

Looking toward 2014

It is inevitable that U.S. presidential elections get considerably more attention domestically and around the world than mid-term elections, but the latter are still extremely important; their results drive in large part the ability of a president to succeed. President Obama will be entering the 2014 midterm election with his party holding a 55- to 45-seat majority in the U.S. Senate and a 17-seat deficit in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The U.S. House of Representatives

Independent analysts as well as strategists for the two parties agree even after the government shutdown that Republicans are likely to retain their House majority in the mid-term election—indeed, most predict minimal change in the House. The damage to the GOP of the October government shutdown has been offset by the debacle surrounding the launch of the Affordable Care Act. With 93 percent of Republicans holding seats in districts that Mitt Romney carried in last year's presidential election and 96 percent Democrats in districts won by President Obama, the House is largely settled.

Part of this is the result of very deliberate efforts by the dominant party in each state to maximize their strength when the Congressional district boundaries were drawn in 2011, leaving relatively few competitive districts. Democratic voters tend to concentrate in urban areas and college towns, Republican voters are more spread out and predominately found in outer suburbs, smaller towns, and rural America. Because Republicans had such a hugely successful mid-term election in 2010, electing many Republican governors and GOP-controlled state Houses and state Senates, many states have Congressional districts more favorable to Republicans than we have seen in many years. This has led to a situation in which many neutral observers expect that the House will likely stay Republican for the balance of this decade, until lines are drawn again in 2021. How each party fares in the 2018 mid-term and 2020 presidential election will determine whether the next decade will see a continued Republican advantage. Two-thirds of the nation's governors and a majority of

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state legislative seats are selected in mid-term election years, so to a certain extent, the 2018 midterm election will prove more important for redistricting than the 2020 election.

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One Democratic leader has privately conceded that “Democrats can’t win back the House, but Republicans could lose it,” which might possibly be correct. Simply doing well isn’t likely to give Democrats enough new seats to take a majority. Republicans would have to perform horribly in order to significantly hurt their own prospects. This is obviously possible; we have seen both parties self-destruct from time to time, but it would take a pretty colossal Republican misstep to tip the House over.

The U.S. Senate

Democrats go into 2014 defending 21 Senate seats while Republicans will have just 14. But making the challenge for Democrats to hold onto their majority even more difficult is that they have seven seats up in states won by Romney, while Republicans only have one seat up in a state that Obama carried. In terms of seats expected to be competitive, 10 Democratic-held seats are in danger (e.g., races that are not rated Solid or Likely Democrat by *The Cook Political Report*), including all seven Romney states. By contrast, only two Republican-held seats are in jeopardy, and Romney carried both of those states in 2012.

Republicans are currently favored to pick up three open seats now held by Democrats: Montana (now held by Max Baucus), South Dakota (Tim Johnson) and West Virginia (Jay Rockefeller). If these seats fall into Republican hands as expected, the GOP will be three seats short of a majority, assuming they hold onto all 14 of their current seats. The two Republican seats currently in danger are in Kentucky and Georgia. In Kentucky, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is in a tough race, facing a primary challenge to his right from a very conservative Tea Party-backed candidate. Although McConnell is currently the favorite to win the nomination, the general election—where he will face Democratic Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes—will also prove difficult.

In Georgia, where incumbent Sen. Saxby Chambliss is retiring, Democrats have a potentially strong candidate in Michelle Nunn, who is CEO of the non-profit Points of Light and the daughter of former Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn. The outcome of this contest will be driven as much or more by who wins the Republican primary. Seven candidates seek the GOP nomination so far, and the field may grow by one or two more contenders. Several of these candidates would have an advantage over Nunn, but there are a couple of Republican candidates who could very plausibly win their nomination and then perform weakly in the general election. Democrats could easily compare such candidates to GOP Senate nominees in Indiana and Missouri in 2012, and in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada in 2010. Each of these weak nominees cost their party seats that they probably should have won.

