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MIDTERM ELECTIONS OF 2010

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The 2010 Midterm Elections: An Overview

Andrew E. Busch

Abstract

This paper addresses three key questions related to the midterm elections of 2010: What happened? Why? And what difference does it make? Republicans made historic gains in the U.S. House and in state elections while making strong gains in the U.S. Senate. They benefited from an economic and issue environment that strongly favored them; in the House they also benefited from the overexposure of Democrats. Republican Senate gains were limited partly because Democrats were not overexposed there and partly due to factors specific to individual races, particularly candidate quality. A number of key demographics moved against Democrats, and the elections were marked by the emergence of a new popular movement in the form of the Tea Party which helped mobilize Republicans and conservative independents. The election results are best understood as a repudiation of Democratic rule, though a simple economic explanation is not sufficient. The long-term importance of the 2010 elections will depend on the interaction of important contingencies with the underlying alignment of the electorate, the character of which remains uncertain.

KEYWORDS: midterm elections, economic voting

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November 2, 2010, will certainly go down as one of the most dramatic midterm elections in American history. Only time will tell whether it will also go down as one of the most significant. Three obvious questions demand consideration: What happened? Why did it happen? And what could it mean?

What Happened?

In the House of Representatives, Republicans gained 63 seats, taking control of the chamber by a healthy margin. That figure represents the largest gain by an out-party in a midterm election since 1938. With 242 seats, Republicans will have a larger contingent in the House than they have had at any time since the 1946 elections. By way of comparison, from 1910 through 2006, the seat loss by the president's party in the House has averaged 29.6.

Although not evenly distributed, Republican gains were broadly distributed. After the 2008 elections, some analysts contended that Republicans had been reduced to a regional party, with strength only in the South and Plains states. In 2010, Republicans gained in New England, sweeping New Hampshire's two congressional seats; the mid-Atlantic, picking up numerous seats in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey; the Midwest, scoring in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, and doing particularly well in Ohio and Illinois; the Rocky Mountain West, in Colorado and New Mexico; the Plains, winning a seat in Kansas as well as the at-large seats in both of the Dakotas; Border states such as Missouri; the Southwest, in Arizona; the Pacific Northwest, in Washington; the peripheral South, especially Tennessee, Virginia, and Florida; and the Deep South, in Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi.

Voters gave Republican House candidates a larger share in 2010 than in 2008 in 393 of 435 districts.¹ Only a few Democratic strongholds, such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and California, escaped unscathed. Democrats took away three Republican seats, while Republicans picked up 66 Democratic counterparts.

If the House results represented a great year for Republicans, the Senate results represented a good (perhaps even a very good) year, but not a great one. In the end, Republicans gained a net of six seats, increasing their total from 41 to 47, more than enough to be able regularly to block action. The gain of six was almost double the average Senate gain by the out-party in midterm election years since 1910, and represented about one-third of the Democratic Senate seats up for election.

Some Republicans were nevertheless disappointed by the Senate results. For a time in the fall, it had seemed that GOP control of the body was possible.

¹ "Districts Across the Country Shift to the Right," *New York Times*, November 4, 2010, p. P1.

Then, just as one opportunity seemed to fall out of reach, another emerged. It was also outside of recent experience to expect that Republicans could make the sort of House gains they seemed increasingly likely to achieve without pulling the Senate along. And indeed, there were a number of races that they could have won but did not—Delaware, Nevada, Colorado, and West Virginia at the least.

However, it was also true that a year before the election, most analysts thought Democrats would hold their own and perhaps even pick up some seats in the Senate. Republicans were facing the daunting task of defending open seats in a number of states that seemed to be trending Democratic or that were otherwise assumed to be targets of Democratic efforts, including Ohio, Florida, New Hampshire, Missouri, and Kentucky. In the end, Republicans held them all with little difficulty. Of the six Democratic seats they took away, half were in conservative territory: Arkansas, Indiana, and North Dakota. Yet the other half were in territory that has recently been firmly blue: Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Finally, state-level elections were largely obscured by the drama of the House and Senate but were also crucial, and were devastating for the Democrats. Republicans gained a net of six governors—they now lead 29-20—including Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio. They also gained about 690 state legislative seats, the largest gain recorded since 1966, and took control of the largest number of state legislative chambers held by Republicans since 1928. To add insult to injury, in the aftermath of the elections, at least 25 Democratic lawmakers in eight states (including nine in Georgia alone) changed parties and added to Republican majorities.²

Why Did It Happen?

