



US mid-term elections 2014

Standard Note: SNIA/7018

Last updated: 7 November 2014

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

In a significant setback for the Democrats, the Republicans won a strong majority in the US Senate in November's mid-term election. This was attributed partly to the unpopularity of President Obama. But it also called into question the prediction that the Democrats are likely to win the 2016 presidential election.

Contents

1	Disillusionment	2
2	Results	2
3	Why the swing to the Republicans?	3
4	Congress demographics	5
5	Co-habitation	5
6	Presidential election predictions	6

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

1 Disillusionment

Voters in the US are generally disenchanted with mainstream Washington politics. That disillusionment has changed its form since 2010. Back then it looked as if the Tea Party was the chief vehicle for Americans to express their dissatisfaction. However, Tea Party support peaked at about 30%, coinciding with the introduction of the Affordable Care Act, and is now down to about 24%.¹ But the fact that the Tea Party is not what it was does not mean that voters are happy with the status quo. Turnout was particularly low and opinion polls suggest that US voters were less interested in these mid-terms than last time, in 2010.²

Most candidates in the 2014 mid-term election campaign were at pains to stress their distance from the Obama administration in particular and 'Washington politics' in general, minimising their own Washington experience and presenting themselves as much as possible as outsiders.

Although mainstream parties have an image problem that doesn't mean that the electorate is becoming more consensual: the polarisation of US public opinion is continuing or even growing, as the social and political views of loyal voters of Republican and Democratic candidates, respectively, solidify on the right and the left. In the middle, there are many voters who are not so loyal and who take less interest in politics.³

2014 was the most expensive mid-term election in US history, with a lot of money being spent on attack television advertisements, which can hardly help to improve the image of politicians. But US voters' sense of unease mirrors that in the UK, with many saying that the economic recovery has not benefited them, despite falling unemployment and petrol at less than \$3 at the pumps for the first time in four years. As well as difficulties on the economy, there were foreign events that contributed to the impression that politicians are powerless, such as Ebola and the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

2 Results

A total of 36 US Senate seats were contested plus all 435 seats in the House of Representatives in the mid-term election that took place on 4 November 2014. The turnout was 36.4%, which was the lowest turnout since the Second World War.⁴

Senate elections took place in Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma (both seats), Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina (both seats), South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming.

There were also elections for the governorship of 36 states and territories as well as election to 46 of the state legislatures. Only the state legislatures of Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia were not included.

¹ 'Tea Party Support Holds at 24%', Gallup, 1 October 2015

² 'On Election's Eve, G.O.P. Is Confident, but Voters Are Sour', *New York Times*, 3 November 2014

³ 'Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology', Pew Research Center, 26 June 2014

⁴ '2014 midterm election turnout lowest in 70 years', *PBS Newshour*, 10 November 2014

US election results

SENATE

36 seats up for election

Democrat

45*

Majority

Republican

52



■ ■ Not contested

*includes two independents

HOUSE

435 seats up for election

177

244

Source: [BBC News Online](#)

The Republican Party gained control of the Senate for the first time since 2006, taking at least seven more seats: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Montana, North Carolina, South Dakota and West Virginia. Votes were still being counted at the time of writing and it was predicted that the Republicans would gain at least one more seat.

The Republicans also re-enforced their hold on the House of Representatives, increasing their majority in that house to levels not seen in decades.

The new, 114th Congress will first meet on 3 January 2015 and will end in January 2017.

