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U.S. Mid-term Elections: An Ebb of the Obama Revolution

The upcoming mid-term elections in the United States scheduled for November 2 are worth following closely. Although congressional races usually have less to offer in terms of intensity and flavour when compared to presidential campaigns—and the epic contest of 2008 set the bar exceptionally high in this respect—the 2010 election season is expected to have a considerable impact on U.S. domestic politics and, arguably, also on U.S. foreign policy. Apart from deciding on the allotment of all 435 seats in the House of Representatives and 36 in the Senate, this year Americans are electing a record high number of governors—37 posts out of 50 nationwide will be on the ballot and are likely to influence the dynamics of the vital relationship between the federal government and the states. But perhaps most importantly, the U.S. electorate will have a say on the merits and shortcomings of the nearly two years of Barack Obama's presidency and on the performance of the Democrat-controlled Congress.

The Democratic Party has been in control of both the House and the Senate the 2006 mid-terms, and solidified its position in 2008, **carried by a wave of enthusiasm that accompanied Obama's successful campaign and electoral triumph**. A solid congressional majority secured a **smooth passage of the so-called stimulus bill**, which mandated an unprecedented surge in federal spending and was hailed by the Obama administration as the principal tool for pulling the U.S. economy out of the recession, as well as the enactment of **federal health care legislation**—a goal unattainable for virtually all U.S. presidents who had set their minds to it and at the same time highly divisive among the American public. Both bills were passed **without a single Republican supporting them**. Nor was that necessary, as the balance of power in the U.S. Congress dictated: Democrats hold 255 seats in the House and enjoy a fairly comfortable 59-to-41 margin over the Republican Party in the Senate, including two independent senators by default caucusing with the party in power.

By most accounts, **Democrats will be unable to hold on to their dominance**. A House takeover by the Republicans (or the Grand Old Party, the GOP)—a scenario that would require gains of at least 40 new seats—is considered the most likely outcome of the mid-terms by the political punditry of virtually all colours. The GOP is also a serious challenge to the Democratic majority in the Senate, but will in all probability stop short of adding the nine seats needed to place the federal legislative branch squarely in Republican hands, as this would require the GOP's victory in practically all Senate races that can reasonably be described as competitive. Still, if we agree that the GOP is

well placed to win most of the elections for state governorships this year, with only seven governorships being currently held by Democrats or considered sure shots for Democratic candidates, as opposed to 16 on the Republican side, **the prospects for the Democratic Party and for President Obama seem quite dismal.**

Politics behind 2010 Mid-term Elections

To some degree, this would not come as a surprise. **Mid-term elections usually bring upsets for the president's party**—a regularity often assigned to the propensity of the U.S. party system to aid the enforcement of the constitutional concept of checks and balances. A different explanation holds that voters tend to display a “buyer's remorse” syndrome, signalling the level of their satisfaction—or dissatisfaction—with the choice made two years earlier. Additionally, as prior voting patterns suggest, supporters of the minority party tend to be more energised than the—supposedly complacent and apathetic—backers of the party in power, and hence more likely to register and vote. In fact, over that last twelve months there has been ample evidence that both sentiments could indeed hurt the Democrats. As early as last November, the GOP installed its governors in New Jersey and Virginia, two swing states that had backed the Obama-Biden ticket in 2008 and with governors from the Democratic Party since 2002—a result signalling the **fragility of the Democratic position in more general terms.** An even more forceful message accompanied GOP's success in the special election in Massachusetts last January, when Scott Brown became the first Republican senator from this arch-Democratic state in nearly 40 years. His task was made somewhat easier by a rather inept Democratic campaign, yet the fact that Brown had run as an unrelenting opponent of the health care legislation, promising to derail President Obama's pet project, lent his victory a decisively counter-Democratic narrative. Finally, as the Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives grew by roughly 25% following the 2006 and 2008 elections, it incorporated more conservative and moderate members. Their situation became precarious almost immediately after the administration and the progressive Democratic leadership had begun pushing for health care reform and a new climate bill.

