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The Midterm Landslide of 2010: A Triple Wave Election

James E. Campbell

Abstract

Democrats were trounced in the 2010 midterm elections. They lost six seats in the U.S. Senate, six governorships, and about 700 seats in state legislatures. Compared to 2008, Democrats lost 64 seats in the House and Republicans regained their House majority. The Republican majority elected in 2010 was the largest number of Republicans elected since 1946. The analysis finds that Republican seat gains resulted from the receding of the pro-Democratic waves of 2006 and 2008 as well as the incoming pro-Republican wave of 2010. Voters rejected Democrats in 2010 for their failure to revive the economy, but also for their advancement of the national healthcare reform and other liberal policies. The analysis speculates that Democrats are likely to gain House seats and lose Senate seats in 2012. Finally, President Obama's prospects of re-election have probably been improved because of the Republican gains in the 2010 midterm.

KEYWORDS: midterm elections, congress, voting, elections, presidency, presidential approval, political parties, economy, polarization, retrospective voting

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The 2010 midterm elections were a victory of landslide proportions for the Republican Party. It was an overwhelming, devastating, and crushing defeat for the Democrats. They were trounced. Democrats sustained a net loss of 64 seats in the House of Representatives. A total of 52 Democratic House incumbents were defeated. As a result, Democrats lost the control of the House that they had won in 2006. The new Republican majority of 242 members is the largest Republican majority in 64 years.

The 2010 midterm was truly a national defeat for Democrats, though it could hardly have been otherwise given the magnitude of their losses. After the 2008 election, Democrats held at least one House seat in 45 states. The election cost Democrats at least one seat in 33 of the 45 states in which they had held a seat. There were only twelve states in which they could have lost a seat, but did not. Though national in scope, Republican gains were not uniform. They fared best in middle-Atlantic, border, and Midwestern states. They gained five seats in each of three states—New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. They gained four in Illinois as well as in Florida. They also picked up three seats in Tennessee and in Virginia. The one bright spot on the political map for Democrats was on the west coast. Democrats managed to hold all 34 of the seats they were defending in California.

The landslide was not limited to House races. Democrats suffered significant losses in Senate, gubernatorial, and state legislative races as well. Though falling short of the nearly impossible task of retaking the Senate (given the net gain of ten seats that was required), Republicans gained six Senate seats and greatly reduced the ability of the Democratic majority to invoke cloture on filibusters.

It was also a good year for Republicans in state elections. They made a net gain of six governorships. In state legislative races, they picked up about 700 additional state legislative seats. According to Karen Hansen (2010) of the National Conference of State Legislators, “this was the most Republican state legislators elected in any election since 1928.” As a result, they added control of twenty state legislative chambers to their column, bringing the total number of Republican-controlled state legislative chambers to 56 out of 99. According to Hansen, Republicans have not controlled this many state legislative chambers since 1952.

In this article, I offer an explanation of why the Republican victory was so large or, perhaps more accurately, why the Democratic losses were as large as they were. While the landslide metaphor aptly characterizes the magnitude of electoral change in 2010, the metaphor of a *political wave* has also been used. Though in truth, the results of the 2010 midterm were not those of a single political wave sweeping over the political landscape, but rather three waves. The political wave favoring Republicans in 2010 brought many Republicans into

office, but many more Republicans were helped into office by the receding political waves of 2006 and 2008. Those waves had helped bring a large number of Democrats into office. Though the 2010 referendum on the in-party Democrats (the incoming wave) is important to understanding the election, the decline from the 2006 and 2008 surges that had favored Democrats (the outgoing waves) is also critically important to appreciating the magnitude of electoral change.

Some Historical Perspective

As the in-party, Democrats were expected to lose seats in the 2010 midterm. The in-party has lost seats in 32 of the 35 midterm elections since 1860 (Office of the Clerk 2010). This is not quite the certainty of “death and taxes,” but it is about as dependable as things get in politics. The regularity of in-party loss has been violated only three times. The in-party gained seats only in the first midterm election of the New Deal realignment (1934) and in two recent midterms in which approval of the president’s job performance was unusually high. These were President Clinton’s 1998 midterm in his second term and President Bush’s 2002 midterm in his first. Both Clinton and Bush had approval ratings in the mid 60-percent range at the time of these midterms. Lacking anything close to that level of approval for President Obama (more on this later), Democratic Party seat losses in 2010 were a virtual certainty.

