



THE US MIDTERM ELECTIONS

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The Political Landscape

On November 2nd, American voters will elect a new Congress and pass judgement on Obama's Presidency half-way through his term of office. American Governments, just like British Governments, almost always do badly in midterm elections and, in both cases, it doesn't mean that they will lose when they come up for re-election, but these midterms feel rather different.

They take place as the American economy seems stuck in the doldrums and the public deficit remains huge with no clear way of reducing it, and the voters feel that both the Democrats and the Republicans bear responsibility. The other new factor is that this anti-Washington, anti-establishment mood has led to the sudden eruption of the grassroots Tea Party Movement which could end up maybe energising but equally maybe disrupting the Republican Party in the months ahead.

Voters will choose all 435 members of the House of Representatives, where the Democrats have 255 seats to the Republicans 178 in the old Congress, and just over a third of the Senate where the Democrats also have a majority of the 100 seats and the Republicans would need to win 10 to gain control. The political pundits expect the Republicans to take the House with 40-60 gains but just fail to win the Senate.

The polls are more opaque. The Republicans have a consistent lead nationally and are trying to make national issues prominent, but the United States is a big country and local and personality factors are important, and Democrats are emphasising these and distancing themselves from the White House if they need to. Polls in those House races that the Republicans need to win show them ahead, but not in all and often not by much. In Senate races, the Republicans will easily win in three traditionally Republican states that at present have Democrat Senators, and are clearly ahead in Pennsylvania. Another five states are very close and the polls have narrowed in the last week, both where the Democrats have been ahead and also where the Republicans have been. The Republicans would then have to go on to win one of the marginal but traditionally liberal states of California, Washington and Connecticut to get control of the Senate and this doesn't look likely at present.

As always in elections, it depends on which side turns out on the day – the Republicans may develop momentum and younger, poorer, Latino and Afro-American voters that favour the Democrats tend to turn out less in midterm than presidential elections – though the Americans have a saying that when times are bad the Democrats look after you better.

Yes, It Really Is the Economy, Stupid

The state of the American economy dominates the campaign. Unemployment is 9%, while a further 9m Americans are forced to work part-time either because their hours have been cut or because they can't find a full-time job, and the housing market is flat. The Obama administration took over just after the crisis developed and an Economic Stimulus Act in 2009, which attracted little Republican support, pumped \$787 bn. into the economy. Any sudden expansion of public spending is bound to lead to the money being scattered around, with some projects not seeming like top priorities and Republicans have been able to present this as wasteful expenditure, biased towards projects with unionised labour and, given the overall environmental emphasis, about 'subsidising windmills in New York'.

The Economic Stimulus Act, together with subsidies to keep the finance and car industries going, has pushed the public sector deficit up to a record \$1.56 trillion, nine times what it was in 2002, and it still doesn't look to the voters like things are getting better.

The problem for the Republicans though is that voters blame the Bush administration for allowing the crisis to occur and see them as responsible for racking up the deficit as well by spending too much, even before the crisis hit. Democrats have constantly pushed the message 'don't give the car to the lot who drove it off the road in the first place'. This may not work though. As one voter in Ohio said about the Democrat

argument, 'It's a good excuse but it is still an excuse'. It's a warning to the Coalition Government in Britain that if the economy hasn't improved in two or three years time the voters won't be interested in them blaming Labour.

Tax Cuts and Tea Parties

The deficit worries Republicans and Democrats but so does the state of the economy. One of the reasons that the Republicans increased the deficit is that Bush introduced a package of income tax cuts without also cutting spending. These are due to expire next year unless Congress extends them. As part of a plan to reduce the deficit, Obama proposed to save \$700 bn. by not renewing the tax cuts for better off households earning over \$250,000 a year. Republicans say that these are the people who create wealth, that it would also be a tax hike on small businesses, and that no one should face extra costs at the present time. Democrats facing re-election in better off districts are nervous about the electoral impact and so the Democratic leadership has not been able to get together a majority to pass anything before the election. Both sides blame each other for delaying the tax cuts and so how the voters will judge this and the recent proposal by Democrats to punish financially firms taking jobs out of the country (which they knew the Senate wouldn't actually pass), remains to be seen.

