

Preparing for the Worst: Democrats' Fears of the 2010 Midterm Elections

As Washington and the nation's political establishment sifts through the results of the astonishing Republican victory in the Massachusetts Senate race to fill the seat held by the late Edward Kennedy, Republicans hope and Democrats fear that 2010 will be another landslide midterm election along the lines of the Democratic debacle in 1994 and the Republican disaster of 2006. A Democratic loss of the U.S. House is very possible, and while Democrats likely will not lose their majority in the Senate, they could suffer substantial losses in that upper chamber.

Midterm elections are almost inevitably a referendum on the party in power. When the same party occupies both the White House and control of Congress, things are pretty straightforward. One party has all the responsibility and takes the credit or blame (usually the latter) for whatever occurs. Another way of putting it is that midterm elections are binary, everything is either a "1" or a "0"—one side goes down, so the other side goes up.

It is perfectly normal for the party of a newly elected president to lose House seats in his first midterm election. In fact, it has happened in seven of the eight midterm elections during the first terms of a president in the post-World War II era, resulting in an average loss of 16 seats. The sole exception was George W. Bush, after the September 11, 2001 tragedy altered the trajectory of the otherwise predictable pattern. In the last Gallup Poll before the attacks, he had a 49 percent job approval rating, one point less than President Barack Obama's average Gallup

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approval rating for the months of December 2009 and January 2010. In the House in presidential years, the winning presidential candidate's party tends to ride that candidate's coattails, using the same issues, circumstances, and voter turnout dynamics that help the presidential candidate win. In the midterm election, two years later, the absence of those same factors almost invariably results in a decline, and a loss in seats.

In the Senate, which has six-year terms, the pattern is less clear. The president's party has lost seats in four elections, gained in four, and the average is a loss of four-tenths of one seat, basically a wash. The Senate seats that are up in a first-term, midterm election are generally those that were last up when the previous president was elected or reelected. Thus, it is not related to the coattail effect two years earlier that brought the current president into office (the exceptions would be appointed senators or those elected in intervening special elections).

So, if midterm election losses are normal, what makes the 2010 elections different? Why is the prediction of losses for Democrats so much greater than usual?

Three Reasons to Expect Democratic Losses

The results in Massachusetts should prompt some apocalyptic fears for Democrats. The last Republican Senate victory in Massachusetts was in 1972, when an African-American Republican, Edward Brooke, was reelected to his Senate seat. The last non-African-American Republican to win a Senate seat in the Bay State was Leverett Saltonstall in 1960, and the last Republican to win this particular Senate seat was Henry Cabot Lodge in 1946. Now Democrats are confronted with the monumental embarrassment of having a seat held by a Kennedy for 55 years (John Kennedy from 1952–1960 and Edward Kennedy from 1962–2009) taken away by a Republican.

But even before the Massachusetts special election, the economy and specifically the horrific unemployment rate were making unusually high midterm election losses in 2010 very likely. After all, unemployment is the single most watched and most salient economic indicator for most voters. Unemployment has only reached ten percent in one month of an even-numbered (read: election) year before. The September 1982 jobless rate, released in October just before President Ronald Reagan's first-term midterm election, showed a 10.1 percent jobless rate. And Reagan's Republicans lost 26 seats in the House that year. Those losses amounted to two-thirds of the gains his party had enjoyed in the previous election, his landslide win over President Jimmy Carter, and came within 50,000 votes of losing four Senate seats and the party's newly won majority.

The unemployment rate was at or slightly above 10 percent for the last three months of 2009 and is projected to remain roughly at that level through the November 2, 2010 election. A solid year of double-digit unemployment would be a situation not seen since the Great Depression. Pushing the unemployment rate significantly down under these conditions is very difficult, as roughly 100,000 new jobs would have to be created each month just to keep unemployment static due to population gains. Even if many new jobs are created, however, some of those will be offset by those who have been unemployed but have given up trying to find work and not included in the unemployment rate. By some estimates, the U.S. economy would need to add a net 150,000 jobs each month for 48 straight months in order to get unemployment back down to nine percent, still a horrible number.

With unemployment likely to be in or near double digits for a solid year, the argument for greater rather than lower or average losses for the party in power is strong, even if the recession and joblessness began under the auspices of the other party in the White House. Every day that a newly-elected president is in office, they take on a bit more ownership of the economy and of what the government does or fails to do.

