



Election Results Fueled by Jobs Crisis and Voter Apathy Among Progressives

Bringing Core Constituencies Back Into the Fold Is Key

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Introduction

Experts and pundits will float many interpretations of the 2010 midterms over the next few weeks, each of which progressives should consider carefully. But the most parsimonious explanation of how 2010 unfolded in terms of lessons for progressives going forward lies in a few fundamental factors: the poor state of the economy; the abnormally conservative composition of the midterm electorate; and the large number of vulnerable seats in conservative-leaning areas. These trends cost the Democrats their House majority but were not strong enough to sweep them out in the Senate.

Independent voters, white working-class voters, seniors, and men broke heavily against the Democrats due to the economy. Turnout levels were also unusually low among young and minority voters and unusually high among seniors, whites, and conservatives, thus contributing to a massively skewed midterm electorate. The Democrats therefore faced a predictable, and arguably unavoidable, convergence of forces. Incumbent Democrats suffered a genuine backlash of voter discontent due to a weak economy with considerable concerns about job creation, deep skepticism among independents, poor turnout among key base groups, and strong enthusiasm among energized conservatives.

The 62-64-seat loss in the House and reduction of the Senate majority is a serious rebuke to the Democrats and the political status quo but this was not an endorsement of a conservative agenda. Data on voter opinions expressed in pre- and post-election polling confirms that the 2010 election was neither a mandate for antigovernment and Tea Party ideology, nor an endorsement of GOP policies on

taxes and regulations. And the election did not turn on a repudiation of President Barack Obama's health care plan despite staunch GOP opposition.

Given these results, progressives' agenda going forward could not be clearer: They must do whatever is necessary to improve the jobs situation and the overall economy, and they must reengage and reenergize their ranks if they are to succeed in protecting and promoting a progressive policy agenda.

The remainder of this memo will outline our interpretation of what happened in the 2010 election based on the returns and available exit poll data. It will explore various theories about why it happened and offer some preliminary thoughts on what progressives should focus on in light of these results in order to advance their issue agenda.

What happened in 2010?

Basic election results

It looks like Republicans gained 62-64 House seats in the 2010 election. This overperforms by 10 seats or so what would have been expected on the basis of the popular vote split (approximately 52 percent Republican to 45 percent Democratic). The Republican vote was efficiently distributed to produce Republican victories, especially in the Rust Belt states and in purple southern states such as Virginia and Florida.

The Republican gain of 60+ seats is the best post-World War II seat gain by either party in a midterm election, and only the third one of more than 50 seats since that time. The others occurred in 1946 (55-seat Republican gain) and 1994 (54-seat Republican gain).

Yet Republicans slightly underperformed relative to expectations in Senate races, where their pickup was six seats, not close to enough to take control of the Senate.

On governorships, the GOP met expectations. They picked up an estimated net of five governorships, though they did lose California—the most important governorship in the nation.

It was a very good night for the GOP all in all. Below we discuss what underlies this impressive performance, starting with who voted in this election—the composition of the electorate—followed by how different groups voted in the election, and concluding with what motivated voters to swing toward the GOP.

Who voted?

The voters who showed up in 2010 were far different from those who showed up in 2008 or even in the last congressional midterm election in 2006. They were much older, whiter, and more conservative.

Age. The 2010 electorate was noticeably light on young voters, who have recently been a very good group for Democrats. About 12 percent of 2010 voters were 18-29 years of age, sharply down from their 18 percent share in 2008 and also down from their 13 percent share in 2006.

On the other end of the age distribution, seniors' turnout was very strong. They were 21 percent of 2010 voters, up sharply from their 16 percent share in 2008 and their 19 percent share in 2006. In fact, going back to 1992 seniors have never been this high a percentage of the electorate.