That the president's party will lose House seats in a midterm election is, of course, nearly a given. In the century since 1910, such an outcome has only failed to come about three times, all under highly unusual circumstances—FDR's first New Deal midterm in 1934, the Clinton impeachment midterm of 1998, and the post 9-11 midterm of 2002. If the fact of an out-party gain is almost a given, though, the size of it is not. In 1894, the opposition Republicans gained 116 seats in the House; in 1962, they gained 3.

² "Dem State Lawmakers Defecting to GOP Post-election," CBS News, November 30, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/11/29/ap/national/main7100495.shtml>. Accessed November 13, 2010. See also, <http://www.gopac.org/chairmanscorner/media22.aspx>. Accessed January 3, 2011.

There is a plethora of political science literature attempting to explain the variations in losses by the president's party. Writing for *RealClearPolitics*, election analyst Sean Trende neatly summarized the factors that determine the size of those losses.³ As Trende pointed out, three factors stand out:

1. Exposure, or the number of seats held by the president's party. The degree of real, as opposed to merely mathematical, exposure depends on how many seats the president's party holds above the party's norm. This is not always easy to gauge, since (as stock brokers like to say) past performance is not a guarantee of future performance. Obviously, the "norm" changes course from time to time. Nevertheless, one can get a sense of exposure by thinking about how many seats are held by the president's party in districts that have shown a recent inclination to vote the other way (see James Campbell's article in this issue of *The Forum*). All other things being equal, the more exposure, the greater vulnerability to losses.
2. The economy or, more broadly, the condition of the country. All other things equal, the worse the economy, the higher the presidential party losses will be.
3. Issues, particularly related to public assessment of the president's policy agenda. Again, all other things equal, the more hostile the public is toward the president's agenda, the higher his party's losses will be.

In 2010, House Democrats faced an extremely negative electoral environment because all three factors were working against them heavily. First, exposure. The Democratic majorities that came out of 2006 and 2008 were built in moderate-to-conservative districts won by candidates claiming to fit those districts. That meant that in 2010 there were 49 House Democrats representing districts that had voted for John McCain for President. If one added Democrats representing districts that had voted for George W. Bush in 2004 but not McCain, the number climbed to over 60.

Second, the economy, which, needless to say, was also a negative. When voters went to the polls, national unemployment was higher than in any midterm or presidential election year since 1982. The putative recovery in 2009 and 2010 was painfully sluggish by historical standards and, although the perceptions of most voters were already set, it cannot have helped that the final GDP figures released just before the election were disappointingly low. The bad objective

³ Sean Trende, "Democrats Didn't Prepare for a Year Like this," *RealClearPolitics*, October 18, 2010. See: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/10/18/democrats_didnt_prepare_for_a_year_like_this_107610.html. Accessed October 18, 2010.

news came against a backdrop of exaggerated promises about the effects of the 2009 stimulus package and claims by leading Democrats that the election would be preceded by a robust “recovery summer” that did not materialize.

Finally, in a complete turnaround since 2006 and 2008, Democrats found themselves on the wrong end of public opinion when it came to the major issues of the day. The big issues of the stimulus and healthcare, which Democrats had hoped would prove popular, were enough of a drag that almost no Democrats in tough races cited them. By September of 2010, 68 percent of Americans told pollsters that the stimulus money had been mostly wasted.⁴ Likewise, a majority of Americans opposed the Democratic healthcare reform from the summer of 2009 until it passed in March, and then continued disliking it through election day.

Bill Clinton argued that Obama’s approval rating would go up by ten points as soon as healthcare passed, but this did not happen. Opponents feared the program’s big price-tag, the taxes and regulations that came with it, the potential for reduced quality or rationing of healthcare, the possibility that federal funds would pay for abortions, and the increased power of centralized government. Many were also repelled by the public sausage-making that in the end produced legislation. Of the 30 House Democrats who opposed the health care bill on final passage, 17 lost. Yet fully 19 of the 22 in tough districts who voted for it lost. Not a single House Democrat who changed his or her vote from a no in November to a yes in March was reelected.⁵

The stimulus and healthcare bills, though, were only the beginning. In many regions, the cap-and-trade bill, which passed the House but was stalled in the Senate, was politically toxic. The automobile bailouts, including the GM takeover, were not popular. Altogether, on the battery of nine issues tested by Gallup, Republicans forged a lead on nearly every one.⁶ In 2008, it was Democrats who led on almost every issue. The president’s approval rating, undoubtedly a reflection of both economic conditions and the president’s agenda, hovered around 45 percent from mid-summer through election day. With all three major factors working against them—exposure, economy, and the policy agenda—it was not surprising that Democrats lost more House seats than any party in a midterm in the last seven decades.