The normal Republican/Democrat battle has been complicated by the rise of the

Tea Party Movement, named after the Boston Tea Party of 1773 when Americans rebelled against the tax on tea and threw off British rule. Populist anti-Washington, anti-government intervention feeling is always present in the United States and erupted in early 2009 with town hall meetings protesting about government spending, bailing out the banks, taxes and anything else protesters could think of. The Movement could have developed into a third party but, instead, has looked to influence the selection of Republican candidates and has united with social conservatives such as Sarah Palin and the Christian Right.

So the Tea Party is more than just an Esther Rantzen type anti-party politics protest, but draws on key ideological features of American life and is identified with by some 20% of American voters. Clinton appeared on television to spin the movement into one that was also anti-big business, but the focus remains mainly hostile to Obama and the Democrats. Tea Party supported candidates have defeated moderate Republicans in the primaries for both Senate and House races and a small group will undoubtedly enter Congress. Sarah Palin supported some Tea Party candidates and also women right-wing candidates whom she has dubbed her tough 'Mama Grizzlies', such as Kelly Ayotte for the Senate New Hampshire seat. The Fox News Channel has moved behind the Tea Party and portrayed them as defending American values and the Constitution against Obama's 'extremism'.

The Republican establishment is not so sure. Candidates' views about bringing back prohibition, social security as unconstitutional, no sex outside marriage and cycling as a plot to create world government (yes, really) may frighten independent voters to support the Democrats, for example in Nevada where Democrat Senate Leader Harry Reid is tied in the polls with the Tea Party Republican Sharron Angle.

The other problem is that the new candidates have been shot to the top with limited campaign experience and maybe some baggage that would have led to them being filtered out by the primary system in a normal year. Bush's former campaign strategist, Karl Rove, pronounced during the primary contest for Delaware that Tea Party candidate Christine O'Donnell was unelectable, but she won anyway. But then revelations that she had been involved in witchcraft while at High School surfaced and made the religious minded voters in the southern half of the state blink. She managed to defuse the issue by saying that if she was really involved in witchcraft she would have been able to get Karl Rove to support her, but these sorts of stories can easily be used by opponents in the blanket TV advertising that is a major part of American elections.

The Republican establishment wants to draw on the enthusiasm and electoral support of the Tea Party but is wondering how far they can work with them when they get to Congress and what splits may emerge in the party. Already, the Republican moderate senator for Alaska,

Lisa Murkowski, has decided to run as an independent against the Tea Party winner.

The Obama Problem

There are mixed opinions among American election strategists as to whether Presidents should get involved in Congressional election races, but Obama has decided to. His approval ratings are in the 40s, much higher than Bush's were at the end, but there is a question mark over whether he will be a vote winner in these elections. His main legislative achievement, apart from the economic rescue package, has been getting health reform through but, while most voters think something needs doing on health insurance, the compromise that emerged from Congress pleased no one. Liberals, already happy with Obama's decision to intensify the war in Afghanistan with the surge, felt the health care reform wasn't radical enough, and Obama's decision to go on the election trail is to energise this Democrat base as much as anything. Republicans complain that health reform is expensive and involved too much government intervention have made its repeal a campaign issue, though some aspects such as stopping insurance companies from refusing to take on people with pre-existing medical conditions are to popular to be reversed. Republicans, finding themselves facing an activist Democrat President, have opposed all his plans in Congress thus making it difficult to get legislation through and the less scrupulous elements on the right have portrayed him as a socialist and started stories about him

being born abroad and even that he is really a Muslim – conservative websites have pictures of him with middle eastern headgear dubbed on.

Obama appears regularly on television to announce one initiative or another – possibly too often and President Reagan's former adviser commented that Reagan was very strategic about when he went public and people may get fed up with Obama if he does it too much – but the problem is that he looks and talks like a liberal American professor.

European audiences didn't appreciate how good Bush was at appealing as an average guy to the average American. Obama has tried to be more 'folksy' in the campaign and mentioned his religion, which he had previously wanted to keep as a personal matter, but he still hasn't recaptured the success of the Presidential election campaign.

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