

## Washington Hold ‘Em: the New Era in U.S. Politics

With few exceptions, midterm elections are not contests between the two major political parties or even ideology, but are referenda on the president and the president’s party. Two years into a new presidency, the public is afforded the opportunity to express their approval or disapproval of their new leader and the direction charted by the new president. Their vote can signal either ratification or call for a midcourse correction.

To every rule there are a few exceptions. The 2002 election, just two years into George W. Bush’s presidency is one example, affected greatly by the September 11 2001 tragedy. The most recent notable one, however, was in 1998, when a Republican-controlled Congress impeached and attempted to remove Bill Clinton, a Democratic president, from office. While public opinion was quite critical of Clinton’s personal behavior in the Monica Lewinsky affair, the move by Republicans was even more unpopular and they ended up losing seats in the Congress as a result.

Looking toward the 2010 midterm elections, for Republicans there is a bit of the “good news and bad news” dynamic at work. The bad news for Republicans is that their party’s “brand,” or image, is badly tarnished with favorable ratings near record lows and unfavorable ratings near record highs. Critics complain that the party lacks strong leadership, that their message is stale, that the demographic profile of support for the party is ominous, and that the party is badly losing ground among young people, minorities, college graduates, and suburban voters.

The last two elections have been devastating for the once omnipotent GOP. Far beyond simply losing last year’s presidential race, Republicans suffered a net

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loss of 54 seats in the House of Representatives in the 2006 and 2008 elections, and lost their majority as a result. With the seating of Democrat and former comedian Al Franken of Minnesota, Republicans will have lost 14 Senate seats in that same span, which is the first time that either party has dropped to 40 seats since Jimmy Carter was president. Just four years ago, Republicans held a clear majority—28 governorships to just 22 for Democrats. Today those numbers are reversed.

## Have Republicans Hit Bottom?

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Far more than voters simply turning out Republican politicians in favor of Democrats, there has also been a fairly substantial shift in party affiliations. Polling by the Gallup Organization shows that in 2001, Democrats edged out Republicans in party identification by one point, 33 to 32 percent, with independents actually coming out on top with 34 percent. In 2003, after the September 11, 2001 tragedy and in the wake of Bush's huge post-attack increase in popularity, Republicans had edged ahead by one point, but one could roughly define the early part of the decade as parity in party identification. Defections

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from Republican ranks in the second half of the decade have dramatically changed that. In early 2009, Democrats held a nine point advantage, 36 to 27 percent, with independents still on top with 37 percent. More telling is when independents are "pushed" into revealing which party they leaned toward. When those figures are allocated in with the respective parties,

the Democratic advantage in "leaned party identification" of one point in 2001 has ballooned to 14 points now, dividing the population to 53 and 39 percent in favor of Democrats.

If all of that is the bad news, the good news for Republicans is that 2010 is not going to be about them. It is going to be about President Barack Obama and his agenda, his stewardship over the economy, and whether or not voters agree with the direction that he and his party are seeking to take the country. Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008 were built on running against Republicans and Republican policies; in 2010 it will be about their own. While today the public still places the blame for the recession at Bush's feet, each month Obama takes a little more ownership of the economy. It will no longer matter who the chief executive was when the recession started.

Obama's handling of the financial crisis, economic stimulus, restructuring of the automobile industry, health care reform, climate change, energy, and federal

spending will dominate the debate and voters decisions in November 2010. If voters believe that Obama has exercised strong leadership, made the right decisions, and continue believing in him, that suggests one electoral outcome. If they don't, that would suggest something very different.

It is far too early to know what that assessment will be. Polling thus far has shown his overall job approval ratings to be about normal for new presidents. His strongest ratings are of him personally, on handling foreign policy, the economy, terrorism as well as the situations in the Middle East and on the Korean peninsula. His worst ratings—"upside down" in pollster parlance, meaning higher disapproval than approval ratings—have been on controlling federal spending and on handling the federal deficit. Broadly speaking, the public seems to like him personally and agree with his broad goals, but they are nervous about some of the specifics. They now believe that his emphasis should shift from reviving the economy to controlling the federal budget deficit. There is particular anxiety over bailing out major sectors of the economy.

It is particularly interesting that the public focus seems to be shifting from one of "get us out of this recession, no matter what it costs," to "the economy seems to be turning around, now we have to get spending and deficits under control." There are considerable signs that the economy may be bottoming out and that a recovery may soon begin. Whether that feeds further into this shift in public emphasis, or whether that economic improvement has a buoyant effect on Obama's approval ratings and the Democratic Party's prospects are anyone's guess. Recent polls have shown Obama's numbers on "strength" and "leadership" have sagged some, likely the result of the public seeing him as having "outsourced" to congress much of the work on the stimulus, the budget and healthcare reform.

### **Pragmatism in the West Wing**

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There is no question that Obama's dominant ideological leanings are liberal, but it is also clear that there is a strong dose of pragmatism at work as well. He asked Defense Secretary Robert Gates to stay on, included former Marine commandant James Jones to serve as national security advisor, got former commander of the navy's Pacific Fleet, Dennis Blair, to be director of national intelligence, and asked his former adversary, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), to be his secretary of state. It is hard to look at this group and others amongst them without being impressed with the clear preference for experience, toughness, and pragmatism. These would not be the choices of liberal groups such as Moveon.org or CodePink.

