

After the Wave: Democrats Still Standing

Republicans claim a mandate to cut taxes and spending. Voters seem to think they wanted Congress to work together to create more jobs.

By **JIM CULLEN**

This much is clear: Republicans will be in charge of the US House of Representatives. Democrats managed to retain at least nominal control of the US Senate, but will have to decide what to do about a strengthened minority that has shown it will use Senate rules to block any legislation that challenges Republican orthodoxy.

Also, Republicans will be in charge of more statehouses, which gives the GOP control over redistricting next year. That will allow Republicans to gerrymander congressional districts, which will make it harder for Democrats to regain control over the House for the next decade. All because potential Democratic voters decided to sit out the mid-term election.

The voters sent a message, but the battle goes on over what the voters meant to say. Republicans claim a mandate for tax cuts and less government regulation. D.C. pundits say Obama will have to compromise with Republicans. But actual polls show a more complicated picture.

MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell on election night blamed "the Left" and "liberalism" for the Democrats' problems. He cited outspoken progressive Rep. Alan Grayson's loss in Florida and conservative Sen. Blanche Lincoln's loss after a primary challenge nearly unseated her. But Glenn Greenwald at Salon.com noted that Grayson represented a conservative district that hadn't been Democratic for decades before he won in 2008. And polls showed Lincoln was behind the GOP challenger by more than 20 points back in January, before Lt. Gov. Bill Halter even announced his candidacy, with the support of labor unions and progressives. (Polls also showed Halter would have been more competitive in the general election.)

Greenwald also noted that Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) was far from a conventional liberal, having repeatedly opposed his party on multiple issues, "and he ran in a state saddled with a Democratic governor who was unpopular in the extreme."

Beyond that, Greenwald noted, "numerous liberals who were alleged to be in serious electoral trouble kept their seats: Barney Frank [Mass.], John Dingell [Mich.], Rush Holt [N.J.], Raul Grijalva [Ariz.], and many others. But there's one glaring, steadfastly ignored fact destroying O'Donnell's attempt — which is merely the standard pundit storyline that has been baking for months and will now be served en masse — to blame The Left and declare liberalism dead." That is the conservative Blue Dog Coalition was crushed by the GOP wave.

The wave took out 60 House Democrats, including at least 29 conservative "Blue Dogs." With only 25 Blue Dog Democrats remaining, Meteor Blades noted at DailyKos.com, the reconstituted Blue Dog Caucus will comprise only 13% of the House Dems, compared with 21% of the current majority.

On the other hand, the 79-member Progressive Caucus saw only four of its members defeated, so the partisan divide will be sharper than in the current House. "Speaker John Boehner will find fewer allies across the aisle willing to give cover to Republican initiatives," Blades wrote. "With the Senate still in Democratic hands, most of those initiatives aren't likely to go far anyway. But the gridlock will also mean slim chance of passing even ameliorative actions such as extending unemployment benefits, much less funding programs such as direct government hiring of a modernized [Works Progress Administration/Civilian Conservation Corps] that the Obama administration should have pushed Congress to approve during its first six months in office. Nor

will there be any way to pass legislation to eviscerate the pernicious Citizens United ruling. The list of what should have been done, and should still be done, but now definitely won't be done in the next two years is a long one."

The silver lining, he added, "is that those Republicans — now in the majority — have a year or so to make good on their ludicrous vows to fix the economy they deny having done so much to wreck and to make all the other magical fixes they implicitly promised in the just-finished campaign. When this inevitably fails, the voters will be ready to throw them out (again). Liberals, meanwhile, have the same amount of time to identify districts where better Democrats than many of those who just lost their seats can be elected with the proper organizing, funding and messaging. Overcoming the deluge of money the Republicans will have at their disposal thanks to rightist billionaires and a rightist 5-4 Supreme Court ruling will be no easy task. But, as Meg Whitman just found out in California, money ain't everything."

The three members of the Progressive Caucus who lost on Nov. 2 were Alan Grayson (Fla.); Phil Hare (Ill.); and John Hall (N.Y.). Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (Mich.) was defeated in the Democrat primary by Hansen Clarke, a progressive state senator, who easily won the general election.