While Democrats were expected to lose seats going into the 2010 contest, no one before the fall campaign began seriously expected Democratic losses to be as great as they were. Republicans needed to gain 40 seats over the 178 they won in 2008 in order to regain control of the House. In August, most political observers anticipated that Republicans would make large gains and that control of the House was an open question. The prevailing view seemed to be that Democrats might salvage control or Republicans might win a slim majority: control of the House was a toss up. Two election forecasting models (Campbell 2010a, Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010) predicted Democratic losses of more than 50 seats with a new Republican majority. Others predicted smaller Democratic losses.

There was good reason that no one expected Democrats to lose as many as 64 seats in 2010, including even those of us who forecast the largest losses. The magnitude of seat change in 2010 was greater than in any election since the 1948 election and more than three and a half times the average seat change in elections in the last half century. The mean absolute seat change in on-year and midterm elections since 1960 was 17 seats. Moreover, in the twelve national elections between 1986 and 2008, only three produced a change of more than ten seats. Seat changes in the single digits had become the norm in what looked to be “the dead ball era” of weakly contested and lopsidedly financed, incumbent-dominated

congressional elections. With rare exceptions, congressional elections in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s were stagnant (Campbell 2003). The 54 seat gain for the Republicans in the 1994 midterm stood out as the outer limit of the politically possible in modern congressional elections—or so it seemed.

Explaining Midterm Electoral Change

The consistency with which the in-party has sustained seat losses in midterm elections and the great variability of those losses, rarely gaining a few seats and in some elections sustaining enormous losses, has been the subject of generations of election scholarship. Various theories have been proposed and tested. The first strain of these traces midterm losses to presidential coattails in the prior election (Bean 1948, 1950). The more developed theory of surge and decline built turnout and information-intensity variations into the coattail theory (A. Campbell 1960 and J. Campbell 1997). The exposure theory accounts for seat change by the extent to which the prior election left a party over- or under-exposed relative to its normal number of seats (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986).

A second strain of midterm theories suggests that midterm losses for the president's party result from the greater motivation associated with negative voting in midterms (Kernell 1977) or from voters using the midterm as a virtual referendum on the president's job performance (Tufté 1975). In recent decades, others have suggested that midterm losses are the result of voters trying to balance or offset the perceived excesses (ideological or otherwise) of the president by strengthening the opposing party (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989, Fiorina 1996, Erikson 1988).

Together, all of the theories that have been proposed to explain midterm electoral change suggest that the extent of change depends quite simply on two elements. First, it depends on where the contest started, that is, the political climate of the prior election or elections. These are the elements of the presidential coattails and the theories of surge and decline plus the exposure theory. Second, seat change depends on where the contest finished, that is, the political climate in the midterm election itself. Midterms are, in part, referenda on the president's party, whether unbiased or systematically tilted against the in-party by negative voting or by a desire to achieve some countervailing balance of policy or power to that of the president (i.e., an electorally invigorated checking and balancing of the president). It is to these two sources of change that we now turn to explain the massive electoral change that took place in the 2010 midterm.

The Roots of Change in 2006 and 2008

Democrats took a beating in 2010, in no small part, because short-term political conditions had so strongly favored them in the two previous elections. The short-term political climates of the 2006 and 2008 elections left the nation with representation that was considerably more liberal in political orientations and more Democratic in party affiliations than the national electorate.

The 2006 Wave

Much of the electorate in 2006 was disappointed with the performance of President Bush and the Republicans in Congress. The economy was slumping. Real gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the second quarter of 2006 was only 1.4% and declined nearly to zero in the third quarter, just before the midterm (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2010). Confidence in the administration's abilities had been badly shaken by its mishandling of the Hurricane Katrina relief and recovery efforts in the fall of 2005. The nation was becoming increasingly impatient and frustrated with the lack of progress in the ongoing Iraq and Afghanistan wars. A Gallup poll in early November 2006 indicated that 55% of Americans thought that the Iraq war was a mistake (Gallup 2010a). Only 40% disagreed with them.

