

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your

colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for

samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



November 5, 2010

# Debunking the Myths of the Midterm

By MICHAEL COOPER

Every election develops its own mythology, usually before the official results are even certified, and this week's was no different. And like all mythology, the narrative that is being woven around the midterm elections by Bulfinches from both parties is a blend of history, facts and, yes, myths.

Before it hardens into accepted fact, some of the new conventional wisdom might benefit from one more spin on the potter's wheel:

## Return to the Republican Fold

Haberdashers who sell those ties with the little elephants on them may not want to order more just yet. There is no denying the powerful wave that swept Republicans back into power in the House, won them seats in the Senate and helped them rout Democrats in statehouses around the country. But even as they were electing Republicans in huge numbers, a majority of voters said they had an unfavorable view of the [Republican Party](#). In fact, there was little difference in how voters viewed the two parties: 53 percent said they had an unfavorable opinion of the [Democratic Party](#), and 52 percent said they had an unfavorable opinion of the Republican Party.

## The Sweeping Mandate

Both political parties would do well to beware the mythological creature that often surfaces immediately after Election Day: the Mandate.

To hear many Republicans tell it, the huge surge that won them control of the House was a clear referendum: an anti-Obama, anti-health care law, anti-government spending mandate.

“The statement made by the American people this week was a repudiation of Washington; a repudiation of Big Government; a repudiation of politicians who refuse to listen to the American people,” Representative [John A. Boehner](#) of Ohio wrote Thursday in a letter asking his fellow House Republicans to make him the next speaker. “The people have been clear: the job-killing spending binge in Washington must end, and Congress must change.”

Often such sweeping mandates do not turn out to be so sweeping. It was only 24 months ago, after all, that Democrats divined a very different mandate in the election that made [Barack Obama](#) president and strengthened their majorities in Congress. “This is a mandate,” Gov. [Bill Richardson](#), a New Mexico Democrat, said at the time. “So the issues of [health care reform](#), energy independence, rebuilding the economy, getting out of Iraq — I think he’s going to have the American people significantly behind him.”

Even as recently as May 2009, [Time](#) magazine felt confident enough to put a G.O.P. elephant on its cover with the headline “Endangered Species.”

But American voters rarely speak with an unambiguous voice. Consider the question of so-called Big Government, which, if exit polls are to be believed, voters have contradictory feelings about. A majority agreed that the government was doing too many things that are better left to businesses and individuals. But voters were fairly evenly divided on what many Republicans made Exhibit A in their case that the Obama administration had overreached: the new health care law. The exit polls found that 47 percent of voters said Congress should leave the law as it is or expand it, and that 48 percent said Congress should repeal it. Not exactly a ringing mandate for repeal.

Voters were also divided on questions of taxing and spending. When people were asked what the highest priority of the next Congress should be, 37 percent said “spending to create jobs,” which was only slightly behind the 39 percent who said “reducing the budget deficit.” And only four in 10 voters said they wanted Congress to extend the [Bush-era tax cuts](#) for everyone, including families who earn more than a quarter of a million dollars a year, as the Republicans want to do.

Ultimately, said Curtis Gans, the director of the Center for the Study of the American Electorate at American University, the mandate in this election may have been essentially the same as the one in the election that sent [President Obama](#) to the White House. “The mandate,” Mr. Gans said in an interview, “was go in a different direction and make it a better country.”

## **The Lost Youth Vote**

Have the Democrats lost the young?

Two years ago, the Obama campaign galvanized young voters, and they turned out and helped elect Democrats around the country. This year, voters under 30 were the only age group in which a majority voted for the Democrats, but relatively few of them bothered to show up on Tuesday. But that does not mean young voters are forever lost. Young voters are among the most transient and tend to sit out midterm elections. This year was no different.

Young voters did make up a decidedly smaller portion of the electorate this year: 11 percent, down from 18 percent in 2008, when many turned out for the presidential election. But their turnout this year was not much different from their turnout in the last midterm elections, in 2006, when 12 percent of the voters were under 30.

## **A Disaster for the President**

Mr. Obama himself called the big Republican gains a “shellacking.” The Republican gain of at least 60 seats in the House was the biggest for any party since President [Harry S. Truman](#) was in office. And a majority of those who voted Tuesday said that they disapproved of the way Mr. Obama was handling

the job, and that his policies would hurt the country in the long run.

Still, there were a few faint silver linings for Mr. Obama, as the 2012 presidential election begins.

For one thing, he does not seem to own the economic downturn — yet. When voters were asked who was most to blame for the current economic problems, 35 percent said Wall Street bankers, 29 percent said President [George W. Bush](#) and 23 percent said Mr. Obama.

And despite what politicians, political analysts and pundits have been saying for weeks, if not months, most of the voters themselves claimed that the election was not a referendum on the president. A minority of the voters — 37 percent — said that expressing opposition to Mr. Obama was a factor in their vote, but an equal number said that the president was not a factor in their votes at all. Nearly a quarter said they voted the way they did in part to express support for the president.

### **The Pundits Have a Clue**

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, below, in what he called the law of the infinite cornucopia, stated that there was never a shortage of arguments to support any doctrine one wanted to believe in for whatever reasons. This law is well known, if not by name, in political spin rooms and on talk shows, and is likely to continue to get quite a workout. Of course, a strong argument could also be made that nothing like that will happen at all.

*Megan Thee-Brenan contributed reporting.*



More in Politics (36 of 41 articles)

OPEN

## **Despite Losses, Nancy Pelosi Will Run for House Post**

[Read More »](#)