At this point, the Senate appears likely to come down to seven seats that will determine whether Democrats retain or lose their majority. This includes four seats held by Democratic incumbents (Mark Begich in Alaska, Mark Pryor in Arkansas, Mary Landrieu in Louisiana, and Kay Hagan in North Carolina) and one open Senate seat in Michigan (Carl Levin). Two seats held by Republicans (Kentucky's McConnell and the Georgia open seat) round out the seven. Assuming that Republicans win the open seats in Montana, South Dakota, and West Virginia, they then need to win five out of these seven seats to win a 51- to 49-seat majority. If Republicans win just four of these six races, the Senate would be tied, although Democrats would effectively hold the majority since Vice President Joe Biden would break any tie votes.

The need to win five out of the seven most competitive races means that Republicans have a very narrow path to a majority. Consider that of the seven races *The Cook Political Report* rated as "Toss Ups" in 2010, Republicans lost five, even though the political environment was tilted in their favor. In 2012, Republicans lost eight out of the ten Toss Up races. On the other hand, all six of these seats are in states that Romney won in 2012, so while the path for the GOP may be narrow, it is not entirely uphill because these are not particularly difficult states for Republicans. The difficulty will come in defeating four Democratic incumbents. Since 2004, 68 Democratic incumbents have run for re-election. Of those, only three have lost, meaning that 96 percent of Democratic incumbents won re-election. Conversely, 60 Republican incumbents have sought re-election since 2004, and 11 have lost. Thus, 82 percent were re-elected (these figures do not include incumbents who lost primaries). The point is not that Republican incumbents are more likely to lose, but that Senate Democratic incumbents have been particularly resilient in recent elections, even in years when President George W. Bush was winning re-election (2004) and in years that saw a GOP wave (2010).

Even with all these caveats, there is a very plausible chance that Republicans can score a net gain of six seats and a U.S. Senate majority. However, with the election just over a year away, the odds that Republicans will actually net those six seats are considerably less than 50/50.

Whether Democrats retain or lose their Senate majority appears likely to come down to six seats.

"Micro" or "Macro"?

For avid sports fans, the preseason is a time for speculating about players and teams, who will do well or poorly, the strengths and weaknesses of each. Fans and sportswriters develop theories in response to these questions, but no one has answers until the real season begins. Politics are similar. During the off year, we can come up with theories of what may happen in the next year's national elections, guessing but not knowing how each candidate and party will succeed.

The first question is: "What will the election be about?" Will it be a "normal" election, the type described by the late Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill as one in which "all politics is local"? These are the kind of elections in which the natural demographic and voting patterns of that state or district are paramount; the relative

strengths of the candidates and campaigns as well as their resources together determine the outcome. In such years, each race is effectively stove-piped, meaning it is its own free-standing contest, with outside influences, national trends, or external events having minimal impact. This kind of election could be called “micro-political.”

The other kind of election, “macro-political” if you will, is more a wave election, one in which the situation begins in each race in the micro-political, default mode—but then it is as if an invisible hand emerges, pushing up the candidates of one party while simultaneously pulling down the candidates of the other. For the party benefitting from the wave, most of their candidates over-perform from normal expectations, while the more victimized party’s candidates chronically under-perform the norm. In most cases, the outcome doesn’t change—only the margins; but in others, those who might have won narrowly can lose, and those who might have come up short actually win, depending upon which party has the headwind.

Democratic candidates up and down the ballot have benefited from such wave situations in the 1958, 1974, 1982, and 2006 mid-term elections, as well as the 1964 and 2008 presidential election years. Republicans were the beneficiaries in the 1966, 1994, and 2010 midterms, and the 1980 presidential election. In such wave election years, all politics is decidedly not local. Wave elections seem to occur more in mid-term than presidential election years, and more often in second-term than first-term mid-term elections, given that four (1958, 1966, 1974, and 2006) out of the six (the remaining two were 1982 and 1994) mid-term wave elections were those held halfway through a party’s second term in the White House.

It is obviously too early to determine whether this will be a micro or a macro election, but this is certainly a factor to keep in mind.

The 2014 Elections Theme?

Two plausible theories exist for the theme of the 2014 election. Will it be a continuation of the 2012 dynamics, in which Republicans struggled with branding problems, particularly among minority, women, younger, and self-described moderate voters? Or will it be the historic dynamic of voters showing displeasure with presidents halfway through their second term, which usually brings about substantial losses in the House and/or Senate?

What will the 2014 election be about: local affairs or a “wave” election?