Race. Voters in 2010 were 77 percent white and 23 percent minority. The minority figure is a decline of 3 percentage points from the 2008 level of 26 percent. This is a sharp drop by recent standards. The years since 1992 have typically seen either been a slight increase or approximate stability in the minority percentage between a presidential and a congressional election. Even when there was a drop in the minority percentage between 2004 and 2006, it was not as large as the drop between 2008 and 2010.

Ideology. Forty-two percent of voters in this election said they were conservatives. That's quite a bit higher than in recent elections. Only 34 percent of voters said they were conservatives in 2008, and just 32 percent in 2006. Even in 1994, only 37 percent of voters were conservatives.

The high conservative turnout came at the expense of moderates. This group was actually smaller than conservatives as a proportion of voters in 2010—38 percent compared to 42 percent. By comparison, moderates were 44 percent of voters in

2008 and they were 47 percent of voters in 2006. And in the 1988-2004 period, the percent of moderates never dropped below 45 percent.

In sum, this cycle saw a substantially older, whiter, and more conservative electorate than in 2008. This in and of itself explains a good deal of what happened in 2010. One more indicator of this is that 2010 voters said they split their vote evenly between Obama and McCain in 2008 (45-45). McCain voters were therefore strongly overrepresented in the 2010 electorate. Indeed, President Obama might not have been elected to begin with if only 2010 voters had voted in the 2008 election.

How did they vote?

The data on how these and other key groups voted in the 2010 election, combined with the turnout trends summarized above, tell the basic story of how the GOP did so well in this election.

Age. Young people aged 18-29 years old supported Democrats by a 13-point margin in the 2010 election (55 percent to 42 percent). This is a significant drop from their 63 percent to 34 percent support for congressional Democrats in 2008 and from their 60 percent to 38 percent support in 2006. Even more unusual was seniors' very strong support for Republicans in 2010 (59 percent to 38 percent). This compares to a 1-point margin for the Democrats in 2008 and a 1-point margin for the GOP in 2006. Indeed, there is nothing even close to this election's 21-point seniors' margin for congressional Republicans going back to 1988.

Race. Congressional Democrats carried Hispanics 60 percent to 38 percent in 2010—a strong performance, but still off from their 68 percent to 29 percent and 69 percent to 30 percent performances in 2008 and 2006. Black voters were even stronger for Democrats—89 percent to 9 percent—which is in line with their 93 percent to 5 percent and 89 percent to 10 percent preferences in 2008 and 2006.

White voters were a different story. They supported congressional Republicans by 60 percent to 37 percent. This 23-point margin compares to an 8-point margin for congressional Republicans in 2008 and a 4-point margin in 2006. The 23-point margin among whites is also higher than it was in two other very good Republican congressional years: 19 points in 2002 and 16 points in 1994. And the 60 percent

share of the white vote is higher than that attained in either one of these years—or in any other recent year.

It is worth noting that while this 60 percent share of the white vote sufficed for a thumping victory in 2010, it will probably not be adequate for any kind of a victory in 2012, given trend assumptions about minority turnout and Democratic support. The GOP will probably need at least 61 percent of the white vote to eke out the narrowest of victories in that electoral universe. So the bar just gets higher as time goes on.

White working class. The most significant shift against the Democrats occurred among the white working class. Congressional Democrats lost this group by 10 points in both 2006 and 2008. Yet this deficit ballooned to 30 points in 2010—a deficit even larger than Democrats experienced in 1994 (22 points). That created an awfully big hole for Democrats to crawl out of, especially given relatively depressed turnout among Democratic-leaning constituencies.

White college graduates. Democrats also suffered losses among white college graduates, which, unlike the white working class, are growing as a share of voters. Congressional Democrats split this group evenly in 2006 and they lost them by 6 points in 2008. But that deficit increased to 19 points in 2010.

Gender. Democrats lost women by a single point in 2010 and men by 14 points. That 14-point deficit among men represents a 20-point margin swing among men relative to 2008 when Democrats had a 6-point advantage and a 17-point swing relative to 2006. The margin swings among women were slightly less: 15 points relative to 2008 and 13 points relative to 2006.

