SYMPOSIUM

The 2010 Congressional Midterm Elections

Editor's Introduction

Costas Panagopoulos, *Fordham University*

Congressional midterm elections were held in the United States in November 2010. Midterm cycles have historically been unkind to the party of the incumbent president, which has on average lost 24 seats in the U.S. House and 4 seats in the U.S. Senate in midterms during the postwar era. In the 2010 general elections, Democrats, who had enjoyed unified control of the federal government since January 2009, suffered devastating defeats in congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative races nationwide. Democrats lost a total of 63 seats in the U.S House of Representatives—a loss greater than in any other midterm in the postwar period—relinquishing control to the GOP for the first time since 2007 and ushering in a new era of divided government in Washington. Republicans also made gains in the U.S. Senate, although Democrats ultimately retained control of the chamber by a narrow margin of 51 to 47 (two independents also caucus with the Democrats).

The results of the 2010 elections came as a surprise to some, given the virtual collapse of the Republican Party in the 2006 and 2008 elections and the enthusiasm that was stirred up by the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Obama began his term as president with high expectations, as well as high approval and popularity ratings, but Americans' attitudes toward the president and his party began to erode precipitously as the economy remained tenuous and Democrats failed to deliver the wholesale change Obama had promised during his campaign (Cohen and Panagopoulos forthcoming). The inherent tension between Obama's dual planks of "change," suggesting a departure from Bush-era policies and an ideological shift toward the left, and a "post-partisan presidency," implying a more centrist approach, required the president to pursue a difficult balancing act on the legislative front that ultimately dissatisfied both his core liberal constituency and moderate, independent-leaning voters (Cohen and Panagopoulos forthcoming).

Signs of trouble for Democrats appeared even prior to the midterm cycle; losses in key gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey in November 2009, and in the contest to fill Ted Kennedy's vacant U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts in January 2010—all states that Obama had carried in November 2008—provided tangible evidence that voters had soured on Democrats and the president. The prospects for victory in the 2010 general elections propelled Republican enthusiasm and deflated Democrats' hopes, resulting in a palpable enthusiasm gap between Democratic and Republican sympathizers. Against this backdrop, Republicans recruited formidable and well-financed challengers in districts and states across the country. Voters' intentions to support Democratic candidates for the U.S. House in 2010 continued to decline throughout the preceding year, in tandem with waning presidential approval and economic performance ratings (Panagopoulos 2010).

Prognostications of significant Democratic losses were confirmed in November 2010. Exit polls revealed considerable voter frustration with the president and congressional leadership, as well as concerns about the economy and health care in particular. Relative to 2006, exit polls also showed sizable drops in support for Democratic contenders in U.S. House races in demographic groups across the board, but declines were especially acute in key subgroups of voters that are essential to the Democratic coalition, including women, Latinos, and independent voters (CNN 2010).

Overall, the 2010 election cycle was historic by several measures and typical by others. This symposium includes six articles that provide early scholarly assessments of the 2010 congressional election cycle and its implications for politics in the aftermath. In the first article, Alan Abramowitz discusses how the results of the 2010 elections are likely to affect the ideological composition of the 112th Congress, concluding that it is likely to be the most ideologically divided Congress of the past 60 years. Next, David Jones and Monika McDermott analyze public approval of Congress and its electoral effects, demonstrating that since the 2008 elections, Congress has been more salient to the American public than usual, making it easier than ever for voters to hold the party in charge accountable. The authors argue that congressional evaluations played a stronger than usual role in the 2010 elections.

One of the more significant developments of the 2010 cycle was the emergence of the Tea Party movement, on whose impact Christopher Karpowitz, Quin Monson, Kelly Patterson, and Jeremy Pope reflect. Ultimately, the authors conclude that the overall impact of the Tea Party was most

doi:10.1017/S1049096511000102

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pronounced in primaries in 2010 but modest in the general elections. The authors also suggest the need for time to sort out the relationship between the movement and the Republican Party.