⁴ *Washington Post*/ABC News Poll, October 3, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_10052010.html.

⁵ See Kevin Sack, “Health Care Vote Only a Part of Democrats’ Vulnerability,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2010, p. P3.

⁶ Bruce Drake, “Republicans Lead Democrats on Seven of Nine Key Election Issues,” *Politics Daily*, August 30, 2010. <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/09/01/republicans-lead-democrats-on-7-of-9-key-midterm-election-issues/>. Accessed December 11, 2010.

Structurally, Republican Senate candidates benefitted from exactly the same economic and issue advantages as their House counterparts, but—unlike the situation in the House—their gains were limited because Senate Democrats were not overexposed. On the surface, this seems odd, since the Democratic pre-election share of 59 senators was the party's largest number in a generation. However, since only roughly one-third of the Senate faces the voters in any election (in 2010, it was 37 of 100), it matters a great deal *which* one-third is facing the voters. National trends can be mitigated (or freakishly amplified) by the idiosyncratic character of the electoral map.

In 2010, that map favored the Democrats, whose majority was built on outsized Senate wins in 2006 and 2008—Senators whose seats will not be at risk again until 2012 or 2014. This phenomenon is one reason why the midterm pattern, which almost always holds in the House, holds only about two-thirds of the time in the Senate, and why there are sometimes wide disparities between House and Senate results. In 1966, for instance, Republicans gained 47 House seats but only 4 Senate seats; in 1974 Democrats picked up 48 House seats and only 5 in the Senate.

There were also reasons particular to certain Senate races that helped Democrats mitigate the wave. In some cases, Republicans did not run the strongest possible candidates. They almost certainly would have won Delaware had they nominated Mike Castle. Sue Lowden in Nevada and Jane Norton in Colorado might well have won against the unpopular incumbents. And Rob Simmons might have more successfully exploited Richard Blumenthal's evident vulnerabilities in Connecticut.

Some of these nomination fights were accompanied by intra-party division in which some Republican moderates were unwilling to accept the primary results and get behind the winner. In one case, West Virginia, the Democratic candidate saved his seat by literally firing a rifle at a copy of the cap-and-trade bill. If Joe Manchin votes as he campaigned, he will be the most unreliable Democrat in the Senate. (If he does not, he may be inviting trouble in 2012, when he has to run for reelection.)

In a number of states, Democratic Senate incumbents saved themselves by running unremittingly negative campaigns from beginning to end, sometimes (as in Colorado, Washington, and California) focusing attention on social issues. (Political scientists eagerly await Thomas Frank's sequel, *What's the Matter with Colorado*, in which he will explore the political distortions caused when affluent progressives vote against their economic interests in lock-step response to pro-choice attack ads.) These candidates succeeded in their oft-stated aim of making the election "a choice, not a referendum."

Beyond that, Democratic Senate candidates sometimes benefitted from a strong ground game run by organized labor and other groups. This sort of urban

turnout machine would help explain why Democrats did better in the Senate than in the House. Turnout in Denver and Boulder could tip the statewide scales against Ken Buck in Colorado, but did nothing to help Betsy Markey or John Salazar keep their House seats. (A similar cause was behind the split verdict in the 2000 congressional elections, when Democrats won a 50-50 tie in the upper chamber with the help of urban-labor turnout, but made little headway in the House.)

If these were the sorts of factors that drove the results of the 2010 midterm elections, they still leave the important question of *who* drove those results. Which voters were crucial to Republican success? As usual, the starting place is with the party's own identifiers. In 2008, Republicans comprised only 32 percent of the electorate; in 2010, Republicans were 39 percent.⁷ This improvement came both because the Republicans of 2008 were more enthused about voting in 2010, and because there were more Republicans in the country than there were in 2008. The revival of both Republican numbers and Republican enthusiasm was traceable to Obama's liberal issue agenda and polarizing approach, which led even two noted Democratic consultants to criticize "Our divisive president."⁸