Ideology. Not only were conservatives an unusually large part of the electorate in 2010 but they also voted unusually heavily for the GOP—84 percent to 13 percent. This margin is substantially higher than the GOP has attained in any election going back to 1988. Even in 1994, they carried conservatives by “only” 81 percent to 19 percent.

Moderates supported Democrats but by a 55 percent to 42 percent margin, significantly less than Democratic margins among this group in 2008 (61 percent to 37 percent) and 2006 (60 percent to 38 percent). Yet the 2010 margin among moderates is very similar to that attained by congressional Democrats in elections prior to 2006 going back into the 1990s.

Independents. There was a sharp swing among independents toward the Republicans in 2010. The GOP carried this group by 19 points, 56 percent to 37 percent. That compares to an 8-point Democratic win among independents in 2008 and an 18-point advantage in 2006. This is by far the GOP's best performance among this group since 1994, when they carried them by 14 points. Of course, it is possible that a substantial part of 2010's shift is due to a higher turnout of conservative independents relative to moderate and liberal independents, but we lack data at this point to evaluate this possibility.

What motivated the swing toward the GOP?

The clearest message from the exit polls about what motivated the swing toward the GOP is, unsurprisingly, the economy. More than three-fifths (63 percent) selected the economy as the most important issue facing the country today and Republicans received 54 percent to 43 percent support among that group.

About half of voters said they were “very worried” about economic conditions, and these Americans voted Republican by 68 percent to 30 percent. Similarly, 41 percent of voters said their family financial situation was worse than two years ago, and this group voted Republican by 61 percent to 35 percent. And 37 percent described the state of the national economy as “poor,” and these voters supported the GOP by 68 percent to 28 percent.

More voters (35 percent) blamed Wall Street for today's economic problems rather than President Bush (29 percent) or President Obama (24 percent). But these Wall-Street-blaming voters supported Republicans by 57 percent to 41 percent. The Obama administration's association with bailing out Wall Street bankers, who are heavily blamed for the bad economy, apparently had a negative effect on Democratic performance in this election.

It is also worth noting that the election did not appear to be repudiation of the new health care reform law. About as many said they wanted to see it remain as is or be expanded (47 percent) as said they wanted it repealed (48 percent).

Nor did it appear that voters were embracing the GOP position on tax cuts. A 51 percent majority of voters wanted to either keep only the Bush tax cuts for those with less than \$250,000 or let them all expire compared to 40 percent who wanted to keep all the tax cuts.

Why did it happen?

Political commentators are notoriously prone to overinterpreting election results and extrapolating singular causes for victories and losses from a multitude of possible factors. These interpretations usually underlie some desire to influence ideological debates and power struggles or to shape media stories about the election. And 2010 is no different.

Conservatives argue that conservative- and independent-minded voters rejected President Obama's policies on health care and the stimulus plan because they fear consolidation of power and excessive government spending. More extremist elements within the conservative movement argue that President Obama himself is alien to mainstream America and is leading the country toward "European-style" socialism. Centrist forces, primarily within the Democratic Party, argue that President Obama and the Democrats are too liberal, have failed to effectively compromise with Republicans on the economy, and have overreached with an essentially moderate, center-right electorate.

Many progressives conversely argue that President Obama and the Democrats have been too timid in their plans, particularly on economic recovery, health care, and financial regulation, and that they didn't do enough to tar the opposition with the bad economy. The economy faltered, the conservative right and the Tea Party enjoyed all the enthusiasm, and the progressive base was demoralized. A range of tactical arguments across the progressive spectrum tie into this main criticism, primarily saying that the president and Congress did a poor job on the communication and politics side of the bailouts and stimulus plans; that the 18-month focus on health care squandered precious time and political capital and ultimately left people confused; and that the White House and Democrats failed to effectively combat the massive misinformation and fear campaign launched by Fox News, Tea Party leaders, and conservative corporate interests.