Examination of other aspects of the 2010 elections facilitates speculation about the likely consequences for the political and electoral process. Michael McDonald discusses the outcomes of the midterm elections and their implications for the 2010 redistricting process that will ensue in the months ahead. Next, I examine voter turnout in the 2010 general elections and show that statewide levels of voter participation were generally influenced by the structure of electoral competition. Finally, Jeffrey Stonecash focuses on split-outcome U.S. House districts and the dilemma that these districts pose for their representatives in Congress.

The 2010 midterm election cycle will likely be remembered as a watershed event, at least regarding the midterms. This symposium is assembled to reflect on the 2010 elections and their implications and to situate the cycle in historical context and within the framework of extant research on electoral politics. The selections aim to demystify aspects of the elections and provide initial insights, analysis, and empirical evidence about the realities and implications of the outcomes of the historic cycle. ■

REFERENCES

CNN. 2010. "Election Center: The Results." CNN.com. http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/.

Cohen, Jeffrey, and Costas Panagopoulos. Forthcoming. "Presidential Leadership and Public Opinion in an Age of Polarization." In *The Obama Presidency: Change and Continuity*, ed. Andrew Dowdle, Dirk C. van Raemdonck, and Robert Maranto. New York: Routledge.

Panagopoulos, Costas. 2010. "The Dynamics of Voter Preferences in the 2010 Congressional Midterm Elections." *Forum* 8 (4): Article 9.

SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS

Alan I. Abramowitz *is the Alben W. Barkley Professor of Political Science at Emory University. He has authored or co-authored six books and numerous articles and book chapters on American elections, voting behavior, and public opinion and is a senior columnist for* Sabato's Crystal Ball. *His most recent book is* The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization and American Democracy *(Yale University Press, 2010). He can be reached at polsaa@emory.edu.*

David R. Jones *is a professor of political science at the City University of New York, Baruch College. His research on congressional behavior and elections has been published in several scholarly journals. He is the author of* Political Parties and Policy Gridlock in American Government *(2001) and coauthor of* Americans, Congress, and Democratic Responsiveness: Public Evaluations of Congress and Electoral Consequences *(2009). He can be reached at david.jones@baruch.cuny.edu.*

Christopher F. Karpowitz *is an assistant professor of political science and a Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. His research and teaching interests include political psychology, political communication, and political participation, with a special focus on deliberative theory and practice. He can be reached at chris_karpowitz@byu.edu.*

Monika L. McDermott *is an associate professor of political science at Fordham University. She has published numerous scholarly articles on voting behavior, political psychology, and public opinion and is the coauthor of* Americans, Congress, and Democratic Responsiveness: Public Evaluations of Congress and Electoral Consequences *(2009). She regularly serves as an election and polling consultant for CBS News. She can be reached at mmcdermott@fordham.edu.*

Michael P. McDonald *is an associate professor at George Mason University and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He has authored several articles on redistricting and has been a redistricting consultant in seven states since the late 1980s. He can be reached at mmcdon@gmu.edu.*

J. Quin Monson *is an assistant professor of political science and associate director of the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. His research and teaching interests include public opinion; campaigns, elections, and voting behavior; survey research methods; and religion and politics. He can be reached at quin.monson@byu.edu.*

Costas Panagopoulos *is an assistant professor of political science and director of the Center for Electoral Politics and Democracy at Fordham University. He is also executive editor of* Campaigns & Elections. *He can be reached at cpanagopoulos@fordham.edu.*

Kelly D. Patterson *is a professor in the department of political science at Brigham Young University. He directs the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy and conducts research on campaigns and elections. He can be reached at kelly_patterson@byu.edu.*

Jeremy C. Pope *is an assistant professor of political science and a Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. His research interests include representation, polarization, and the constitutional convention. He can be reached at jpope@byu.edu.*

Jeffrey M. Stonecash *is Maxwell Professor of Political Science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. He is currently working on a book about the effects of realignment on the relationship between presidential and House election results since 1900. He can be reached at jstoneca@maxwell.syr.edu.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press