Just as important as the Republican recovery was the total reversal of party preference by independent voters. In 2006, independents gave Democrats control of Congress by favoring them by a 57-39 percent margin. In 2010, independents swung to favoring Republicans by a nearly identical 56-37 percent margin. This swing was foreshadowed as much as a year earlier when Republicans began winning races in New Jersey, Virginia, and Massachusetts by compiling huge margins among independent voters. One way to look at this shift was that independent voters were disappointed in the failure of President Obama to live up to his pledges of economic restoration and bipartisanship. Another (not incompatible) way is to note that the relatively conservative independents who abandoned Republicans in 2006 simply returned in 2010. Other key findings from the national House exit polls:

- Women voters swung from heavily favoring Democrats in 2008 to splitting 49-48 for Republicans in 2010.
- Voters making over \$100,000 a year (about a quarter of the electorate) swung from an even Obama-McCain split in 2008 to a heavy Republican edge in 2010.
- Catholics, a key swing group that went for Obama in 2008, voted 53-45 Republican in 2010; white Catholics split 58-40 Republican.

⁷ Exit poll data here and later can be found at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/ and www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/.

⁸ Patrick H. Caddell and Douglas E. Schoen, "Our divisive president, redux," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2010.

- In 2008, first-time voters were 11 percent of the electorate and voted overwhelmingly Democratic; in 2008, first-time voters were only 3 percent of the electorate and gave Democrats only a slight edge (45-43 percent).
- In 2008, voters thought government was not doing enough by a 51-43 percent margin; in 2010 voters said by an even wider 56-38 margin that government was doing too much.

Key portions of Obama's coalition remained basically intact—racial minorities, the highly secular, and voters under 30. Yet these were not enough when independents, white Catholics, and upper-income voters swung hard to the other side, when women and first-time voters were fought to a draw, and when the electorate had moved sharply against the philosophical premises underlying his entire policy agenda. Moreover, the election results were not unambiguously positive for Democrats even when it came to the minority vote. The Democratic share of the African-American vote for House candidates fell from 93 percent to 89 percent, while their share of the Latino vote fell from 68 percent to 60 percent. The election also brought to power and prominence some minority Republicans—most notably Marco Rubio of Florida, Brian Sandoval of Nevada, and Susanna Martinez of New Mexico—who may eventually enable Republicans to chip away further at their disadvantage there.

The Battle Over Interpretation

The struggle for interpretation of the election results began even before the voting ended. One school of thought held that the elections were merely a referendum on economic conditions. There can be no doubt that the state of the economy was an important part of the outcome. Nearly two-thirds of voters cited the economy as their number one issue, and those who were “very worried” about the economy voted heavily Republican. However, there are good reasons to be cautious about embracing a purely economic explanation.

For one thing, the last time unemployment approached 10 percent—in 1982, when unemployment was worse than in 2010—the out-party gained only 26 House seats, and lost one Senate seat. Political science models, built largely around economic conditions and exposure, predicted Democratic losses in 2010 of somewhere between 22 and 52 House seats, well below the 63 that actually resulted.⁹ And while exit polls showed that 23 percent primarily blamed Obama for economic conditions, another 30 percent blamed George W. Bush, while 35 percent blamed Wall Street. The GOP won 57 percent of the voters who blamed

⁹ James E. Campbell, “Forecasts of the 2010 Midterm Elections,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 43 (October 2010): 625-626.

Wall Street. To the extent that the economy was a key to Republican electoral success, that key did not take the form of simple retribution for bad times.

For a time, financing of campaigns by “secret” money (facilitated by the controversial *Citizens United* decision) was held to be a critical factor by some analysts. However, the Campaign Finance Institute has shown that Democrats outspent Republicans overall, even taking into account outside money. This was even true of the Democratic House incumbents who lost. If outside money had an effect, in most cases it was to level the playing field somewhat, giving outgunned challengers an opportunity. The CFI concluded that the candidates who most benefitted from outside money were Republican challengers who lost with 45 percent of the vote or more.¹⁰ In some of these cases, outside money simply added to the resources working on behalf of amply-funded candidates like Sharron Angle or Ken Buck, presumably buying little in terms of marginal benefit.

Another possibility, at least theoretically, is that the election results represented a positive national embrace of the Republican Party. However, not even Republican partisans like John Boehner argued for this, and with good reason. House exit polls showed that only 43 percent had a favorable opinion of the Democratic Party, while only 41 percent had a favorable opinion of the Republican Party. Conversely, 52 percent had an unfavorable view of Democrats, 53 percent of Republicans. Republicans won because only one in ten with an unfavorable view of Democrats voted for the Democratic candidate anyway, while nearly a quarter of those who viewed the GOP unfavorably voted for the Republican candidate notwithstanding.