Adding to Republican problems was the misconduct of several in their own ranks, most notably those involved in the Abramoff corruption scandal. Then in September, the Republican leadership in the House became embroiled in a scandal involving how they had handled the improper conduct of Representative Mark Foley with congressional pages. Democrats campaigned on a theme that the Republican majority in Congress had cultivated a "culture of corruption" in Washington. The charge struck a chord with voters.

The resulting atmosphere of the 2006 election could hardly have been worse for Republicans. According to Gallup's numbers, displayed in Table 1, President Bush's approval dropped 15 points, from 53% at his reelection in 2004 to 38% in early November of 2006. The decline was especially severe among independents. In 2004, their 48% approval had made President Bush's reelection possible. In 2006, their 31% approval of him made big Republican losses inevitable. Along with the loss of six Senate seats and control of that chamber, Republicans sustained a net loss of 30 House seats in 2006. This cost Republicans the control of the House that they had held since the 1994 election.¹

¹ Democrats made a net gain of 30 seats in 2006 by picking up 31 seats and losing one (Georgia Third). Technically, Democrats gained Vermont's seat in 2006, though its previous occupant caucused with them. As a result, this was not counted as a real seat gain for Democrats. Three of the 31 Republican seats lost in 2006 were retaken by the Republicans in 2008.

Table 1. Presidential Approval of Presidents Bush and Obama, 2004-2010

President	Date	Presidential Approval			
		General	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Obama	November 2010	45 (-20)	81 (-8)	42 (-21)	11 (-23)
Obama	February 2009	65	89	63	34
Bush	November 2008	28 (-10)	5 (-2)	21 (-10)	63 (-18)
Bush	November 2006	38 (-15)	7 (-9)	31 (-17)	81 (-11)
Bush	November 2004	53	16	48	92

Source: Gallup 2010b and 2010c.

Note: Change from previous rating is indicated in parentheses.

The 2008 Wave

As bad as conditions were for Republicans in 2006, they were worse in 2008. They were bad going into the campaign and still managed to go downhill in the closing weeks before election day. Dissatisfaction with the Iraq War had grown since 2006. Eighteen separate polls conducted by CNN/Opinion Research throughout 2007 and up to July of 2008 indicated that about twice as many Americans had come to oppose the War in Iraq as support it (Campbell 2010b, 227). On the economic front, gas prices in July of 2008 had almost doubled since early 2007. Real growth in the GDP was a negative seven-tenths of a point in the first quarter of 2008 and only six-tenths of a point on the positive side in the second quarter (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2010). Between April and July of 2008 in four Gallup polls, a mere 15% of respondents on average said that they were satisfied “with the way things are going in the United States at this time” (Gallup 2010d). According to an early Gallup poll in September of 2008, only one-third of Americans approved of President Bush’s job performance, five percentage-points fewer than the already low ratings he had at the time of the 2006 midterm (Gallup 2010c).

Despite this unfavorable climate for Republicans, John McCain and Barack Obama were locked in a very competitive presidential race in the month leading up to the conventions, and McCain actually took a lead over Obama in the polls for ten days or so after the conventions. Then the floor dropped out of the economy and the campaign. The Wall Street meltdown hit. It was a financial crisis of huge proportions. Like dominoes toppling one after another, the crisis

overtook the campaign as the nation spiraled into its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Between early September and early October, one huge financial institution after another went under, was bought out, or was bailed out by the government (Campbell 2010b). The stock market lost between 25% and 28% of its value in a month (as indicated by the Dow-Jones and Standard and Poor's indices). Between early September and October, the number of Americans characterizing economic conditions as poor (the lowest rating in the Gallup poll) jumped more than twenty points, from 46% to 68% (Gallup 2010e).