The growing Republican dependence upon the votes of older, white, male, and conservative voters has been well documented and thoroughly examined since 2012. Polls conducted during the first nine months of 2013 show that the Republican Party’s favorable or positive ratings badly trail their negative ratings, and that while the Democratic Party’s ratings are exceedingly mediocre, Democrats’ favorable/positives are much higher and unfavorable/negative ratings are much lower. We see the same when “Republicans in Congress” or “Republican leaders in Congress” are tested and compared with “Democrats in Congress” and “Democratic leaders in Congress.” One party looks bad, the other looks worse. Ratings for each party

are little changed from last year, meaning that the gap between the parties persists and the GOP brand, at least so far, has not improved since the election.

Only once in the last century has the party in the White House avoided House losses in a second-term mid-term election. In fact, in five out of the six second-term, mid-term elections in the post-World War II era, the party in the White House has suffered significant losses in the House and/or the Senate, and usually both. The lone exception, 1998, was after Republicans impeached President Clinton in the House and tried him in the Senate—public opinion disapproved of Clinton’s personal behavior but hardly wanted to remove him from office for it.

Voters obviously don’t have their calendars marked to remind them of a second-term, mid-term election. By halfway through a second term, however, the novelty of a new president has begun to wear off, and administrations typically lose their energy, passion, focus, and new ideas. The “first team,” the strategists and advisors who helped elect and re-elect the president, have usually moved on, leaving the second or third team in place. In addition, problems for presidents, their administrations, and parties tend to mount during years five through eight. President Eisenhower had two recessions in his last year in office, the Kennedy–Johnson second term was plagued by the Vietnam War, and Nixon–Ford had the Watergate scandal as well as fallout from President Ford’s pardon of former President Nixon. President Reagan’s second term was marred by the Iran–Contra scandal, President Clinton’s by the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and President George W. Bush’s second term was dominated by controversy surrounding the Iraq War. Decisions that are made or events that take place during the first term sometimes reappear in the second, like chickens coming home to roost.

Mindful of all of this, Democrats, who lost their House majority in 2010 (in no small part by the Affordable Care Act, or ACA), worry about the implementation of the health care reform measure. It is still unclear what role the ACA will have in next year’s midterm elections, but polls consistently show more Americans with unfavorable than favorable opinions about it, and those who believe the new law will hurt their family outnumber those who think it will help them. If there is a first-term chicken to come back to punish Obama and Democrats, it is most likely to be health care reform and the Affordable Care Act, though it could be something else.

All elections start out as micro and some become macro, small waves become moderate ones, and eventually some become big enough to reach a tidal wave; others just peter out. Democratic problems in 1994, for example, began to manifest themselves in the spring and summer of the election year and continued to build through Election Day, while their 2010 problems started becoming apparent during the summer of the previous year, about 14 months before the election. Of course, there are other possibilities for what the 2014 elections will focus on, beyond either the continuation of 2012 dynamics or the “six-year itch,” but these two seem the most plausible.

Metrics to Watch

There is no one poll question or economic metric that can predict an election’s theme. The key is to watch certain key poll questions and monitor a series of data, each one like the piece of a puzzle.

Presidential Job Approval

For decades, a couple of truisms have remained constant. First, there is the theory that mid-term elections are usually referenda on the incumbent president. The sitting president's name is not on the mid-term election ballot, so if voters are unhappy with the plight and/or direction of the country, their only outlet is to punish the candidates of the president's party. Unfortunately for incumbent parties, this effect is not very symmetrical. Satisfied voters usually don't vote to reward the candidates of the incumbent president; they simply make their decisions on other factors.

So, the first question we ask is whether the incumbent president is a liability for his party or not? There is no better method than simply watching the president's job approval rating. Is a president's approval rating above or below 50 percent? Is it rising, falling, or stable? How does it compare with the job approval ratings of other recent presidents at this point in their second terms, namely Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush?

Heading into the autumn of 2013, Obama's job approval numbers are now in the low 40's, and disapproval in the low 50's. (The Gallup Poll is the old standby and what I believe to be the only source of reliable data on this question for over 50 years. It is worth noting that this is all freely available to the public on Gallup.com, including charting comparisons of the current president with past occupants of the White House. Other polls worth watching are the ones from ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times*, CNN, Fox News, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, and Pew Research Center.)