Similarly, on the economic side, one might divide the Democratic Party into two wings: the more liberal Robert Reich and Paul Krugman wing, and the more

moderate, business-friendly Robert Rubin faction of the party. The vast majority of top economic advisors come from the latter, the Rubin school. Many of them are his protégés, steeped in the same support for free trade, balanced budgets, and working with the business community, not against them. In light of ballooning spending, mounting deficits, and government takeovers, that could certainly seem ironic. Administration backers, however, would argue that their team is as cognizant of those risks as any, but that they are essential under the circumstances.

It is also clear that the West Wing of this White House has more congressional experience—"Congress-centric" in the worlds of the *New York Times*' Matt Bai—than any in modern history, with close and long-time connections with many of the key players that will help move the Obama agenda through Congress. This administration has taken on a more aggressive agenda than any new president since Franklin D. Roosevelt. But it appears to have put together a team and a strategy that gives a seemingly impossible set of proposals a surprisingly plausible chance of surviving. The key from this group seems to be a rare kind of political willingness to compromise.

One way of looking at this White House team is to consider the two most widely cited quotes from White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. Shortly after the election, he told CBS News' Bob Schieffer on *Face the Nation*: "Never allow a crisis to go to waste. They are opportunities to do big things." And months later, the *New York Times* wrote that Emanuel likes to tell his West Wing staff: "The only nonnegotiable principle here is success. Everything else is negotiable." That view meshes well with the expression that Obama himself has used countless times: telling people not to let the perfect become the enemy of the good. This is a president and an administration that would certainly like to get a whole loaf or a half or a third of a loaf, but would rather settle for two-thirds or a half than come up empty-handed. The question of course, in their zeal for bipartisan support for their agenda, is how much compromise is too much? And at what cost are they willing to pay to obtain bipartisan support?

## **The Stage for the 2010 Midterm Elections**

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While the direction of the partisan winds is unknown, the terrain provides some information. Paradoxically, the dynamics in the House provide more hope to Republicans than in the Senate. Having gained 54 seats in two elections, most of the weaker Republicans, and those in districts sympathetic with Democrats, have already been culled from the congressional herd. Just 34 Republicans represent districts won by Obama in 2008. Meanwhile, 49 Democratic members sit in districts carried by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) in 2008. These numbers do not

dictate the outcome, but they do show that Democrats are more vulnerable to losses than Republicans.

Because of the six year terms in the Senate, the seats up for grabs in 2010 are those from the 2004 election, which was not horrible for the GOP. While there is not much of an imbalance in terms of seats up—19 Republican-held seats to 18 for Democrats—Republicans have five open seats to defend, and will probably have one more. Democrats have one open seat now and likely one more. Much more often than not, open seats are more problematic for parties to hold than those with incumbents seeking reelection. All in all, Democrats have about four seats to worry about and Republicans have seven, though candidate recruiting season is not over and circumstances in several states may change.

Just looking at the individual situations that exist today in each of the Senate and House races, if there were no partisan or ideological winds, waves or tides, one might expect Republicans to pick up five to ten seats in the House and lose one or two seats in the Senate, though those estimates are purely hypothetical and contingent upon this being an “all politics is local” style election. In other words, that does not factor in Obama being an asset or a liability or whether Democratic majorities in the House and Senate are viewed as having been particularly effective or not. This five to ten seat gain for Republicans in the House and one or two seat gain for Democrats in the Senate might be viewed as something of default estimates. Whatever prevailing political dynamics exist in 2010 will push the races one way or the other from those positions.

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## **A New Era in U.S. Governance**

Beyond the partisan shifts over the last four years and the 2010 midterm elections, there is a much larger and more profound change that is taking place. For 28 years, beginning with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, a central theme in U.S. public policy was to limit the role of government, to let the markets work whenever possible. The degree varied some from president to president, congress to congress, year to year, and issue to issue. But from Reagan through both Bush presidencies and even though to a lesser extent Clinton, there was a bias on the scale toward less governmental intervention into the private sector.

All of that effectively changed on September 15, 2008, the day that Lehman Brothers went into default. More accurately, it was a sequence of events that culminated in the Lehman Brothers default, the seizing up of worldwide credit

markets over the next few days, and the stock markets plummeting a week later. With that series of calamitous events, government reticence to take actions unseen since the Great Depression with public acceptance, begrudging though it may have been, becoming more the norm than the exception. Starting with the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) program aimed at the financial sector and continuing on through effective federal takeovers of General Motors and Chrysler, as along with unprecedented levels of economic stimulus, all combine to demonstrate that a new era is at hand, one that began in September, before Obama's election.

Whether Obama, McCain, Clinton, Mitt Romney or anyone else was elected president, it is hard to imagine they would not have taken a profoundly

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more interventionist approach than what the American public had grown accustomed to. Each may well have handled the economic crisis in different ways, but actions by Bush, former Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke last fall previewed this turn in American politics. Beyond just the financial services sector and the current congressional action on health care reform and climate change, there are growing

signs that a new era of closer governmental scrutiny, regulation, and involvement in food, drug, and consumer safety suggests political life in the United States has indeed entered a new era.

The pendulum of limited government and a more circumscribed role of regulation went too far in one direction. Human nature being what it is, it will likely begin heading back in the opposite direction, toward more expansive government and more closely regulated industry and economy. To a certain extent, even without the outcome of recent elections, it would have happened anyway as a result of last year's economic debacle. But the results accelerated or amplified that trend. Now, the 2010 midterm elections could either slow it down or give it another push forward. Watching this new Obama administration this year has been more than a bit like watching a very high stakes poker game, with audacious moves by skillful players with an enormous amount on the table. The outcome is anyone's guess.