The political fallout was dramatic. President Bush's already anemic approval numbers dropped from 33% to 25% (recovering a bit to 28% by election day) (Gallup 2010c). Most of the loss was among Republicans. As Table 1 shows, Republican support for the President dropped from 81% to 63% between the 2006 and 2008 elections. Having stood by their president through the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the mishandling of Hurricane Katrina, high levels of domestic spending, and failures to control illegal immigration, the Wall Street meltdown proved to be the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." These conservative Republicans did not change their values, but they could not overlook the performance-failure of the administration. Obama overtook McCain in the polls and won the presidential election with 53.7% of two-party popular vote. On top of their 2006 losses, in the wake of the Wall Street meltdown, Republicans lost another eight Senate seats and suffered a net loss of 24 seats in the House.²

A Restoration Election

The circumstances of the 2006 and 2008 elections did not define a new normal in American politics. They were deviations from the normal. Voters turned to the Democrats in 2006 and again in 2008 out of frustration with the performance of the Republicans as the in-party. Democratic gains in 2006 and 2008 were the result of a short-term response to performance shortcomings by Republicans as the in-party. They did not reflect a long-term movement toward liberal values and the Democratic Party. The interpretation of the 2006 and 2008 outcomes as based on short-term performance evaluations and, therefore, of likely short duration is supported by the big difference between the long-term ideological and partisan views of the electorate and the political composition of Congress created by these elections.

The American electorate is center-right in its political orientations and near parity in its partisanship (Campbell 2010b). Among reported voters in the National Election Studies (NES) of 2004 and 2008, the mean percentage claiming a conservative political perspective was 35%. Only 24% claimed a liberal

² Democrats made a net gain of 24 seats in 2008 by picking up 28 seats and losing four. Three of the four Republican pick-ups were seats picked-up by Democrats in 2006.

orientation and 41% said that they were moderates or were unable or unwilling to classify their outlook. With respect to partisanship, counting independent leaners as partisans, the average of reported voters in the 2004 and 2008 NES surveys (reweighted to the actual vote) was 48% Democratic and 46% Republican with the remaining six percent being independents (Campbell 2010c). The 2010 exit poll confirms this partisan parity with a conservative tilt.

As a result of the 2006 and 2008 elections, Democratic numbers in the House had increased from a significant minority of 203 members after the 2004 election to a large majority of 257 members after 2008. After 2008, Democrats had a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. These lopsided congressional majorities were decidedly at odds with the distribution of political orientations and party affiliations in the electorate. Congress was far more liberal and far more Democratic than the electorate. The discrepancy between the perspectives of the public and the composition of Congress in 2008 were enormous. Something had to give.

Accordingly, the Republican take-backs in 2010 reflected a return to the normal party balance of recent decades. Most Republican seat gains in 2010 were in districts that they had lost in 2006 and 2008 and that had been inclined to the Republicans, as evidenced by their presidential voting. Of the 67 seat pick-ups for Republicans in 2010 (offset by three Democratic pick-ups), 39 (58%) were in districts that had been lost by Republicans in 2006 or 2008 (16 in 2006, 23 in 2008). Democratic success in the 2006 and 2008 elections left a large number of Democrats defending seats in districts inclined to vote Republican. Going into 2010, 47 Democrats were defending districts carried by Bush in 2004 *and* McCain in 2008. (There had been only six Republicans in Kerry-Obama districts.) Of the 67 Republican seat pick-ups in 2010, 35 were in Bush-McCain districts and another 22 were carried by Bush in 2004 though not by McCain in 2008. A good part of the story of 2010 is that it was the undoing of short-term gains made by Democrats in 2006 and 2008.

In this respect, the comparisons that have been made between the 2010 midterm and the 1994 midterm miss an important difference. Though Republicans made huge gains in both midterms (54 in 1994 and 64 in 2010), the 1994 election was a break-through election. It was the final installment of a staggered realignment to partisan parity that had begun in the late 1960s (Campbell 2006). While Republicans made long-term gains in presidential voting in the late 1960s and in party identification in the early 1980s, the lack of local Republican Party strength in southern states delayed the culmination of the realignment in congressional elections until the 1994 midterm. The outcome of the 1994 midterm election was, thus, the final act of a realignment. The outcome of the 2010 midterm was very different. To large degree, it was a restoration to the status quo ante.