Thus, this electoral shift, like many big electoral shifts before it, might best be understood as a rejection of the in-party—what James Ceasar has called “the Great Repudiation”¹¹—and merely an *opportunity* for the out-party rather than an embrace of it. It was a repudiation of 9.6 percent unemployment, to be sure. It also makes sense to view it as a repudiation of policies that most Americans perceived to have failed to deal with that crisis effectively. It was, perhaps, a rebuke (if not yet a repudiation) of a style of leadership which many Americans found distant and more than a touch arrogant. But it was also a broader repudiation of a program that many saw as an attempt to turn the United States into a European-style social democracy. This perception, at any rate, was a large part of what was driving Republican turnout and what was turning conservative independents away from Democrats in droves.

¹⁰ See “Non-Party Spending Doubled in 2010 but Did Not Dictate the Results,” Campaign Finance Institute, November 5, 2010. See: http://www.cfinst.org/Press/PReleases/10-11-05/Non-Party_Spending_Doubled_But_Did_Not_Dictate_Results.aspx. Accessed December 2, 2010.

¹¹ James W. Ceasar, “The Great Repudiation,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Vol. X, No. 4 (Fall 2010).

Emblematic of these concerns was the Tea Party movement, whose yellow Gadsden flags added an element of popular uprising to the election. Some Democratic leaders claimed that the Tea Party was “Astroturf” (as opposed to grassroots), and it did receive some top-down aid from people like Richard Armey, former GOP House Majority Leader, whose Freedom Works organization served as a clearinghouse. On balance, though, the Tea Party movement was a genuine, decentralized, bottom-up movement that expressed the worries and aspirations of a significant proportion of the American electorate. (Indeed, long-time political journalist Lou Cannon called it “a movement that is more truly grassroots than any other of our time.”¹²) As such, it took its place among movements of the past such as the populist, progressive, conservative, new politics, and religious right movements that each entered the electoral arena in force and reshaped American politics.

Although deficits, debt, and federal spending were the immediate concerns of the movement, its deeper concerns were constitutional, with both a Big “C” and a little “c”. Supporters of the movement were convinced that federal authority had exceeded its Constitutional bounds as expressed in the enumeration of powers and the 10th Amendment. Critics mocked these concerns as quaint, but the mockery only convinced supporters to redouble their efforts. They were also worried that policy trends driven by the Obama/Pelosi/Reid leadership were threatening to change the fundamental character of the United States, a “small c” constitutional change that would leave the U.S. with permanently higher spending, higher taxes, more dependency on government, and less freedom.

To the Tea Party, then, the election was not just about specific economic issues. It was about American exceptionalism itself—the capacity of the United States to pursue a distinct form of democratic life, more decentralized, more focused on liberty, and less under the domination of progressive administrative “experts” than European variants. In 2008, Barack Obama frequently claimed that he was seeking to “transform America.” The Tea Party took him at his word.

As with all decentralized and largely spontaneous movements, the Tea Party included a fringe—in this case, consisting of “birthers,” radical libertarians, and assorted cranks. However, accusations that the Tea Party was a hotbed of racism were not well supported, and aroused suspicions that Democrats were attempting to silence the Administration’s critics without having to engage their arguments. Rather, the Tea Parties’ biggest fault—and simultaneously greatest appeal—lay in the fact that they were often not very experienced in the ways of politics.

¹² Lou Cannon, “The Conservatives Come Back From the Dead,” *Politics Daily*, October 31, 2010. See: <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/10/31/the-conservatives-come-back-from-the-dead/>. Accessed December 12, 2010.

As a result, the movement almost certainly cost the Republicans at least one Senate seat and perhaps as many as three. (Its candidate also lost in Alaska, but to another Republican). In perhaps the most disastrous move, the Tea Party-endorsed Republican candidate for governor in Colorado won his primary, imploded, and finished with 11 percent of the vote in the general election. On the other hand, Tea Party-supported candidates won more than they lost, including Senate races in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wisconsin. In House races, no fewer than 32 Republicans who seized Democratic seats were identified as having significant Tea Party support.¹³

Moreover, one cannot blame the Tea Party for losses in individual Senate races without thinking about how the movement raised the overall level of Republican strength. For one thing, the movement organized and mobilized a critical segment of the electorate. Though polls did not agree on how many Tea Party supporters in the electorate were Republicans versus conservative independents, the number of independents was non-trivial. As importantly, many of the Republicans in the movement had become disconnected from their party. Both the enthusiasm of Republican voters and the edge that Republican candidates held among independent voters on election day undoubtedly owed something significant to the Tea Party.