Second, there is a very strong relationship between a president's job approval rating and how that president's party will fare in the midterm elections. Obama's approval ratings, which averaged 50 percent for December 2009 and January 2010, put him considerably lower than where Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush were at this point, four points lower than where Bill Clinton was at the end of his first year, and one point above where Reagan was. Positioned on this ranking between Clinton and Reagan, Obama is in the company of the two presidents whose parties suffered the greatest first-term, midterm election losses in the post-World War II era, having lost 52 and 26 House seats respectively, compared to the average of 16 seats.

As nonpartisan political analyst Rhodes Cook points out, no president in 50 years has seen a greater first-year drop in Gallup job approval than Obama, and no president between January 1 of their second year in office and the eve of their first midterm election has seen their approval rating go up so much as one point (Nixon came the closest to going up, only dropping by one point in 1970). The Gallup Organization looks at it on a different level, pointing out that newly-elected presidents have averaged a five-point loss in job approval in their second year in office, the only exceptions being the two Bushs, who experienced modest gains during their second calendar year. So, with the second lowest first-year approval in

A Democratic loss of the U.S. House is clearly possible

Republicans and conservatives also express considerable disdain for their own party's leadership.

the post-war era, the greatest first-year drop in approval, no modern historical precedent for significant second-year increase in approval, and the prospect of high unemployment for the rest of this year, the case for greater than normal losses is a strong one.

The third reason to expect losses—at least House losses—is that Democrats had picked up so many seats from the GOP in the two previous elections that it seemed virtually

inevitable that Democrats would face stiff losses—53 Democrats are sitting in seats that were in GOP hands four years ago, 48 seats are in districts that Senator John McCain (R-AZ) won in 2008, and 47 are in districts that were won by both McCain in 2008 and George W. Bush in 2004. The difference between 256—the current number of House seats held by Democrats—and 201—the number that Democrats held exactly four years ago—is due to many factors. First, a series of Republican congressional scandals leading into the 2006 election, and the fact that the war in Iraq was at its lowest point, hurt the party. But piled on top of this were rising federal deficit levels, a mounting debt, and a horrible job approval rating for Bush (below 40 percent). All of these things created a horrific political climate for a Republican majority trying vainly to retain their House and Senate majorities. Two years later, although the situation in Iraq was improving, the economy was deteriorating, creating another extraordinary opportunity for Democrats to gain seats. Now, Democrats must defend those seats, many of which could not have been won under normal circumstances.

In the Senate with its six-year terms, there is no historical exposure component. This class of Senate seats is made up of those which last faced the voters in 2004, a fairly placid congressional election year that featured a pretty competitive presidential race. Neither side benefited from any strong turnout or issue tide, one reason why the seats up this year are evenly divided, 18–18. Instead, the reason why Democrats may face moderate to stiff losses in the Senate has more to do with the current political climate and circumstances related to the incumbents and states involved.

Early last year, it was generally thought that Republicans would face small Senate losses as it appeared that they were going to have an unusually large number of retirements and few Democratic seats appeared to be in danger. The changing national political environment has improved Republican chances of holding onto most, if not all, of their own open seats and has pulled a number of Democratic seats previously thought to be safe into more competitive situations. In addition, a variety of events and circumstances indigenous to individual states intervened to create unexpected problems for Democrats. The election of

Obama and Joseph R. Biden to the presidency and vice presidency and the death of Kennedy all left open seats that were not going to be contested in 2010 by their appointed successors. Ken Salazar's nomination to be Secretary of the Interior resulted in an appointed senator without a statewide base in the swing state of Colorado. Evan Bayh's surprise retirement announcement in February put yet another key Democratic seat at grave risk. And now Blanche Lincoln in Arkansas and Majority Leader Harry Reid in Nevada, among others, are in danger of losing their seats, presenting real challenges for Democrats.

An Angry Constituency

While some have suggested that Obama is a liability, the situation seems more complicated than that. After all, views of him are hardly monolithic. For the fourth quarter of 2009, 38 percent of Americans considered themselves independents, 33 percent Democrats, and 27 percent Republicans. Each of these groups sees Obama and the Democratic majority in Congress very differently.

Among Democrats, Obama's Gallup approval ratings are strong and have ranged between 84 and 86 percent in December and early January. The number is strong among self-identified liberals as well, between 77 and 80 percent. Conversely, among Republicans, Obama's approval ratings ran between 15 and 18 percent, and between 28 and 31 percent among conservatives. The key, however, is to see where he stands among the critical swing groups of independents and moderates. Among independents, Obama's approval ratings have ranged from 45 to 48 percent, having started out in the high fifties to mid-sixties early last year. Among moderates, Obama's approval ratings ran mostly in the seventies until early July, and have hovered around 60 percent since early September, running between 57 and 63 percent at year's end.