The 2010 Referendum

The bounce-back from the 2006 and 2008 elections is a good part of the 2010 story, but certainly not all of it. The 2010 midterm was also about what voters thought about the performance of the large Democratic majorities in Congress and of President Obama. With a unified government with large majorities in both the House and the Senate, responsibility for public policy and national conditions is about as clear as it can get. And Americans were not happy with the conditions of the nation or, for that matter, with the policies that the Democrats had pursued.

The overriding issue for voters in 2010 was the economy. The recession that had begun in December of 2007, near the end of President Bush's second term, did not end until June of 2009, at least according to the official designation of the National Bureau of Economic Research (2010). Regardless of whether the recession lingered longer than the official estimate or the recovery was so tepid that it was difficult to distinguish from the recession itself, most Americans continued to regard the economy as unacceptably weak. In mid-July of 2010, 75% of respondents in a CBS News survey said that they expected the recession to continue for at least another two years (CBS News 2010). In the 2010 exit polls, 90% of respondents said that they thought the state of the nation's economy was not good or poor, and 86% said that they were worried about economic conditions (CNN Politics 2010).

The hard economic numbers indicate that there were good reasons for these concerns. At the time of the election, the economy had not experienced three consecutive quarters of real GDP growth over two percent in nearly three years (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2010). The nation had experienced eighteen consecutive months of unemployment rates over 9.4% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). This was the most months with unemployment at this level since the Bureau of Labor Statistics started keeping monthly records in 1948. With discouraged workers and underemployment taken into account, the picture was even bleaker.

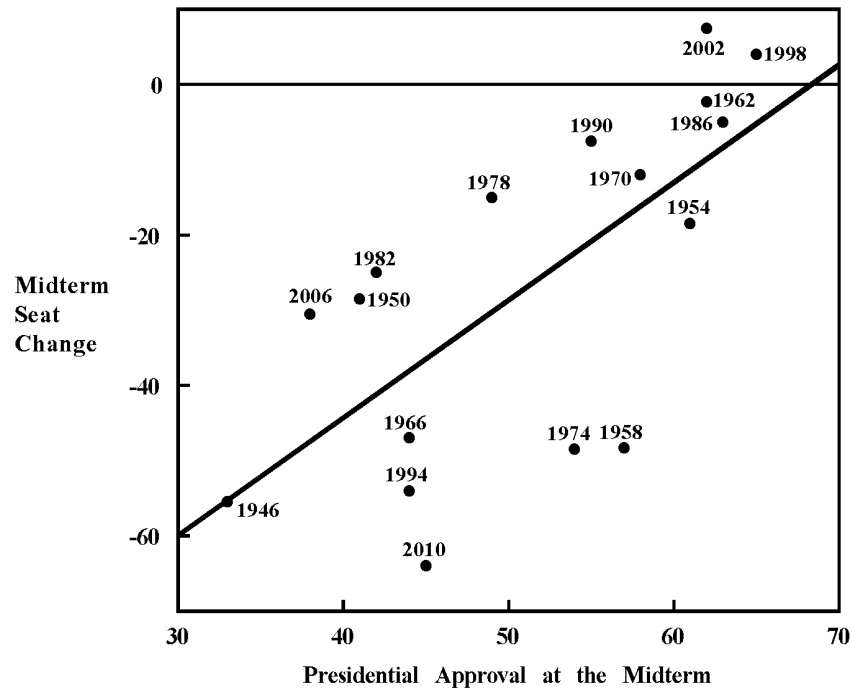
What made matters worse for Democrats was that a large majority of Americans thought that Obama administration policies had been ineffective or even counter-productive. An ABC News/Washington Post survey in October of 2010 indicated that 68% of respondents thought that the \$800 billion stimulus plan, the administration's centerpiece economic policy, was "mostly wasted" (Polling Report 2010a). In the election's exit poll, 31% said that the stimulus made "no difference", and another 34% said that it "hurt the economy" (CNN Politics 2010). Only 32% said they thought the Obama administration's stimulus plan had "helped the economy." Only 38% of respondents in a USA Today/Gallup poll in early August of 2010 indicated approval of how President Obama had handled the economy (Polling Report 2010b).