Setbacks for the president's party are, therefore, a kind of a “known unknown” in the outcome of these mid-term elections, with little evidence to the contrary. A popular president could offset these factors, as was the case with George W. Bush during the 2002 election season, but someone with an unenviable approval rating, hovering below 50%, is likely to make things worse. Similarly, higher marks for congressional performance—a recent Gallup analysis suggests that approval rating of 40% should be interpreted as the dividing line in this context—usually signal a more favourable outcome for the president's party.

A glance at the available polling data helps to put this in the 2010 context. First, President Obama's has stabilized around 45%. A drop in popularity was inevitable, but **few U.S. presidents in the post-World War II history enjoyed such modest approval ratings** at the time of the first mid-term elections during their term. As for Congress, its approval rating reached new lows in September, standing at a mere 18%.¹

Second, the largest group of U.S. voters, the independents, after tilting the 2008 election in favour of Obama and the Democratic Party, are now **leaning towards Republican candidates.** To be

¹ F. Newport, *Midterm Election Landscape Still Points to Republican Gains*, Gallup, 27 September 2010; J. Jones, *Obama Approval Averages 45% in September*, Gallup, 4 October 2010, www.gallup.com.

sure, independents remain suspicious of both major parties. Yet they are willing to trust the GOP rather than the Democrats on issues that are shaping the political agenda this autumn—reducing unemployment, narrowing the federal deficit and reining in the federal government, of which they have become more distrustful. Quite tellingly, public opinion polls indicate that dissatisfaction with President Obama’s policies is the chief factor mobilizing independents to take part in the 2010 election in the first place.²

Third, as late as two weeks before election day, there was a considerable, **double-digit enthusiasm—or engagement—gap between registered Republican and Democratic voters**, with the latter less likely to turn up at the polling stations.³ Moreover, some progressive Democrats may not only be lacking enthusiasm, but also losing faith in Obama’s transformative prowess. Already the health care bill was received with mixed feelings, since it ultimately lacked some key progressive ideas. **Health care reform is emblematic of Obama’s missteps in dealing with his own party**—some of its members were not sure whether to engage in it, others were not excited by its final content, but most agreed that the administration focused on this issue at the expense of more pressing challenges, with the economic downturn topping the list. Obama’s most hotly debated foreign policy decision so far—to expand direct American military engagement in Afghanistan—no doubt cost him some support within his own party as well. The president has, therefore, been going to great lengths to energize core Democratic constituencies of less affluent voters, Hispanics or young adults, applying a mix of encouragement (“let’s bring back the magic of 2008”) and open criticism, as when he called the apparent lack of enthusiasm among Democrats “irresponsible,” at the same time warning against empowering the GOP and its policies that had led to the recession in the first place.

However skilled an orator and communicator Obama may be, it is doubtful whether he will be able to overcome the **pessimism of the American public regarding the U.S. economy** which trumped all other potential election issues, such as national security or U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, both topics would have seemed more natural for the GOP to explore, e.g. by underlining that progress in Iraq has been made possible by policies put in motion during the Bush presidency, had it not been for a particularly disadvantageous economic situation. This even allowed the Republicans to run a campaign that—while exceptionally well-funded thanks to relaxed campaign financing regulations—lacked the quality characteristic of the campaign that preceded the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994. The unemployment rate in the second half of 2010 remains steady at around 9.5–9.7%, so modest additions to the workforce from the supposed flywheel of the recovery, i.e. the private sector, could not offset layoffs in other segments of the labour market. The U.S. housing market—traditionally a good indicator of the overall condition of the U.S. economy—remained anaemic and embattled, with a lower-than-anticipated rate of existing-house sales and the number of foreclosures in September reportedly reaching record high. Echoing this were external predictions, warning about the **durability of the high unemployment rate, muted domestic demand and higher cost of capital among lingering economic uncertainty**.⁴ It came as no surprise, then, that

² *Independents Oppose Party in Power...Again*, Pew Research Center, 23 September 2010, www.pewresearch.org.