Based on polls, focus groups, and interviews with pollsters as well as campaign consultants, each group is more nuanced in their views than often portrayed. While some Democrats and liberals strongly disagree with the Obama administration's policy in Afghanistan, and its lack of forcefulness in supporting a public option in healthcare reform, they seem thoroughly invested in and strongly supportive of Obama. Beyond the normal family squabbles, there are no meaningful fractures between Obama and the liberal branch of his party.

As far as Republicans and conservatives are concerned, there is very little that Obama and Democrats have done that they do not find objectionable, the notable exception being the deployment of more troops to Afghanistan. They have very legitimate policy grievances, but that should not come as a surprise to anyone. What is unusual is that as much as Republicans and conservatives dislike Obama, loathe most of his policies, and despise the Democratic Congress and particularly its leaders, they do express considerable disdain for their own

A vise-like grip has enveloped Obama and his party from two large, opposing U.S. groups.

party's leadership and establishment as well. In particular, they are angry at the deficits that grew and size of government that expanded so much under Bush and the years of the Republican majority in Congress. It is the first time that I have witnessed the base of one party detesting the other party while also having contemptuous feelings toward their own party's leadership and recent performance. They are, however,

unified in their opposition to Obama and the Democratic Congress. While there are some who have splintered off to become Tea Party activists who might support independent or third party candidates, this disappointment with party performance is unlikely to interfere with the party's midterm election strategies.

That leaves independents, who seem to like Obama personally, believe he is very smart and knowledgeable, and like what his election represents and says about our country. But at the same time, these independents are growing increasingly concerned that Obama's view of the role of government may be different and more expansive than theirs. Independents are showing more and more concern about deficits, spending, and that the tentacles of government are reaching far beyond their level of competence and ability to pay. To the extent that these independents hold Obama in high personal regard, this feeling does not extend to the Democratic Party overall or Democrats in Congress. Democrats now, in the aftermath of the Massachusetts loss, have to admit that, among independent voters over the last year, their party's brand has been badly damaged.

Fate Lies in the Hands of Independents

A vise-like grip has enveloped Obama and his party, with one large group of Americans upset that Obama and Congressional Democrats diverted their attention to health care reform and climate change at the expense of the economy and jobs, while another group grows increasingly concerned about an unprecedented expansion in the size, scope, and reach of the Federal government. These two forces are squeezing Obama and Democrats from opposite directions and doing grave damage to him and his party.

There is a perception, albeit not entirely fair, that once Obama was elected, he checked the box on the economy, and pushed through a highly imperfect and grossly insufficient stimulus package. Once he did this, the perception continues that he quickly moved onto climate change and health care reform and allowed those two issues to dominate the time, energy, and political capital that he and

Congress had attained. Only much later did he come back and deal with jobs and the economy with an insufficient and anemic renewal and expansion of the home buyers' tax credit.

Obama and the Democratic Congress have allowed health care reform, and to a lesser extent climate change, to consume the lion's share of the bandwidth of effort and attention that the public sees Washington policymakers as having. It is inaccurate to say that the president or Democrats in Congress, or for that matter Republicans in Congress, have made the effort to "focus on the economy like a laser beam," to use the immortal words of 1992 presidential candidate Clinton during a previous recession.

Democrats can generally be counted upon to support Obama and Democratic candidates this year, to the extent that Democratic voters will turn out. Similarly, Republican voters can be expected to toe the line for GOP candidates this year, assuming they are not siphoned off by Tea Party candidates. But just as they were in Massachusetts, independents are nationally the largest bloc of voters. Independents showed in Massachusetts that they had little patience left for Democrats, despite their long history of supporting them. There is little reason to believe that independents nationally, who are even more fickle than their counterparts in Massachusetts, will feel any differently. This is a very turbulent time, and Democrats have to worry that the same wave of independent voters that swept the GOP out of Congress in 2006 by an 18-point margin will do the same to Democrats, at least in the House, on November 2. Unless some significant event changes the trajectory of this midterm election, Democrats will suffer House losses of the magnitude they suffered in 1994 and Republicans experienced in 2006 and will wind up with a very narrow majority in the senate.