The public's views of President Obama and the Democrats on non-economic issues did not help their cause. The major policy accomplishment of Democrats and the Obama presidency had been the enactment of a national healthcare reform law. This overhaul of the nation's healthcare system, while a major legislative accomplishment, was not well received. Depending on the question wording of the particular poll, the health plan either sharply divided the electorate or was rejected by it. When asked directly in an AP-GfK Poll in November of 2010 about their support or opposition to the reform, opponents outnumbered supporters by 47% to 38% (Polling Report 2010c). The policies of President Obama and congressional Democrats in a number of other areas, from illegal immigration to the handling of the BP oil disaster, also met with considerable public opposition. The exit poll captured the general disenchantment of the electorate. It indicated that 52% of voters in 2010 thought that President Obama's policies would "hurt the country." Only 43% thought they would "help the country" (CNN Politics 2010).

The president's approval rating has proven over the years to be a fairly good summary measure of the general political climate. In 2010, it clearly favored the Republicans. Between frustration with the weak recovery of the economy and the adoption of policies that were out of step with the center-right political mainstream, President Obama's ratings dropped 20 points in the first two years of his presidency. As presented in Table 1, his approval rating declined from 65% in February of 2009, shortly after taking office, to only 45% at the midterm. Among political independents, his ratings dropped 21 points to 42%. Among Republicans, Obama's ratings dropped 23 points to just 11%. Much as President Bush had been ridiculed by Democrats, President Obama was now anathema to Republicans. President Obama's rating among Democrats, on the other hand, dropped by only eight points to a midterm rating of 81%.

Some historical perspective is useful in interpreting what President Obama's approval rating reveals about the midterm. Figure 1 displays presidential approval ratings at midterm elections going back to 1946 against the net number of House seats won or lost by the president's party in those elections. First, the plot provides some perspective on the level of approval necessary for a party to expect no seat change in a midterm, the politically neutral level of presidential approval. As both the highly unusual small gains of 1998 and 2002 and the very small losses of 1962 and 1986 suggest, a politically neutral climate for the in-party in midterm elections is reflected by presidential approval ratings in the mid-60s. By this benchmark, President Obama's approval rating of 45% was about 20 points below what it needed to be for Democrats to break even, all things being equal (i.e., if 2006 and 2008 were somehow set aside). An approval rating of 45% may not sound bad, but presidential parties have not done well in midterm elections with presidential ratings at that level.

Figure 1. Presidential Approval and Midterm Seat Change for the President's Party, 1946-2010



Second, while President Obama's approval rating of 45% should be read as evidence that the political climate of 2010 favored Republicans, it should *not* be read as indicating a *massive* repudiation of the Democrats. Four presidential parties have gone into midterm elections since 1946 with presidents holding approval ratings at or below that of President Obama's in 2010. None sustained losses as great as the 64 seats lost by Democrats in 2010. In two cases, 1946 and 1994, in-party losses were indeed severe, but still at least ten seats less than those of 2010. In three midterms (1950, 1982, and 2006), the losses were less than half of what they were in 2010, despite the fact that the approval ratings of those presidents were lower than Obama's.

Setting aside 2010 and estimating a regression of approval on midterm seat change or calculating the mean of seat change in previous midterms with approval ratings in the 38 to 48 range indicates that a party could generally expect to lose about 34 to 37 seats in a midterm, about 27 to 30 seats *less* than Democrats lost in 2010. The point is that the history of approval ratings and midterm seat losses indicates that the political climate of 2010 was responsible for some of the losses, probably just over half of them, but certainly not all of them. The spread of points around the regression line in Figure 1 as well as the distance between the 2010 observation and its expected value indicates that 2006 and 2008 had almost

as much to do with the 2010 landslide of seat losses as the unrest of voters with the first two years of the Obama presidency.