Each of these explanations enjoys some grain of truth that we'll consider in turn, and some arguments contain more relevance than others. But all of them miss the mark in terms of the larger picture.

Years of political science research show fairly conclusively that structural issues explain most of the variance in election results. Context, candidates, and politics matter, of course. But progressives should examine the basics if they want to understand why 2010 happened as it did: the poor condition of the economy; a

conservative-leaning midterm electorate; and a Democratic Party with many marginal seats to lose. Strategic and policy decisions certainly made some difference in the magnitude of losses, but in a horrible economy it's difficult to escape the reality that Democrats were poised to lose a significant number of seats no matter what they did.

The economy

President Obama was elected in November 2008 with an unemployment rate of 6.9 percent, up from 4.4 percent in May 2007. GDP growth may be improving, but it has remained far below the level necessary to drive investment and begin solving the employment crisis. The unemployment rate had hit 8.6 percent by March 2009—a few months after the Obama administration took office. The White House predicted that unemployment would peak around 10 percent without the stimulus plan, but with it, unemployment would not rise above 8 percent. Yet the unemployment rate continued to rise, hitting just more than 10 percent, and it has hovered between 9.5 percent and 10.1 percent for more than a year and remains even higher for African Americans (16.1 percent) and Hispanics (12.4 percent).

The second year of the Great Recession left the typical family with an income of \$60,888, which is lower than at any time since 1997 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Family income has fallen by 5.3 percent since the recession began—compared to a 2 percent decline during the early 2000s recession and a 3.4 percent decline during the early 1990s recession. Poverty rates are rising, even though just seven targeted provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act kept more than 6 million additional people from falling into poverty last year.

President Obama correctly insists that his administration inherited an economic catastrophe and that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and other economic measures helped to avoid the worst with a recession turning into a depression. Yet the bulk of Americans continue to suffer from poor economic conditions. The president's job approval on the economy turned into net disapproval in October 2009 based on the average of public polls, and things have not improved much since then. The recovery measures may have been necessary but they were clearly insufficient in the minds of many voters, particularly independents. And the Democrats consequently suffered as the incumbent party that “owned” the economy—fairly or not.

The composition of the electorate

The 2010 electorate bore little resemblance to the electorate that brought President Obama to power in 2008, as discussed earlier. Minority and youth turnout were especially low. At the same time, the exit polls show that the electorate was far more conservative than usual—42 percent of 2010 voters were self-identified conservatives compared to 32 percent to 34 percent recently. Given the unusually skewed composition of the electorate, it is not at all surprising that Democrats faced such huge headwinds in 2010. Although midterm elections tend to be more favorable to conservatives, progressives must closely examine why so many more conservative-leaning voters turned out this year and why so many progressive-leaning voters stayed home.

Democrats held many marginal seats

The Democrats won many seats in 2006 and 2008 in districts that were noticeably conservative and Republican leaning. Early examination of the 2010 electoral map shows that the bulk of Democratic losses occurred in these districts. The Democrats were almost assured of losing these seats given the state of the economy and the overall discontent of the public and conservative-leaning midterm voters.

If these structural factors help to explain the bulk of the Democrats' dilemma in 2010, what should observers make of the alternative explanations put forth above?

First, the conservative argument about public concern over government spending is not entirely without merit, although the implications of this criticism are off base in terms of larger support for their antigovernment agenda. Democrats must confront the fact that the bank bailouts and stimulus plan were not popular policies for many Americans—particularly independents and Republicans—despite the economic merit of these efforts. Pew polling from April 2010 showed that two-thirds of Americans did not believe the stimulus plan had helped to create jobs. A plurality of Americans (49 percent) similarly said the Troubled Asset Relief Program did not help to avert a larger crisis in the economy. Partisan perceptions of the bank bailouts and stimulus plans were split with independents and Republicans holding quite negative views of these programs and slight majorities of Democrats backing both. These findings were confirmed in the exit polls as 65 percent of midterm voters said the stimulus package either hurt the economy

(33 percent) or made no difference (32 percent). The roughly one-third of voters who felt the stimulus package helped the economy broke heavily Democratic while those who felt negatively or more neutral about it favored the GOP.