The Populist Caucus, organized in January 2009 by Rep. Bruce Braley (D-Iowa) lost only two of its 33 members — Hare and Tom Perriello (Va.).

Voters Old, White & Angry

Democrats lost the House and saw their majority reduced in the Senate because young voters didn't turn out while elderly voters alarmed by Fox News and other right-wing media did. Young voters turned out in higher numbers than seniors in 2008, but seniors went from 16% of the vote in 2008 to 23% in 2010 while voters between 18 and 29 fell from 18% to 11% in 2010. And young voters were the only age group that favored Dems.

For what it's worth, exit polls also found that the Republican blowout was a phenomenon limited to white voters. The Maynard Institute noted that blacks, Latinos and "all other races" went Democratic.

Specifically, 63% of white men voted Republican, as did 58% of white women. Black men voted 85% for Democrats, as did 93% of black women, 60% of Latino men, 68% of Latino women and 55% of "all other races."

Darcy Burner, president of ProgressiveCongress.org, noted that younger voters stayed home — "not merely compared to 2008, but with a significant drop-off from 2006 numbers when the last congressional midterm election was held. The same is true for blacks and Latinos. Women shifted sharply towards Republicans, from favoring Democrats by 14 points in 2008 to splitting evenly on Tuesday.

"Suffice it to say for the moment that flagrantly throwing women, gays, organized labor, and Latinos under the bus, breaking campaign promises around which significant elements of your base have organized, abandoning the lofty rhetoric of the campaign to cut backroom deals with the people whose greed and bad faith created the messes we're in, and actively and repeatedly insulting the people who communicate most often with your key supporters is probably not the optimal strategy for resounding political success."

Michael Tomasky noted at Guardian.co.uk that overall turnout was down by about a third, or more, from nearly 130 million to about 82.5 million. "That's at least 45 million no-shows, and the exits tell us the bulk of them were liberal, young, black, Latino. If 25 million of these no-shows had voted, Democratic losses would pretty obviously have been in the normal range, and they'd still control the House."

Tomasky wrote that instead of soul-searching, the party should invest \$200 million in get-out-the-vote

operations.

Polls Apart

Republican spin was that the voters were repudiating Barack Obama, but media-sponsored polls of 17,504 voters leaving the polls actually found that 24% of voters meant to express support for Obama, 37% meant to express opposition to Obama and 37% said Obama was not a factor. The exit polls also found 53% had an unfavorable opinion of the Democratic Party and 52% had an unfavorable opinion of the GOP.

The economy was named by 62% as the most important issue facing the country, followed by health care (18%) and the war in Afghanistan and illegal immigration (8% each).

The poll also found that only 38% thought the government should do more and 56% said the government was doing too much. It found that 40% support the Tea Party movement, 31% oppose it and 25% are neutral, but 56% said the Tea Party was not a factor in the election.

Jed Lewison of DailyKos wondered how the GOP got the votes of 30% of those who listed their top priority as increasing spending to create jobs. “I mean, that is exactly what the stimulus was designed to do; perhaps it emphasized tax cuts too much and perhaps it spent too little, but that was done to win GOP support in the Senate. Without Republicans, we’d have spent far more on job creation and they’ve made opposing the stimulus a cornerstone of their campaign. So how in the world did they manage to win 30% of votes from people who want to see more federal spending?”

Brian Dockstader also noted at Ourfuture.org that the exit polls showed that, when asked who was to blame for the economy, voters blamed bankers (34%), Bush (29%) and Obama (24%). But even among those who blame the bankers, Republicans held an 11-point advantage. “So let me get this straight: the voters who are the most upset with Wall Street, who put the most direct blame on bankers for causing the recession and wrecking the economy, voted more for the party that held the White House when the Wall Street bailout was signed into law (hint: it wasn’t Obama) and that almost unanimously opposed even the most modest reforms to hold Wall Street accountable and make it so the bankers can’t wreck the economy again. They are mad at Wall Street, yet turned around and handed Wall Street’s Puppet Party control of the House? Seriously?”