The Intensity of Opposition in the 2010 Election

While it would be wrong to attribute most of the Democratic losses in 2010 to a repudiation of President Obama, there is no disputing the intensity and anger directed toward the Democrats and the administration. The determination of many voters to throw the Democrats out of office was palpable. It was expressed, in part, in the emergence of the anti-establishment conservative “Tea Party Movement”, and it was measured by the nearly twenty-point enthusiasm gap between the parties as measured by Gallup. The political intensity in the opposition to the Democrats in 2010 was partly a function of polarization in the electorate. With liberals being more liberal and conservatives being more conservative, the stakes in politics increase, and with them, the intensity. But intensity of the opposition to Democrats in 2010 may also have reflected voter resentment at the unfulfilled and misused mandates of the 2006 and 2008 elections.

Large Democratic majorities were elected to Congress in 2006 and in 2008 based on performance considerations, not to enact liberal policies. Upset with the performance of President Bush and the Republicans on a number of issues, but particularly the economy, voters turned to the Democrats. The mandate to Democrats from disenchanted Republicans and moderate swing voters in the elections of 2006 and 2008 was largely to get the economy up and running again. The liberal base of the Democratic Party, however, had other ideas. With large majorities in both the House and the Senate, the Obama administration thought that both centrists and the party’s liberal base could be satisfied. Through the federal spending package of the stimulus and various targeted and limited-time programs (including programs for first-time home-buying, cash for clunkers, assistance to forestall home foreclosures, extended unemployment benefits, and bailouts of the automobile industry), the administration hoped to invigorate the economy. This would satisfy political centrists. By enacting a national healthcare program, the liberal base of the party would be satisfied.

When the 2010 midterm rolled around, those in the liberal base had their historic national healthcare law. They did not get everything they wanted. They did not get a “public option,” but arguably the highest priority on the liberal agenda for the last four decades was now law. The moderates and independents who had voted for Obama and the Democrats, on the other hand, had nothing to show for it. The administration’s economic policies had failed to turn the economy around. In the exit polls of 2008, 93% said that the economy was “not so good” or “poor” (CNN Politics 2008). Two years later, 90% had the same

impression (CNN Politics 2010). In the exit poll of 2008, 63% said that the economy was the nation's most important problem. Two years later, the number was exactly the same. The enthusiasm felt by those opposing the Democrats in 2010 was generated both from their failure to deliver on the performance mandate to revive the economy and from the use or misuse of this mandate to enact liberal policies, particularly the healthcare reform plan.

Lessons for 2012

The 2010 midterm offers two important lessons to carry forward to 2012 and, perhaps, some insights into what may transpire in 2012. First, 2010 demonstrates again that electoral change may be structured as much by the past election as the current one. An important reason why Democrats lost seats in the 2010 midterm was that the political conditions of 2006 and 2008 had temporarily been in their favor. Many Democrats were elected to districts that were inclined to support Republicans, at least as suggested by their presidential votes. Many of these Democrats were poorly positioned to withstand the 2010 Republican wave, and a large number did not survive it. While it is too early to speculate very seriously about the political conditions that will shape the 2012 election, it is not too early to observe that many Republicans will be vulnerable because they have been helped into office by the 2010 pro-Republican wave.

About 60 Republicans are in districts that President Obama carried in 2008. Most of these are not Democratic-tilted districts (only 14 were also carried by Kerry in 2004), yet they are seats that are not predisposed towards Republicans either. With the 2010 wave leaving Republicans at a 64-year higher-water mark (the most Republicans in the House since the Congress elected in 1946), it is unlikely that Republicans can gain more seats in 2012 and quite likely that they will lose seats. The one factor now in place that may offset the effect of the receding pro-Republican wave from 2010 is the advantage that Republicans will have from reapportionment and the greater control that they will have in redistricting. The huge gains Republicans made in state legislative elections in 2010 may pay direct dividends for them in the House elections of 2012.

By contrast, Republican prospects are brighter in the Senate. Despite having gained six seats in 2010, the Republicans are likely to gain even more in 2012. The class of Senators coming up for election in 2012 was last elected in the Democratic wave year of 2006. As a result, Democrats will be defending 23 Senate seats in 2012 (this includes two independents who caucus with the Democrats) and Republicans will be defending just 10. Six of the Democratic Senate seats were won in 2006 with less than 55% of the vote. In short, while there is greater potential for seat losses for Republicans in the House, the opposite is the case in the Senate.