Although some Tea Party endorsements misfired, the Tea Party leadership also made the strategically crucial decision to work through the Republican Party rather than try to organize a third party, a route which could have been catastrophic to GOP prospects. Not least, as former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan observed days before the election, the Tea Party succeeded in pulling Republicans back to their core message of limited government and constitutionalism after years of Bushian ambiguity, just as that message was resonating more powerfully with the broader electorate.¹⁴ Altogether, by a 4:3 ratio, 2010 House voters said they supported rather than opposed the Tea Party.

Where the Tea Party will turn next will be one of the key questions of American politics in the near future. The question, sometimes posed by pollsters, of whether the Tea Party is a passing fad is a distraction. Every political movement driven by a passionate response to a set of issues ends up fading eventually, or becoming an institutionalized caricature of itself. Passion cannot be sustained indefinitely, and issues are either solved or prove intractable. The real question is how long the Tea Party will endure, and what impact it will have while it endures.

In the short term, the elections of 2010 almost guarantee a continued presence by the movement. The two greatest enemies of popular movements are failure and success. Total lack of impact leads to quick discouragement and a

¹³ "Repainting the House," *New York Times*, November 4, 2010, p. P16.

¹⁴ Peggy Noonan, "Tea Party to the Rescue," *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2010.

breakdown into bitter factionalism; too much success leads to complacency and irrelevance. In 2010, the Tea Party had enough impact to avoid discouragement but not enough success to produce complacency. As long as Barack Obama is in the White House, the issues driving the movement will likely remain salient. The test for the longer-term future will be whether the Tea Party—or, to be more precise, given the decentralized nature of the phenomenon, Tea Parties—will mature enough that they would rather win with a Mike Castle (who, after all, voted against both the stimulus and health care reform) than lose with a Christine O'Donnell.

What Could It Mean?

The final key question—and the one most difficult to answer—is what difference 2010 will make. Historically, an important feature of midterm elections has been their subsequent impact on politics and policy. Arguably, key policy eras were bracketed by midterm elections (1910-1918, 1930-1938, 1958-1966, 1978-1986). At the least, presidents are usually less effective legislatively after midterms than before, and midterms can impact the following presidential election, though not always in the most predictable ways. Any comparison to the past must necessarily be very tentative. Yet some things can be predicted.¹⁵

First, Barack Obama will have to re-craft his legislative strategy dramatically, and will almost certainly have less success. For the rest of his term, he will be on the strategic defensive, fighting off attempts to roll back his prior successes. New liberal successes in big areas like cap-and-trade or immigration are off the table. This does not mean that Obama will have nothing more to show for his presidency, but any significant legislative achievements will be shared and not constructed on his terms.

Second, the new political environment will affect 2012, though precisely how cannot be known. Both Obama and the Republicans will approach their relationship with the presidential election in mind.

Third, all of the reasons that state-level midterm gains by the out-party have historically been important will be in play following 2010. Public policy on welfare, education, pension reform, and healthcare will all be influenced by the state officeholders just elected. Republicans will also build an electoral farm team. Ten or twenty years from now, we will probably find that more than a few Republican members of Congress were originally state legislators first elected in 2010. And 2010 was exactly the right year to catch an electoral wave in order to influence redistricting. The election results guaranteed that Republicans will have

¹⁵ See Andrew E. Busch, *Horses in Midstream: U.S. Midterm Elections and Their Consequences, 1894-1998* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

full control of redistricting around 170 U.S. House seats, while Democrats at the state level will control redistricting of only around 70. The rest will be determined by state governments that are divided in party control or by citizens' commissions.¹⁶

Democrats will hope that 2010 will prove to be another 1946 or (as second-best) 1994. Republicans had big midterm years in both cases, gaining a large number of seats and taking control of Congress. Harry Truman was so damaged by the 1946 midterm that Democratic Senator William J. Fulbright of Arkansas suggested that Truman appoint a Republican Secretary of State then resign the presidency. Yet, two years later, Truman was reelected and Democrats swept back into control of Congress. After his party's 1994 drubbing, Bill Clinton likewise recovered and won reelection handily, though Democrats were unable to dislodge Republicans in Congress for another decade.

