixating more on Russia than on the thousand chronic cuts to democracy here at home... After soaking up countless hours of TV airtime and vast quantities of ink and zillions of pixels to denounce Russia in place of offering progressive remedies to the deep economic worries of American voters...

Now, Democrats in Congress and other party leaders are starting to face an emerging reality: The "winning issue" of Russia is a losing issue.

The results of a reliable new nationwide poll – and what members of Congress keep hearing when they actually listen to constituents back home – cry out for a drastic reorientation of Democratic Party passions. And a growing number of Democrats in Congress are getting the message.

"Frustrated Democrats hoping to elevate their election fortunes have a resounding message for party leaders: Stop talking so much about Russia," *The Hill* reported over the weekend. In sharp contrast to their party's top spokespeople, "rank-and-file Democrats say the Russia-Trump narrative is simply a non-issue with district voters, who are much more worried about bread-and-butter economic concerns like jobs, wages and the cost of education and healthcare."

*The Hill* coverage added: "In the wake of a string of special-election defeats, an increasing number of Democrats are calling for an adjustment in party messaging, one that swings the focus from Russia to the economy. The outcome of the 2018 elections, they say, hinges on how well the Democrats manage that shift.

**A Big Disconnect**

Such assessments aren't just impressionistic or anecdotal. A major poll has just reached conclusions that indicate party leaders have been operating under political illusions. Conducted last week, the Harvard-Harris national poll found a big disconnect between the Russia obsession of Democratic Party elites in Washington and voters around the country.

The poll "reveals the risks inherent for the Democrats, who are hoping to make big gains – or even win back the House – in 2018," *The Hill* reported. "The survey found that while 58 percent of voters said they're concerned that Trump may have business dealings with Moscow, 73 percent said they're worried that the ongoing investigations are preventing Congress from tackling issues more vital to them."

The co-director of the Harvard-Harris poll, Mark Penn, commented on the results: "While the voters have a keen interest in any Russian election interference, they are concerned that the investigations have become a distraction for the president and Congress that is hurting rather than helping the country."

Such incoming data are sparking more outspoken dissent from House Democrats who want to get re-elected as well as depose Republicans from majority power. In short, if you don't want a GOP speaker of the House, wise up to the politics at play across the country.

Vermont Congressman Peter Welch, a progressive Democrat, put it this way: "We should be focused relentlessly on economic improvement [and] we should stay away from just piling on the criticism of Trump, whether it's about Russia, whether it's about Comey. Because that has its own independent dynamic, it's going to happen on its own without us piling on."

Welch said, "We're much better off if we just do the hard work of coming up with an agenda. Talking about Trump and Russia doesn't create an agenda."

Creating a compelling agenda would mean rejecting what has become the rote reflex of Democratic Party leadership – keep hammering Trump as a Kremlin tool. In a typical recent comment, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi pounded away at a talking point already so worn out that it has the appearance of a bent nail: "What do the Russians have on Donald Trump?"

In contrast, another House Democrat, Matt Cartwright of Pennsylvania, said: "If you see me treating Russia and criticisms of the president and things like that as a secondary matter, it's because that's how my constituents feel about it."

### **Betting on a Lame Horse**

But ever since the election last November, Democratic congressional leaders have

been placing the party's bets heavily on the Russia horse. And it's now pulling up lame.

Yes, a truly independent investigation is needed to probe charges that the Russian government interfered with the U.S. election. And investigators should also dig to find out if there's actual evidence that Trump or his campaign operatives engaged in nefarious activities before or after the election. At the same time, let's get a grip. The partisan grandstanding on Capitol Hill, by leading Republicans and Democrats, hardly qualifies as "independent."

In the top strata of the national Democratic Party, and especially for the Clinton wing of the party, blaming Russia has been of visceral importance. A recent book about Hillary Clinton's latest presidential campaign – *Shattered* by journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes – includes a revealing passage. "Within 24 hours of her concession speech," the authors report, campaign manager Robby Mook and campaign chair John Podesta "assembled her communications team at the Brooklyn headquarters to engineer the case that the election wasn't entirely on the up-and-up."

At that meeting, "they went over the script they would pitch to the press and the public. Already, Russian hacking was the centerpiece of the argument."

In early spring, the former communications director of the 2016 Clinton presidential campaign, Jennifer Palmieri, summarized the post-election approach in a *Washington Post* opinion piece: "If we make plain that what Russia has done is nothing less than an attack on our republic, the public will be with us. And the more we talk about it, the more they'll be with us."

Polling data now indicate how wrong such claims are. Initially in lockstep this year, Democrats on Capitol Hill probably didn't give it a second thought if they read my article published by *The Hill* nearly six months ago under the headline "Democrats Are Playing With Fire on Russia." At the outset, I warned that "the most cohesive message from congressional Democrats is: blame Russia. The party leaders have doubled down on an approach that got nowhere during the presidential campaign – trying to tie the Kremlin around Donald Trump's neck."

And I added: "Still more interested in playing to the press gallery than speaking directly to the economic distress of voters in the Rust Belt and elsewhere who handed the presidency to Trump, top Democrats would much rather scapegoat Vladimir Putin than scrutinize how they've lost touch with working-class voters."

### **Nuclear War Risks**

But my main emphasis in that Jan. 9 article was that "the emerging incendiary

rhetoric against Russia is extremely dangerous. It could lead to a military confrontation between two countries that each has thousands of nuclear weapons.”

I noted that “enthusiasm for banging the drum against Putin is fast becoming a big part of the Democratic Party’s public identity in 2017. And – insidiously – that’s apt to give the party a long-term political stake in further demonizing the Russian government.”

My article pointed out: “The reality is grim, and potentially catastrophic beyond comprehension. By pushing to further polarize with the Kremlin, congressional Democrats are increasing the chances of a military confrontation with Russia.”

Here’s a question worth pondering: How much time do members of Congress spend thinking about ways to reduce the risks of nuclear holocaust, compared to how much time they spend thinking about getting re-elected?

In political terms, *The Hill*’s June 24 news article headlined “Dems Push Leaders to Talk Less About Russia” should be a wakeup call. Held in the thrall of Russia-bashing incantations since early winter, some Democrats in Congress have started to realize that they must break the spell. But they will need help from constituents willing to bluntly tell them to snap out of it.

If there is to be a human future on this planet, it will require real diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia, the world’s two nuclear-weapons superpowers. Meanwhile – even if the nuclear threat from continuing to escalate hostility toward Russia doesn’t rank high on the list of Democrats’ concerns on Capitol Hill – maybe the prospects of failure in the elections next year will compel a major change. It’s time for the dangerous anti-Russia fever to break.

**Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group [RootsAction.org](http://RootsAction.org) and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.***

---