

## The Focus Now Shifts to 2012

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It is hardly unusual for the party holding the White House to incur midterm election losses; indeed, such defeats for the president's party are the norm, having lost congressional seats in 15 out of 17 post-World War II midterm elections. The only exceptions were in 1998, after the ill-fated attempt to impeach and remove President Clinton from office, and in 2002, the election 14 months after the 9/11 tragedy. But when the majority party of the U.S. House suffers the greatest loss of congressional seats by either party in 62 years, the most in a midterm election in 72 years, plus net losses of six U.S. Senate seats, six governorships, and almost 700 state legislative seats—the largest decline in state legislative seats in more than a half century—obviously something big was going on. Voters were trying to say something.

The 2010 midterm elections were complicated and somewhat bifurcated. In the high visibility races like U.S. Senate and governor, the Democratic losses were large but hardly historic. After all, Republicans lost six Senate seats in 2006 and eight in 2008. But in the lower visibility contests like U.S. House and the state legislative elections, the results were truly historic. What appears to have happened is that in the lower profile races, it was almost a parliamentary election—voters casting their ballots on the basis of party more than anything else. In the higher profile senatorial and gubernatorial contests, where candidates are better defined and the elections tend to get more news coverage, the strengths and weaknesses of individual candidates and their campaigns mattered more, and voters were more discriminating in their choices of who they threw out and who they retained.

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Republicans failed to beat Democrats in several critical statewide races where the GOP candidates were flawed, waged ineffective campaigns, or in some cases, both. Conversely, similarly situated Republican candidates in the down-ballot races often won despite their individual shortcomings or those of their campaigns. In short, in the high visibility races, Republican gains were strong, but in the down-ballot races their gains were almost biblical in size.

### **Why Did Voters Change Tack?**

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Political scientists have several theories about the strong propensity for midterm election losses for the party holding the White House. One is that midterm elections are referenda on the president, a preliminary verdict of whether voters are happy or not. Almost invariably, two and six years into a presidency, voters are unhappy about something. With unemployment just barely under 10 percent, not to mention the ambitious and controversial legislative agenda pursued by President Obama and congressional Democrats, there certainly were plenty of reasons for voters to want to express their displeasure.

A second political science theory is “surge and decline.” When presidents are elected or re-elected, the most pressing issues of the year, the particular voter turnout characteristics that year, and other dynamics that work to benefit many of that party’s candidates are often referred to as the presidential candidate’s “coattails.” Two years later in the next midterm election, when circumstances are different and there are no presidential coattails to cling to, many of that party’s candidates lose.

The third theory is restoration of balance. Upon capturing their party’s presidential nomination, candidates for the White House run toward the ideological center where presidential elections are usually won. The victorious candidates often (and erroneously) then interpret their victory as an ideological one and begin to govern for their party’s natural-inclination, Republicans from the right and Democrats from the left. Two years later, voters, having cast their ballots for the candidate perceived as most centrist, become resentful with more than a light case of buyer’s remorse setting in, and then seek to restore balance, voting for the opposition party in order to bring things back over to the middle.

The 2010 midterm elections appear to contain elements of each of these theories. It is not hard to see the referendum aspect of the election. The U.S. economy had dropped precipitously and was undergoing an agonizingly slow and painful recovery. Voters seemed chaffed that, through 2009 and early 2010, Washington’s focus was on health care reform and not the economy and jobs. President Obama’s job approval ratings tumbled in 2009 and did not recover in 2010—polls showed approximately 70 percent of Americans thought the

country was headed in the wrong direction—and on November 2 they articulated their displeasure at the ballot box.

But the surge and decline dynamic was at work as well. The unprecedented voter turnout of younger and minority voters in 2008 that turbocharged the Democratic vote in that presidential year was not replicated in the 2010 midterm, as the participation of both groups returned to normal levels. That left high and dry many Democratic candidates who had won in that banner year two years earlier.

Finally, there is the restoration of balance. Voters remember Barack Obama running on a platform of wanting to change the way Washington works, ushering in what they thought would be an era of post-partisanship that would include working across party lines. Instead, what they saw in 2009 and through Election Day 2010 was more partisanship and a heavily ideological approach to governing. Voters punished President Obama and Democrats on November 2.

After the lame-duck session of Congress, when Obama moved back to the middle in several highly-publicized compromises with Congress, the president saw his job approval numbers rise. From mid-June 2010 through the election, President Obama's weekly job approval ratings in the Gallup Poll never exceeded 46 percent. In the four weeks following the lame-duck session, his approval rating never dropped below the level of 48 percent.

