The town hall in America prevailed in 2026

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The writer says that In his book The Lovers' Quarrel, he argued that America was founded twice – first in 1776, as a league of states and localities jealous of distant power, and then in 1787, as a nation strong enough to bind them through a Constitution – and that its politics has been a quarrel between the two ever since. PHOTO: ALEX KENT/NYTIMES

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US politics has always been a quarrel between two impulses. In last week's midterms, one won.

Elvin Lim

Eighteen years ago, Barack Obama arrived in Washington promising hope and change, with 257 Democrats in the House and, for a time, 60 in the Senate. This week, Democrats won something remarkably like it – about 255 House seats and 55 or 56 senators, on a popular-vote margin unseen since the 1970s.

It is tempting to read Nov 3 only as a verdict on President Donald Trump, and it was one. But it also marked a second chance at the political realignment that Obama promised and could not complete. The first signs of a resurgent Democratic coalition lie not in the big races but in the night's local votes.

While attention was focused on the battle for Congress, voters in some 41 American localities were asked a humbler question: Should a data centre be built here?

In all but one, according to Ballotpedia and CNBC, they said no, or not without conditions. In Edgewater, Florida, 77% voted for a ban; in Alhambra, California, 82%. Eleven towns in Ohio shut the door outright.

Two days later, Wall Street heard what the townships had said. The Nasdaq suffered its worst day in 19 months, and by Nov 6, the tremor had reached the Straits Times Index. These developments explain why MAGA's interruption stalled, and how the next movement might succeed.

THE HOPE THAT WAS INTERRUPTED

Obama's promise was real. He raised a big tent, carried Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia, and spoke of a country that was not red or blue but whole. But he governed from the centre outwards, most visibly with the Affordable Care Act, and the periphery contested the centre: first the Tea Party, then Make America Great Again (MAGA). By 2016, counties that had twice voted for him were voting for his opposite.

Seen from 2026, the decade that followed may well look less like a realignment than a temporary rebuke. Some of the counties that left Obama have come home: Democrats regained rural Iowa counties no Democratic Senate candidate had carried since 2008, and young and Latino voters have swung back. Obama's coalition-building was interrupted, not destroyed.

WHY THE TOWNSHIPS MATTER

What brought it home was a monthly bill. Trump and Big Tech sold the artificial intelligence boom to Americans as a race against China. It arrived in their kitchens as an invoice: Ohio's household electricity bills reportedly rose more than 12% between July 2025 and July 2026.

Trump said opponents of data centres wanted "to end up being backwards and poor". Yet 56% of voters in NBC's exit poll called AI and data centres a major or crucial factor. The revolt of the little man was undone by the little man.

In my book The Lovers' Quarrel (2014), I argued that America was founded twice: first in 1776, as a league of states and localities jealous of distant power, and then in 1787, as a nation strong enough to bind them through a Constitution. Its politics has been a quarrel between the two ever since. MAGA speaks in the accent of the first founding, with its distrust of distant elites and its faith in the local. Yet, while the anti-federalists feared a powerful executive, MAGA ironically made a cult of one.

On AI, the irony was complete. The Trump White House chose the nationalising impulse of 1787: Its December 2025 executive order sought to accelerate AI infrastructural growth through one light national standard, pre-empting the states.

Political scientist E.E. Schattschneider taught that whoever sets the scope of a conflict decides its outcome. Voters shrank this midterm election to the size of a zoning hearing, where a neighbour's electricity bill outweighs a lobbyist's cheque, and they did not divide by party: 58% of Republicans, Blue Rose Research finds, would oppose a data centre in their own community. The heirs of the anti-federalists were undone by the townships their forebears had championed.

The market drew its own conclusion. It spared the cloud giants, which already own their server farms, and punished the makers of memory chips, whose plants take years to build and cannot be unbuilt when orders thin. Demand for computing will not vanish, but it will shift simply to places more willing to host it.

REFOUNDING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Here is the lesson for Democrats, today's party of America's second founding, on how to win this quarrel. The champions of the first founding, from Andrew Jackson to Ronald Reagan, won elections and rearranged the furniture. The builders of the second, from the framers to Franklin Roosevelt to Obama,

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have generally sustained more durable victories, but only when they learnt to speak in the first founding's voice. Obama learnt that lesson too late.

Roosevelt is the proof. During the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover's Republican Party lost more than 50 House seats in the 1930 midterms, amid economic pain not unlike today's. Two years later, Roosevelt stitched farmers, workers, city immigrants and the South into a coalition that governed for a generation. It was a tent of particularities – one built on accommodations with a collective of states in the Jim Crow South.

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WHERE SINGAPORE STANDS

The quarrel is American, but its echoes travel far and wide. Computing turned away from Ohio will seek friendlier ground, some of it in our region, carrying the politics of power and water in its luggage. Singapore, which paused new data centres between 2019 and 2022, learnt the meaning of social licence early. Its neighbours will have to learn it quickly.

Our deeper exposure lies with those who make the chips rather than those who buy them. In January, Micron broke ground here on a US$24 billion memory plant, due to begin output in 2028. Singapore makes about a tenth of the world's semiconductors and grew 5.4% last quarter on the AI boom.

If American townships slow the build-out, the adjustment will be felt in our fabs long before Washington notices. Our officials know Washington's corridors well. They would do well to know Ohio's county commissioners too.

The AI boom is not over. It will go on, more slowly and more expensively, and more of it in Asia, but on the township's terms. And the hope of 2008 is not over either. It has simply learnt where it must live.

The political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, travelling through America in the 1830s, found its soul not in the capital but in the township. He understood the real heart of America and he would not have been surprised by last week. MAGA told Americans that it alone could fix America. Americans gave it the chance, read their bills, and went to the town hall.

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