Seeing little improvement in the overall economy, many independent and GOP voters came to see the recovery attempts as wasteful government expenditures, which confirmed their suspicions about ineffective government. One would expect this reaction from Republicans, who uniformly opposed the stimulus plan, but the convergence of opinion among independents made it extremely difficult to argue that the Democrats' plans on the economy were taking the country in the right direction.

Yet conservatives are wrong to assume that public negativity about government performance and the recovery measures has translated into a massive ideological shift to the right on the role of government. Strong majorities of Americans continue to want government involvement in key areas. Consider these results from a recently released pre-election survey on Americans' attitudes toward government conducted by *The Washington Post*, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University.

The poll asked the public if they supported more, less, about the same, or no federal government involvement in dealing with a variety of issues. Majorities ranging from 67 percent to 84 percent on five domestic policy issues said they wanted to see either the same or more federal government involvement in the issue. In fact, outright majorities of Americans on four of these issues said they actually wanted to see more federal involvement. Those wanting to see less or no involvement ranged from only 32 percent down to 16 percent.

Then consider this result from a general question in the same poll about whether you'd rather have the federal government provide more services even if it cost more in taxes or have the federal government cost less in taxes but provide fewer services. A slight plurality (49 percent) preferred the first government-expanding option over the second government-cutting option (47 percent). Even more interestingly, these sentiments are notably less hostile to government's role than has been the case at a number of points in the past. Only 28 percent selected the government-expanding option in 1994, while 57 percent preferred the government-cutting option.

And what does the public say they want their representative in Congress to do—fight for more spending to create jobs in their district or fight to cut government spending even if that means fewer jobs in the district? It turns out that, by 57 per-

cent to 39 percent, they want their representative to fight for more spending to create jobs. There is again no evidence here of an overriding commitment to cut government. And again we see a less hostile attitude toward government's role than was seen back in 1994 when, by 53 percent to 42 percent, the public came down on the cutting spending side of the choice.

So does the public want to see government performance improve? Yes, and in a serious manner. But conservative hype about a public thirsty to cut government is overblown and not backed by credible data.

Second, the more extremist caricatures of President Obama as a foreign enemy of the republic bent on bringing socialism to American shores can be dismissed outright in terms of its influence on the majority of voters. This is purely a Fox News/Tea Party/GOP myth that has not persuaded large segments of more fair-minded Americans. A strong majority of Americans does not believe these claims. Yet it is undeniable that this narrative has influence among the most conservative elements of the electorate. There is a sizeable minority of hyperconservative Americans who believe President Obama and his plans are a threat to America and who are highly energized in opposition to his agenda. This will not likely subside in 2012.

Third, the notion that President Obama and the Democrats overreached does not hold up to empirical scrutiny, although there were serious public doubts about how some of his policies played out in Congress and some ongoing confusion about their effectiveness, particularly on health care. The public is basically split on the Affordable Care Act as described above, but it is difficult to deny that the manner in which this plan was passed and explained to the American people was suboptimal at best. Relitigating the health care debate seems counterproductive at this point, particularly in the face of Republican promises to repeal this signature achievement or to make it unworkable in practice.

Fourth, the argument that the Obama administration was too timid in its policies and thus exacerbated economic problems is a difficult counterfactual to assess. We support the argument that the stimulus plan could have been bigger and bolder and that the politics of the bank and auto bailouts were atrocious with virtually no concessions extracted from the worst offenders on Wall Street and little urgency about reining in the outsized influence of finance in the economy.