## **What To Expect Heading Toward 2012**

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President Obama's turn toward the center seemed to match up well, at least stylistically, with the approach of newly-elected House Speaker John Boehner. While certainly a conservative, Boehner above all else is an institutionalist, not given to histrionics, bombast, or rhetorical excesses. Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have studied the mistakes made by then-speaker Newt Gingrich and congressional Republicans in 1995-1996 and seem determined not to repeat them. Nevertheless, Boehner pushed through the House a measure that sought to repeal President Obama's health care reform act, and Republicans were obliged to push for repeal in the Senate. Republicans owed their base a good-faith effort to overturn the controversial law, even though the votes to repeal it did not exist in the Senate. Republican leaders saw a need to "check the box" on attempting repeal before moving on to making more realistic changes in the law and other issues.

In the aftermath of the tragic shooting in Tucson that badly wounded Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), killed six and wounded a dozen others, there seems to be a determination on the part of leaders in both parties to dial down the partisan rhetoric and seek some restoration of civility to the

political process. While few expect these changes to be permanent, it does mean that 2011 will begin with a new and different tone and at least an effort to make things different.

The year 2011 is a transitional one, with House Republicans having to make the change from being an opposition party to one with a role in governing, having to shoulder responsibility rather than just being on the attack. Meanwhile, their colleagues on the Senate side are all but measuring for drapes as they are widely expected to pick up a majority in 2012 when Democrats, currently with a narrow 53–47 seat edge, have 23 seats to defend compared to only 10 that Republicans have to worry about. More than just a quantitative level of vulnerability, the 23 Democratic Senators with seats up for

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re-election were last elected in 2006, a great year for Democrats, while the 10 Republicans who won are a hardy breed, having prevailed in a very hostile environment for their party. Things are hardly better for Democrats in 2014, when they have 20 seats up, compared to only 13 for the GOP. With 43 seats up in 2012 and 2014 combined to only 23 for Republicans, it is very hard to see how Democrats can retain their edge in the upper chamber.

President Obama must reposition himself for re-election this year after a calamitous first two years in office. Having seen his job approval ratings improve after his move toward the center and compromising with Republicans in the lame-duck session, many see this as a roadmap for Obama, just as a move toward the center in 1995 and 1996 provided President Clinton with a pathway to re-election. But unlike the situation that Clinton found himself in after devastating losses for his party in 1994, Obama has a very difficult economic climate and is trying to extricate the country from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In comparison, some would argue that Clinton was in an easy situation.

President Obama will have a difficult balancing act, leaving sufficient troops in place in Afghanistan to help stabilize the troubled nation while heeding demands from liberals in his party to remove as many troops as quickly as possible. How he juggles this problem could decide whether his surge in Afghanistan will be seen as successful or folly, and could determine whether he draws a challenge to his re-nomination from anti-war elements in the Democratic Party.

His other challenge is the economy, where the shape of this recovery is far different from the post-World War II norm. In the past, housing has led “V-shaped” recoveries, where elastic economies snapped back into place like rubber bands. With the housing market shaken to the core by millions of “underwater” mortgages, where homeowners owe more than the diminished value of their homes, and an industry going through a painful deleveraging process, real estate and housing will likely be a drag rather than a leader of this recovery.

President Reagan was able to rebound from tough 1982 midterm election losses with a period of robust growth that enabled him to win a 49-state re-election victory. But few, if any, economists expect that kind of growth over the next two years, bringing an enormous amount of uncertainty regarding President Obama’s re-election prospects. If unemployment were to drop from the December 2010 level of 9.4 percent down to eight percent or lower by November 2012, his re-election prospects would brighten significantly. On the other hand, if unemployment is close to or higher than nine percent, it is much harder to see how he can prevail over any but the weakest GOP challenger.

Arguably the state of the economy is of greater consequence than who Republicans nominate. If the economy bounces back strongly, even the most formidable Republican would have a hard time winning. But if the unemployment rate remains high and the economy weak, a less than impressive GOP nominee would have a very good chance. Presidential elections are, more than anything else, a referendum on the incumbent president, and few things matter more than the state of the economy and the public’s assessment of their own pocketbooks.

The final thing to watch for is whether Americans continue to view the role of government skeptically, as they have increasingly over the last two years, or if they revert to being nominally pro-interventionist. Historically, somewhat more Americans have indicated to pollsters that they favored government “doing more to solve the problems facing our country” compared to “doing too many things better left to business or individuals” (the actual wording varies from one pollster to another). Starting early in 2009, the balance shifted from pro-interventionist to one more skeptical about the role of government, with independents voters shifting sharply. Democrats pretty reliably support more government, while Republicans are against more government; independent

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voters have historically sided slightly more with Democrats for more government. By the time the 2010 midterm election occurred, independents were opposing more governmental involvement by almost two to one. How those numbers sort out over the next two years will determine to a large extent whether voters are inclined toward Democrats or Republicans in 2012.