The second lesson of 2010 is that the short-term waves that provide a national shape to an election are the result of the public reaction to whether their mandates have been fulfilled. A major reason why the Democrats took such a brutal beating in the 2010 midterm election is that they neglected or were unable to fulfill the mandate of 2008. The idea of a mandate has a checkered history in electoral studies and is often, and rightly, dismissed in its overdrawn form—as a clearly articulated directive from voters as to what political leaders should do, along with a special grant of authority to carry forward with this mission in the people’s name (Dahl 1990). This, of course, is nonsense. Elections are far too blunt as instruments of the popular will to convey a mandate in this sense.

However, elections are not without meaning. Candidates are elected for a reason or multiple reasons, even if these are general in nature and often difficult to decipher. Elections are not random events. In this sense, the *reasons* why a candidate or party was elected embody that election’s *mandate*. In this sense, all elections entail a mandate or multiple mandates of some degree. The mandate for the Democrats in 2008, the critical reason why Obama won the election, was to restore the economy to health. In this, he failed—at least as of November of 2010. Moreover, he spent much of his time and political capital in the first two years of his term fighting for a national healthcare plan rather than working to revive the economy. As Democrats should have painfully learned from 2010, retrospective voters punish political parties for unfulfilled mandates.

While the out party in American politics is not often held responsible to the same degree as the presidential party, Republicans were given a mandate in 2010 that they might be wise to heed. The mandate would seem to have been to restrict and even roll back the size and intrusiveness of the government, to restore fiscal discipline, to help get the economy back on track, and to bring a center-right perspective to a range of issues from healthcare reform to illegal immigration. The mandate was *not* for a sharp turn to the right, nor was it a flat-out condemnation of the Obama administration to this point. The election results are as much of a withdrawal of the performance-based rejection of Republicans in 2006 and 2008 as they were the mix of performance and value-based rejection of Democrats in 2010.

In other words, Republicans should not take the 2010 landslide as the voters giving them the policy-equivalent of a blank check. It is tempting to read a 64-seat landslide as an overwhelming endorsement of a party’s ideological perspective, and many tea-party supporters are eager to jump to this conclusion. Yet it would be wrong *and politically dangerous* to do so. Much as Democrats were punished in 2010 for ignoring the “right” in a center-right nation, Republicans may run the risk of being punished in 2012 if they choose to ignore the “center” of the center-right nation. They made that mistake once before in 1994, and Bill Clinton was reelected in 1996.

The political climate of 2012 is likely to depend on which party advances policies that reflect the values held by a center-right nation and fulfills the national mandate to restore the economy to health. The Republicans would seem to have an advantage when it comes to supporting policies consistent with center-right values, though this assumes that the tea-party wing of the party acts with some restraint, and this may not be a safe assumption. However, they do not hold the presidency and, in this, the Democrats have an advantage that is not easily overcome.

Despite their being soundly trounced in 2010, the overall advantage going into 2012 is likely to be with President Obama and the Democrats. First, time is on their side. Recessions do not last forever, even those that have been prolonged by faulty policies. The weak economy is likely to return to health over the next two years. Whether his policies had anything to do with it or not, President Obama will receive the credit if the economy is in good shape by 2012. Second, and ironically, having a Republican-controlled House and more Republicans in the Senate may restrain the excesses of President Obama and his Democratic congressional colleagues. The latter may be particularly important, since the defeat of many of the less liberal “blue dog” Democrats in 2010 left the Democratic caucus even more skewed to the left than it had been (witness the selection of former Speaker Nancy Pelosi as minority leader).

With both polarized parties having a good deal of political clout in Congress over the next two years, the policy debate is likely to be characterized by gridlock, punctuated with an occasional compromise and histrionics from frustrated liberals in the Democratic Party and tea-party conservatives in the Republican Party. In the end, through little doing of his own, the legislative record of President Obama in the last two years of his term is likely to look a good deal more centrist than that of his first two years. In short, because of the 2010 midterm results, President Obama is likely to be better positioned in 2012 for election to a second term than he was in 2010.

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