Another approach is to look at the poll aggregation sites, notably RealClearPolitics.com and Pollster.com.¹ Each compiles presidential job approvals from a large number of different polling organizations, constructing and graphing moving averages. While not all of the polls that are stirred into the mix are of the highest quality, they do include the best of the public polls. The averages are highly useful for monitoring trends. Though not strictly a poll aggregator, statistician Nate Silver's *fivethirtyeight.com* is also an invaluable resource for monitoring and interpreting polls and public opinion trends.

The Gallup Organization's website (www.gallup.com) is enormously useful, with detailed demographic breakdowns and comparisons with previous presidents at comparable points of their presidencies.²

Midterm elections have a number of moving parts, but given the referendum characteristics they tend to exhibit, these job approval ratings are the best way of ascertaining whether a president is having a detrimental, neutral, or even positive impact on his party's standing as the campaign goes on.

The Economy and Consumer Confidence

A second truism in U.S. elections is that Americans vote their pocketbooks—they vote their personal economics. If the economy is doing poorly, Americans lose confidence, and that in turn erodes confidence in the president and party perceived as most in power, generally the one holding the White House. Again, like with job approval ratings, while a strong economy is good, voters are less likely to reward than to punish if things are bad. A strong economy can make voters more likely to forgive various transgressions. One reason that President Clinton was able to fend off efforts to remove

him from office was because the economy was strong and voters seemed reluctant to throw out a president during vibrant economic times. But when the economy is weak, voting against the president is one of the only tools voters have, and they have never shown a reluctance to exercise that right.

Since we are focused on politics, it is appropriate to look at the public perception of the economy rather than technical economic indicators. To ascertain whether Americans feel good or bad about the economy today, whether it is improving or deteriorating, and how they see the immediate economic future, it's better to look at attitudinal measurements rather than GDP, unemployment, or any other pure economic measures. The best are the Conference Board's Consumer Confidence and the University of Michigan's Index of Consumer Sentiment. Both indices are based on ongoing national surveys of adults and made up of a combination of poll questions about whether the economy and their personal financial situations are better than they were six months or a year earlier, their expectations of each for the future and their assessment, and likelihood of purchasing high value items like homes, automobiles, and major appliances. If the electorate's view of the economy is likely to have some determinative impact on an election, these indices will pick up the direction and significance of the movement.

Going into the fall, consumer confidence ratings were off a bit from recent six-year highs, significantly higher than during the recession and most of the recovery, but losing momentum over the summer, an indication that Americans feel better but still not good about the economy and its prospects.

**For now,
Americans appear to
feel better but still
not good about the
economy and its
prospects.**

A Referendum on Obamacare?

If there is a single domestic issue that will have an impact on the 2014 mid-term elections, it is health care reform, specifically the Affordable Care Act. Undoubtedly it was a major factor in the 2010 midterm elections, though 2010 and 2012 saw no major shifts in attitudes. The people who disliked or were opposed to it in 2009 and 2010 remained so, those who liked or supported it continued to do so, and those ambivalent or uncertain pretty much remained so as well. Now with more elements of the law undergoing implementation this year and next, public attitudes will prove important in ascertaining whether health care will be a positive, negative, or neutral factor in 2014.

Most of the major polling organizations include poll questions on health care reform in many of their surveys, but those by the Kaiser Family Foundation are particularly worth watching.³ Over the course of several years, its polling has consistently asked Americans certain questions about their attitudes toward health care reform, allowing trends to be examined.

In interpreting polls on health care, particularly those conducted by partisan pollsters on either side, readers should be careful to look at the exact wording of questions—very small changes can elicit very different responses, in effect putting a finger on the scale. For that reason, it's probably wise to avoid long and wordy

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questions and stick to whether people have a favorable or unfavorable view of the law, or whether they think the law will help, hurt, or have no effect on them and their families. Other questions need careful watching, particularly those that attach words like “fix,” “repair,” or “modify” to either support or oppose the law. Pollsters commissioned by those opposed to the law often give an option to “repeal or modify” the law versus keeping it as is, while those on the pro-ACA side give an option to “keep and modify” the law

versus changing it. As a very large number of Americans feel the law is imperfect and needs changing, adding that option to one side or the other moves large numbers. Ironically, “modify” is the one argument that we don’t hear coming from partisans, as most Republicans are talking repeal or defund while Democrats are talking about keeping it in place.