In both cases, the key to presidential recovery lay in a skillful combination of confrontation and adaptation. Truman famously confronted the "do-nothing 80th Congress," but he also gave ground on wartime economic controls. When Congress passed tax cuts and Taft-Hartley over Truman's veto, it further deflated issues that had contributed to public anger in 1946. Clinton also faced down Congress in the government shut-downs of 1995-96. Simultaneously, he agreed for the first time to a balanced budget in principle, signed welfare reform, and declared that "the era of big government is over." Republicans, out of power in Congress for 16 and 40 years respectively, attempted to satisfy the pent-up legislative demands accumulated during years in the wilderness, but found out that it is risky to try governing from Capitol Hill.

For their part, Republicans will hope that 2010 is like 1930, the last time a midterm election created a split Congress. Herbert Hoover was legislatively stymied for the most part, while Democrats (in combination with progressive Republicans) had enough power to advance an alternative agenda in the form of labor anti-injunction legislation, federal relief, and a tax policy geared to income rather than consumption taxes. Hoover, unlike Clinton, was detached and rigid, failing to adapt to the new situation. Republicans may also look to 1966, when the party rebounded after many had left it for dead following a 1964 defeat that was much worse than the one they suffered in 2008. In that year, they did not gain a majority in either chamber, but they stopped the Great Society cold, exposed the fault lines in Lyndon Johnson's new Democratic coalition, elected a fresh generation of leaders, ended the talk of Democratic inevitability, and laid the groundwork for 1968.

Whether 2010 will come to resemble any of these will depend on a combination of the underlying political tendencies with contingencies that cannot

¹⁶ Dennis Cauchon, "GOP engineers historic shift in state capitols," *USA Today*, November 4, 2010, p. 9A.

be known now. One set of important contingencies will consist of the always unpredictable role of external events, including the course of the economy, the prominence (or lack) of foreign policy or national security crises and catastrophes, and challenges imposed by natural disasters. Another set of important contingencies will be political, including how the President, his party, and the opposition will approach the post-2010 election situation. Will Obama prove to be more like Clinton or more like Hoover? (The guess of many analysts is that he is, by ideology and temperament, no Clinton, though his compromise on the Bush tax cuts extension might have been a contrary indication. Time will tell.)

A complementary question will be whether Republicans will attempt to govern fully from Congress, as they did after 1946 and 1994, or whether they will settle for more modest agenda-promotion and a stalemate that sets up 2012. Here, their failure to capture the Senate might prove a blessing in disguise, as grandiose aims are implausible and it will be more difficult for Obama to use Congress as a foil. Both Truman and Clinton had a cleaner shot at their opponents. After the elections of 1930, 1946, and 1994, these were matters of strategy, decision, skill, and some luck; they will be again after the elections of 2010.

These contingencies will interact with the underlying alignment of the American electorate, which one can acknowledge and address in a common-sense way without subscribing to the more stringent dogmas of realignment theory. Truman had more success than Clinton, achieving not only reelection but reconquest of Capitol Hill, in part because his electorate was more heavily Democratic than was Clinton's. However, the character of today's alignment is not self-evident, and it will be years before we know where 2010 fits in the broad sweep of American political history. Five broad possibilities—five political narratives—can be contemplated, and each fits the facts in a certain way.

Five Perspectives in Search of the Longer Run

“America is still a center-right country.” In this view, expressed by analysts such as Michael Barone, the natural tendency of the American electorate is moderately conservative and favors Republicans. They occasionally lose, due to short-term factors, but the longer-term alignment remains intact and will snap back after a deviation. There is substantial evidence for this view, including the fact that Republicans have won 7 of the last 11 presidential elections and that self-described conservatives outnumber self-described liberals by a margin that is typically 3:2 (an advantage that has ballooned in recent polls to 2:1). Another piece of evidence might be the obvious dilemma that Democrats face in House elections. To gain a majority, they must elect a significant number of members from moderate to conservative districts. If the liberal leadership pushes those

members to vote a liberal line—or even forces those members to bear the burden of a liberal record by Congress as a whole—they cannot hold their majority.