³ F. Newport, J. Jones, L. Saad, *GOP Well Positioned Among Likely Midterm Voters*, Gallup, 4 October 2010, www.gallup.com.

⁴ *OECD Economic Surveys: United States, September 2010*, www.oecd.org.

eight in ten Americans believed the economy to be in recession, and nearly two-thirds predicted that economic conditions were likely to deteriorate.⁵

More than anything, these figures testified to public **doubts about the appropriateness of the administration's economic policies**. In some cases—the volume of the federal budget deficit being perhaps the best example—this scepticism was unjustified. The enormous deficits of 1.42 trillion dollars in 2009 and 1.55 trillion dollars in 2010, as estimated by the Office of Management and Budget, were only partly accumulated due to the expansive fiscal policies of the Obama administration. In no small part these deficits are driven by the cost of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, initiated and executed rather poorly by the Bush administration, as well as by the tax cuts introduced in 2001 and set to expire automatically by the end of 2010. Still, after what was probably the most tense debate on the U.S. economy during this election season, Obama opted for extending most of the tax cuts, fearing that higher taxes would work against the recovery, but the Democrats in Congress were unable to rally enough votes to follow through on this, partly because some of the more conservative Democratic senators sided with the GOP in a drive to keep all tax cuts intact. This uncertainty about the best way forward was mirrored by the diversity of commentaries that accompanied the tax debate.⁶

All things considered, while the frail economic situation and growing uneasiness with the Democratic Party's policies herald a political change of tack in Washington, even the Republicans will be confronted with **the unpredictability of the anti-establishment mood** reigning among the U.S. public this year.⁷ **The ascendancy of the Tea Party movement** is of course symptomatic here, although it cannot be reduced to this trend. As a protest movement closely associated with the economic downturn and using a decisively conservative narrative, the Tea Party seems to play right into GOP's hands, provided that Republicans find a way to harness this power. On the other hand, absence of organized structures and outright aversion to established institutions, a quickly diagnosed deficit of viable policy solutions, and an air of uncoordinated anti-Obama craze that surrounded the first Tea Party rallies encouraged many commentators to dismiss the movement's significance in the long term. Neither of these early calculations turned out to be accurate. **Plans to simply "co-opt" the Tea Party failed**. Instead, the GOP's mid-term manifesto, the "Pledge to America," included proposals (curbing government spending and promoting small government, "rolling back" health care reform) and language revealing the extent to which the Tea Party had pushed the GOP towards greater partisanship. Worse still for the GOP, Republican primaries before the 2010 elections had resulted in a number of surprise nominations for Tea Party-backed candidates, whose actual electability in November was immediately put into question even in conservative circles. They argued that Tea Partiers could seem too polarizing, especially to voters in prospective battleground states, and could become the main reason why the GOP might not gain as many seats as it could have if it had somewhat less radical candidates to offer, or could entangle the Republican Party in an internal strife over who represented "true American values." Above all, however, the Tea Party has proved itself to be **a political force that has to be reckoned with** by both major parties, not least because of its attractiveness to virtually all voting blocs after consistently advocating greater fiscal responsibility.

⁵ D. Jacobo, *U.S. Economic Confidence More Negative Than a Year Ago*, Gallup, 14 September 2010; L. Morales, *Americans More Pessimistic About Emerging From Recession*, Gallup, 15 September 2010, www.gallup.com.

⁶ F. Zakaria, "Raise My Taxes, Mr. President!" *Newsweek*, 1 August 2010; M. Zandi, "The Tax Cut We Can Afford," *The New York Times*, 14 August 2010.

⁷ L. Saad, *Voters Issue Strong Rebuke of Incumbents in Congress*, Gallup, 7 April 2010, www.gallup.com.

The movement's most energetic fractions will continue to reside outside the Beltway, but it will be interesting to see how the new Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives advances this agenda.