Generally speaking, more Americans have unfavorable feelings toward the law than favorable, and are more likely to think it might hurt than help themselves and their families. But neither side has anywhere near a majority opinion, and quite a few remain uncertain or ambivalent about the law. Today, the numbers don’t suggest it will be a major factor, but a strong shift in these numbers, in either direction, would be an important signal for the election.

Perception of the Parties

A fourth set of poll results to watch are the favorable and unfavorable ratings for the two parties. As previously discussed, coming out of the 2012 elections, the Democratic Party’s favorable/unfavorable numbers have been mediocre at best, while the Republican Party’s ratings have been terrible. Republican’s unfavorable ratings range from 53-60 percent, while the Democrats unfavorable numbers are usually in the 40’s, occasionally touching 50 percent.

Republicans need to repair their brand, and the party’s favorable/unfavorable numbers are as good of a measure as any of whether voter hostility to the party has waned. Conversely, if Democrats are to have problems consistent with most other second-term, mid-term elections, presumably they would manifest themselves in their party’s favorable/unfavorable numbers.

Most of the major polling organizations periodically ask the party favorability/unfavorability, or in the case of the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, positive/neutral/negative questions. If the Republican Party brand begins to improve or the Democratic Party’s image deteriorates, these questions could help determine that.

Generic Congressional Ballot Test

Finally, there is the generic Congressional ballot test, which attempts to measure the percentage of likely votes for Republicans or Democrats in a district’s congressional race if the election were held today. To be sure, the generic ballot test is not good at helping to estimate how many seats a party may gain or lose, but it is useful in signaling which way the wind is blowing, and to a certain extent whether it is blowing mildly, moderately, or heavily in that particular direction. For some inexplicable reason, the

generic ballot test poll tends to have a roughly three-point tilt in favor of Democrats. History is pretty clear that one has to knock about three points off of the Democratic number to get a true reading of roughly how the popular vote for the House may go. How the national majority popular vote will swing does not mean that party will win a majority of the seats. Indeed, in 2012 Democrats won the national popular vote for the House, yet while they gained seats in the House, they did not win a majority.

This was for two reasons. First, having scored impressive gains in the 2010 midterm elections, Republican governors and state legislators were in a position in 2011 to draw Congressional district boundaries that were much more favorable to GOP candidates than previous decades' maps, which more often than not were overly generous to Democrats. Second, the Republican vote for the House is more efficiently allocated around the country than the Democratic vote. It is not unheard of to have an urban Congressional district with a large majority of minority voters cast far above 75 percent of their ballots for the Democratic candidate. In the most Republican of districts, GOP candidates winning by landslide margins don't usually have such lopsided margins. Still, the generic Congressional ballot test, subtracting three points from the Democratic number, is a useful measurement to ascertain if the election is likely to be more of the macro, nationalized election than a micro, all-politics-is-local normal election.

Conclusion

There is still roughly a year before the 2014 midterm elections, plenty of time for major events to change the political landscape and electoral circumstances. Today, the real fight seems to be more over a majority in the Senate than in the House of Representatives, though that could certainly change. As the election comes closer, the accuracy rate for political prognostication grows considerably better, with less time for circumstances to change. Objective observations, while trying hard to leave personal political biases out of the equation, can usually lead to a reasonably accurate assessment of the future. But people with strong personal feelings about the outcome often allow those feelings to color their judgments, as many Republicans in 2012 thought to the very end that Romney would win and as some Democrats similarly deluded themselves about losing their House majority in 2010.

The dynamics described above are designed to help in interpreting the 2014 midterm elections. However, they will likely also prove extremely relevant in looking at the political environment leading into and framing the 2016 presidential election. Which side will play offense, which will play defense, and why? These same factors and metrics could offer answers.

Notes

1. "President Obama Job Approval," RealClearPolitics, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_obama_job_approval-1044.html?sms_ss=tumblr&at_xt=4d61461c00233111%2C0; "Obama Job Approval," *The Huffington Post*, <http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/obama-job-approval>.
2. "Presidential Job Approval Center: Obama Job Approval," Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.
3. "Polling," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, <http://kff.org/polling/>.