In other words, it would seem under current conditions that Democrats can gain a congressional majority but cannot govern like Democrats if they want to keep it. Indeed, Republicans regained 22 of the 28 seats they lost in 2008, and they seem well-positioned to retain control of the House and make a strong play for the Senate in 2012. In this interpretation, 2006 and 2008 were dominated by short-term factors that worked against the GOP in unusual ways—difficulties in Iraq and the financial meltdown—and 2010 was the snap-back.

“Demographics is destiny.” In this view, a new liberal/progressive majority that is being formed will be the enduring dominant characteristic of American politics going forward. This position, espoused by analysts such as John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, extrapolates demographic trends and sees a bright future for Democrats. This narrative is more speculative than the first, but a case can be built here as well. Evidence for this view includes Democratic strength among younger voters, fast-growing minority groups (especially Hispanics), and highly-educated secular professionals. In 2010, though they slipped a bit, Democrats continued doing quite well among these groups. In this interpretation, it was 2010 Republican gains that were the result of short-term factors (the economy most especially). The snap-back will come in 2012 and beyond, when Obama will be reelected and Democrats will recoup their congressional losses.

Dealignment. In this view, there *is* no solid underlying alignment. The dominant feature of American politics is volatility. Observers can note that Democrats controlled the House for 40 years before losing it in 1994; Republicans held it for 12 years before losing it back; Democrats then held on for only 4 years before losing it back again. Independents are the decisive force, and there are more (not fewer) of them in the electorate. They are also capable of sudden and dramatic shifts, swinging from +18 Democrats in 2006 to +19 Republicans in 2010.

There are two possible versions of dealignment. In one, there is no solid partisan alignment at the moment but there could be someday. In the other, not only is there no solid alignment now, but there cannot be such an alignment under modern conditions. These include a public souring on organized parties, the rise of the adversarial media, and the popular love for divided government. In either case, 2010 was just another swing by a volatile electorate, which rejected liberal overreach without endorsing Republican hegemony.

Deadlock. In this view, the foundational fact of American politics is not dealignment but *deadlocked* alignment, one that is so solid that it raises questions about governability or even whether Americans can live together in the same political society. The key fact about 2010 is that it has restored that deadlock, though not quite in the same institutional form as at other points over the last

sixteen years. (The key feature now is a split Congress). It is remarkable that after a decade which has seen two big financial bubbles burst; two recessions, one mild, the other not; the worst terrorist attack in American history; two extended wars; plus one of the most contentious presidential elections and one of the most historically notable; the deadlock which existed in 2000 still roughly exists.

Within all of this, the opposition party could still not win more than 53 percent in a presidential election at the height of a financial crisis when the incumbent's approval rating was below 30 percent. Nor could a different opposition win control of the Senate or make inroads into states like Connecticut, Massachusetts, or California after over a year of unemployment approaching 10 percent. In this narrative, 2010 is the newest election proving, along with 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2006, that neither side can gain a decisive breakthrough in the contemporary milieu.

End of an era? Finally, if one thinks carefully about geographic and demographic coalitions, it is possible to imagine that there has actually been a Democratic alignment at the presidential level since 1992. This notion runs counter to the plausible interpretation of 2004 as the culmination of a decades-long rolling Republican realignment¹⁷ (and 2006-2008 as a collapse of that alignment), but the evidence is worth pondering. The electoral maps of 1992, 1996, and 2008 were strikingly similar. Although Obama won a handful of states that Democrats have not won for a long time (Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana), the vast majority of states that he won were won by Bill Clinton in 1992 and/or 1996. In 2000, the Democratic candidate actually won a small nationally-aggregated popular vote plurality despite losing the Electoral College, and the 2004 Republican win represented the narrowest victory by an incumbent president running for reelection since Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

Perhaps 2008 was not the beginning of the new Democratic realignment touted by some but simply part and parcel of the 1992 presidential alignment. Perhaps 2008 will even prove to be the last hurrah of the 1992 alignment, as 1964 was in many ways the last hurrah of the New Deal alignment, though it was heralded at the time as the dawn of lasting Democratic dominance. In this scenario, 2010 might play the role of the 1966 midterms, both a repudiation and a harbinger of change to come.

Each of these scenarios has its own shortcomings as well, some more than others. Of course, the election of 2012, the campaign for which began on November 3, will go some distance to determining which of them is most defensible in the end. Then it will be up to political scientists and historians to try to separate contingency from fate.

¹⁷ James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch, *Red Over Blue: The 2004 Elections and American Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).