Beyond 2010 and Ahead of 2012

From the vantage point of future U.S. domestic politics, **the mid-term election sets the stage for the 2012 presidential campaign.** Perhaps crucially, mid-term setbacks do not imply that the incumbent president cannot win re-election. Even after their parties had suffered major losses in Congress, both Ronald Reagan in 1984 and especially Bill Clinton in 1996 went on to claim their second term in office. In Obama's case, a lot will depend on the fate of his administration's hitherto legislative achievements, which the GOP has repeatedly pledged to dismantle. If the Republicans were indeed to win the majority in the House, they could seriously think of slowing down the appropriation process for major federal programs, effectively phasing them out. It is doubtful whether the GOP would deliberately risk being portrayed as the "party of no," but Republican freedom of manoeuvre in potential cooperation with the administration might be constrained by more radical forces on the right. It is in this context that **the significance of gubernatorial races' outcome** cannot be overstated. Many state authorities have already decided to submit to voters' consent motions designed to block some aspects of health care legislation. A bottom-up campaign against this federal programme, in particular if led by state executives, would drain the administration's energy in a series of legal and political battles. Health care might be just one such contentious issue, followed by **immigration.** Candidates in most gubernatorial races—interestingly, both Democrats and Republicans—have made promises to push for severe anti-immigration state laws, undeterred by the federal administration's success in challenging as unconstitutional the immigration legislation adopted in the state of Arizona last spring.

President Obama's domestic agenda could, therefore, run the risk of being pushed back or at least put on hold. Even if the Democratic Party was to retain a majority in both the House and the Senate—which is highly unlikely, but not outright impossible—it is uncertain whether it would muster enough strength to pursue a cap-and-trade legislation, for instance, similar to the bill that passed in the House in 2009, especially during a volatile economic situation. This would force the administration to rely more heavily on the existing instruments of executive power. In either case—with or without a majority—as 2012 approaches Obama might want to focus on implementing the reforms passed to date (including the reform of financial institutions) rather than advance bold new initiatives. His recent decision to reshuffle the White House staff—letting go of Rahm Emanuel, a full-blooded politician closely associated with health care reform, and appointing a far less polarising Peter Rouse as the chief of staff—could indicate just that. In broader terms, such an approach could prove to be both practically and politically savvy, all the more so if the House were to switch hands and the Democrats were to remain in control of the Senate. A gridlocked Congress would be a rather difficult—and far more unreliable—partner for the administration, which could in turn try to distance itself from the legislative branch and portray it as incapable of shouldering responsibility for the country's problems. It would remind the American public that **Obama is still the central figure in U.S. politics,** commanding the widest range of possibilities to shape the direction in which America is headed. Assuming that he will seek re-election, its prospects will be closely tied to the U.S. economic situation. Equally important, however, is **who will be running against Obama in 2012.** Persisting low

approval ratings might provoke renewed speculation about a different Democratic candidate. Predictions about a Republican nominee—most probably someone from the current list of Republican frontrunners such as Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee or Newt Gingrich—would definitely be premature today.⁸

Foreign Policy: Contingent Activism

Finally, conventional wisdom suggests that as he becomes increasingly consumed by domestic challenges, **Obama's attention will inevitably turn inwards at the expense of foreign policy.** A different interpretation highlights the systemic differences between the president's ability to conduct foreign policy and to advance the domestic agenda. To be sure, the president depends on a cooperative Congress in his dealings abroad. Appropriating funds for foreign operations, including military spending and foreign aid, consenting to treaties, appointing high-ranking officials—all this has to go through the legislative branch. Indeed, if the Senate does not consent to the so-called New START agreement, the administration's only tangible deliverable of the "reset" with Russia will be forfeit. This goal will be even harder to attain once the Republicans—some of them very sceptical of the deal—strengthen their ranks in the Senate following the midterms. The administration will, therefore, be desperate to have a vote on the treaty before the new Senate convenes in early 2011. Budgetary prerogatives are likely to come to the fore if the GOP-controlled House were to decide that the logic of "responsible spending" should apply to America's international activism as well, with a notable exception of the Afghan operation, which the Republicans may in fact be more supportive of than the Democratic Party. These possibilities notwithstanding, the president's authority is arguably greater in foreign than in domestic policy. At home, barring a major terrorist attack or an immediate external threat, the president can expect to be challenged for influence by Congress, the judicial branch or the states. This should invite foreign policy activism, at least in theory.