But what if the stimulus plan had been \$1 trillion or greater rather than \$787 billion? Would unemployment be lower than it is today? Perhaps it would, as many economists have argued and economic models suggest. But maybe the size of the package would not have mattered given the structure of the plan and the depth of the employment crisis. Should the administration have either stepped away from the banks or done something much stronger such as nationalization to force greater structural changes in finance? As progressives, we did not like seeing corrupt bankers walking away with millions after wrecking the economy and would have preferred a much stronger approach to restructuring the financial sector in the wake of its recklessness. Would this have led to faster and deeper economic recovery? Again, perhaps, but it is unknown.

It strikes us that progressives were correct to argue that these policy and political missteps—and the inability or unwillingness to more forcefully challenge conservative caricatures of progressive policies—played some role in the diminished enthusiasm of the progressive base, as seen in the below normal turnout patterns among young voters and minorities. The issue of a demoralized or apathetic progressive base is a serious concern that must be addressed by 2012. President Obama will face a very difficult environment if he heads into reelection with a likely electorate as conservative as this midterm electorate—especially if the economy continues to struggle.

What should progressives consider next?

Our primary goal in this memo is to provide an empirical-based analysis of what happened in 2010 and why it happened, not to outline a comprehensive policy agenda or political strategy for progressives.

Yet it is clear, given what we know from the elections, that progressives have three basic objectives over the next two years.

Genuine improvement on the jobs front is a prerequisite for future success and conservatives should be forced to take responsibility for the economy

Progressives should offer to work with conservatives on targeted job-creation measures and show a commitment to doing whatever it takes to fix the economy—without sacrificing long-term progressive priorities on the economy, such as the repeal of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest earners. Many of the most

politically workable ideas will unfortunately be unsavory to progressives since Republicans will likely only sign up for supply-side measures such as tax holidays or other enticements to the private sector. But cooperation and determination to do whatever is necessary on jobs may be needed in order to achieve the larger and more pressing goal of ensuring that the economy is doing better by 2012. The more difficult challenge, for which we do not have an answer, is convincing a stubborn GOP Congress that more needs to be done on the economy beyond tax cuts for wealthy people. We don't hold out strong hope for this cooperation given the example of the past two years, but conservatives must be forced into accepting responsibility for addressing the ailing economy in some manner.

Progressives must not yield to the conservative, antigovernment agenda or their desire to repeal health care

Cooperation on job creation may be expedient and necessary in the short term. But progressives should fight tooth-and-nail against conservative attempts to drastically slash government services for working and poor families, efforts to radically alter major programs such as Social Security, and any attempt to repeal the health care bill. Conservatives have proven time and again that they are not interested in working with progressives and the administration to address the nation's problems, but this should not stop progressives from presenting a compelling vision of the future and standing up for their core achievements in terms of economic security and opportunity measures. If conservatives want to misinterpret the election as an endorsement of extreme antigovernment ideology, progressives should welcome that fight and stand up for their core principles and for American families.

The progressive majority that coalesced in 2006 and 2008 needs serious reengagement

It should be obvious to all progressives that an electorate that looks like the one from 2010 is disastrous to their long-term goals. They need to take stronger steps to reignite the historic coalitions that fueled the 2006 and 2008 elections, particularly among women, young people, African Americans, and Latinos. These progressive constituencies will be strong allies of renewed steps to fix the economy without compromising on long-term goals, and will stand with the president as principled opponents to conservative overreach on plans to dismantle government. President Obama and Democratic lawmakers must in turn do their part to encourage and enlist progressives in this fight for the country's future.

The 2010 elections were undoubtedly a setback for the progressive agenda. But these elections need not be determinative of future success. Progressives must take the harsh verdict on the economy seriously, take the necessary steps to improve the jobs situation, and recognize that they will need both independent voters and core progressives to forge successful coalitions for their policy ideas going forward.

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