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said union members can be proud of union members’ work — particularly in Nevada, West Virginia and California — as the firewall that prevented anti-worker candidates from taking office. Overall, he said, union voters cast their ballots for working family candidates by a 64% to 36% margin. He also pointed out that, according to a survey of voters in the 100 congressional races that swung the election, 63% of voters oppose tax breaks for people who make more than \$250,000 — a key plank in the Republican Pledge to America. Nearly two-thirds (62%) oppose privatizing Social Security and 68% do not want the retirement age raised to 70, as Republicans propose. The survey, which was conducted by Peter Hart Research for the AFL-CIO, also found that 77% of all voters (and 74% of Republican voters) wanted to create jobs by investing in roads, bridges, schools and energy systems and 65% of all voters and 47% of Republican voters wanted to continue unemployment benefits if jobs were unavailable. Republican leaders have opposed both proposals.

A post-election survey of 1,000 voters, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and the Campaign for America’s Future, found that anger is running high and 58% said their vote was an attempt to send a message to Washington about their dissatisfaction, very similar to the 1994 election.

The anger is fueled on the right by the perceived big spending and liberal policies in Washington, but as many are angry about leaders in Washington working for elites and not regular people and engaging in extreme partisan politics.

A majority opposed the Republican plan to cut \$100 billion from domestic spending programs while extending the Bush tax cuts to those earning more than \$250,000. Those top-end tax cuts should expire, 51% said. The poll also found 69% said that “politicians should keep their hands off Social Security and Medicare” as they attempt to address the national deficit.

Majorities are looking for candidates who promised to eliminate the special deals and tax breaks won by corporate lobbyists for Wall Street, paid for by American taxpayers and workers’ outsourced jobs. Republicans have pledged to protect those breaks. Significant majorities also supported a “made-in-America” campaign message, new investments in infrastructure through a national infrastructure bank, and a five-year strategy for reviving manufacturing in America.

Tea Party Sours Senate

The good news for Dems is that Tea Party candidates probably cost the GOP at least three Senate seats: Rep. Michael Castle (R-Del.) likely would have won the Delaware Senate seat in a walk, but Christine O’Donnell upset him in the GOP primary and then self-destructed. Sen. Harry Reid was polling in the 30s until Sharron Angle’s victory gave him an opening. And Sen. Michael Bennett (D) defeated Tea Party candidate Ken Buck.

Markos Moulitsas of DailyKos noted that Tea Party candidates also made the job harder in states like Kentucky, where establishment candidate Trey Grayson was leading Democrat Jack Conway by 20 points before Grayson was upset by Rand Paul, which forced Republican and allied organizations to spend \$5-6 million trashing Conway. “That money could’ve made the difference in Colorado and Washington,” Moulitsas wrote. In Florida, the GOP could have had an easy pickup with outgoing Gov. Charlie Crist, but he went independent rather than get run over by Marco Rubio and the Tea Party in the GOP primary and Republicans spent \$4-6 million securing the victory in a three-way race. And in Nevada the GOP and allied groups spent \$10 million trying to salvage Sharon Angle.

In Connecticut, teabagger Linda McMahon largely self-financed her campaign, but former Rep. Rob Simmons might have made a tougher race with Richard Blumenthal and forced Dems to spend more in the state.

In state races, legislative control in 11 states flipped from Democratic to Republican as the GOP will control 25 state legislatures, including Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas, which will give them control over the boundaries of 189 congressional districts when it comes to redistricting next year, according to an analyst with the National Conference of State Legislatures. Democrats control both chambers in 16 states with 26 congressional districts, down from 121 in 2001.

Over the next several years, 15 to 25 seats in the US House are more likely to remain Republican or switch from Democratic after redistricting as a result of the party’s state victories, says Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican State Leadership Committee.

“We’re going to end up protecting a lot as opposed to carving new ones,” he predicted in a conference call with reporters, according to Bloomberg BusinessWeek.

In most states, governors play an important role in redistricting, and Republicans had success in these races as well. Democrats lost governors’ seats to Republicans in Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, and at least eight other states. In Ohio and Pennsylvania, Republicans took from Democrats the lower house of the Legislature as well as the governor’s office. In Wisconsin, Republicans swept both houses and the governor’s chair. Republicans won both houses of the state Legislature in Alabama for the first time since the end of the Civil War.

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