Obama's record so far, however, shows clearly that **the agenda of the president of the United States is run by what happens at home.** Indeed, in 2010 Obama postponed his trip to Australia and Indonesia—twice. The first time, he decided to oversee the passage of the health care bill. By the time his second trip was due to take place, federal and state authorities were busy with the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The oil spill in particular has shown that Obama will be unwilling to dodge internal problems—such as harsh criticism for the administration's allegedly insufficient effort to respond to the emergency—by choosing to engage in foreign policy. And even as Obama's playing field in domestic politics is about to shrink, this is hardly surprising. **Of all the items on the foreign policy agenda that Obama has set in motion over the last two years, only a few will matter in his bid for re-election.** The war in Afghanistan is the most obvious one, especially if the situation on the ground does not improve sufficiently to allow for the drawdown of U.S. troops there. Conversely, a fiasco of the recent U.S. engagement in the Middle East peace process would not cost Obama his presidency, while it is debatable whether success in Arab-Israeli talks would help his chances to win the second term. After all, Jimmy Carter successfully brokered the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1979, but it seemed to matter little during the 1980 presidential campaign. Carter received 71% of the Jewish vote in 1976, but only 45% four years later.

⁸ J. Jones, *Romney Edges Palin, Huckabee in Early 2012 GOP Test*, Gallup, 16 July 2009; *Romney, Palin at Front of GOP Presidential Field*, Gallup, 30 September 2010, www.gallup.com.

While it would be hard to argue that progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue can hurt Obama by default, he will be careful not to press for a solution that could estrange Jewish Americans.

In addition, as one observer notes, Obama's foreign policy has deliberately been tied to a number of very demanding deadlines, with most of them due in the second half of 2011.⁹ It is then that the administration expects progress on key issues: transition of responsibility from international forces to the Afghan army and the beginning of a gradual drawdown of U.S. troops (July), Middle East peace talks (September) and withdrawal from Iraq (December). Uncertainty surrounding each of them is commonly known. Success in Afghanistan depends on the number of troops on the ground as much as on a workable relationship with the Afghan authorities and, crucially, on cooperation with Pakistan. Arab-Israeli negotiations are probably only as durable as the Obama administration's ability to avoid crises over Jewish settlements which can reappear simply because of the make-up of Israel's current ruling coalition. In Iraq, the administration has stuck to the schedule for troop drawdown, but the situation will remain volatile as long as there is no Iraqi government in place. Obama's goal of a "responsible withdrawal" from Iraq by the end of 2011 hangs in the balance.

In each of these instances—Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, Iraq—internal dynamics in the United States will play a vital role as well, adding to the magnitude of the challenge. America's partners and rivals alike will be paying close attention to the direction in which U.S. politics evolves. More specifically, the more likely Obama will seem to win his second term, the less recalcitrance he can expect from those on whom his foreign policy has come to depend, and vice-versa.

Hence the U.S. president's perceived political standing at home is a necessary component of the effectiveness of his leadership abroad. The result of the 2010 mid-term elections is unlikely to help Obama in this context, but it would be wrong to expect a precipitous change in U.S. foreign policy against its backdrop. The impact will be much more subtle, as reflected both in President Obama's suppressed appetite for engaging in foreign ventures and in the fact that his administration is keen on reaping the harvest of the first two years of international activism rather than on opening new ambitious chapters in the area of foreign policy.

⁹ J. Diehl, "Obama administration relies on diplomacy by timetable," *The Washington Post*, 11 October 2010.