3 Why the swing to the Republicans?

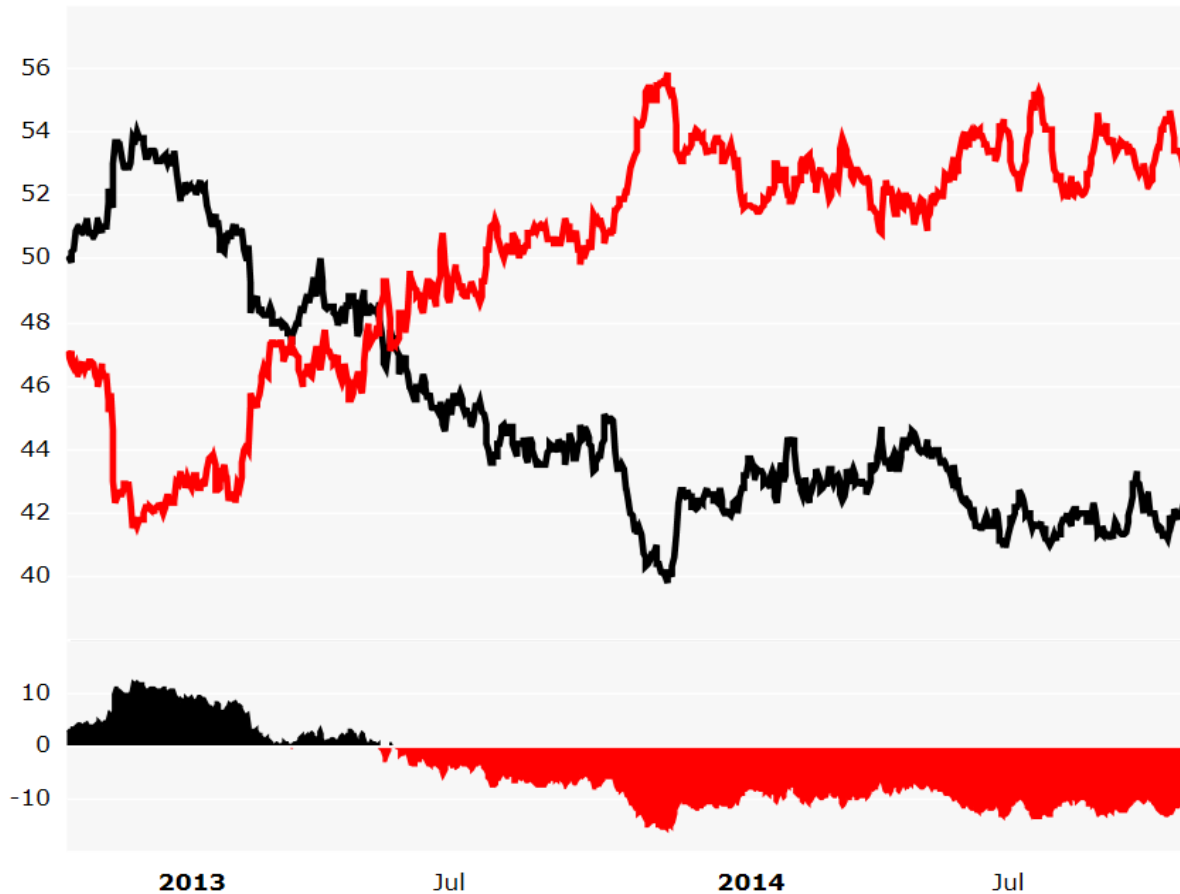
There was no dominant political theme at the 2014 elections, unlike at previous mid-terms.⁵ The economy was important, although not as important as at the 2010 election, worries about overseas crises were important, but not as important as they were in 2002 and 2006. A general sense of malaise and decline was reported, and the vaunted economic recovery is generally reported not to have had enough impact on voters' pockets yet.

⁵ 'Unlike previous midterm election years, no dominant theme has emerged for 2014', *Washington Post*, 9 August 2014

- Obama unpopularity

The foremost reason for the unexpectedly convincing success for the Grand Old Party is said to be the unpopularity of the President, who has fallen from nearly 70% job approval rating among the general public in 2009 to around 40% at the time of the mid-terms.

President Obama job approval rating, November 2012 to November 2014



Source: realclearpolitics.com

The President's unpopularity led many Democratic candidates to try to distance themselves as much as possible from the President in their campaigns.

- Poor Democratic turnout

However, Obama is almost matched by other politicians when it comes to voter disapproval. This resulted in a poor turnout for the Democrats, particularly among their important younger voters, who had been important in getting the President elected in the first place. The Democrats made substantial efforts to get the young, women and ethnic minorities to turn

out, but they were less successful than in earlier elections in the Obama era. Conversely, the Republican turnout, particularly among older voters, held up better.⁶

- More moderate Republican candidates

The success of the Tea Party in capturing candidacies from more moderate Republican figures was given as an explanation for earlier Republican disappointments. However, the Republican establishment pushed back against their more radical colleagues this time, and Republican candidates are widely rated to have been more electable this time, more successfully capturing middle-ground votes.

4 Congress demographics

The large turnover of Senators and other elected politicians resulted in a sharp broadening of Republican politicians' demographic profile. They sent 100 women to Congress, including the first black woman Republican, while Tim Scott became the first black Senator elected in a southern state since the 19th century.

This has had some impact on the Senate's traditional white male domination, but balanced representation is some way off.

5 Co-habitation

With a Democratic President and Congress controlled by the Republican Party to a degree not seen for years, many have commented that for the remaining years of his presidency, Obama may be a lame duck. Obama is predicted to focus on foreign affairs and, particularly, to concentrate on closing a deal on Iran's nuclear programme, which would constitute his major foreign policy legacy, along with the less clear one of ending the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Republicans have called on the White House to move towards the political centre, and said that they intend to get the Senate legislating again after years of gridlock. The President has said that is his job to foster cooperation: "I have a unique responsibility to try and make this town work."⁷

The Republicans have offered to cooperate with the White House on areas of employment, tax reform, free trade agreements and the construction of the Keystone oil pipeline. However, realistically, the Democrats are not likely to be in favour of increased bipartisan action, especially since the Republicans did so much to frustrate the Democrats when there was a Republican minority in the Upper House.

Another factor that points towards increasing polarisation is the fact that the Senate will become more conservative (and hostile to Obama policies) not just because it will have more Republican members but also because many of the new Republicans are more conservative than average (despite the retreat of the Tea Party). And many of the Democrats who lost their seats tended to be centrists (picked specially for marginal Republican seats), meaning that the remaining Democrat group in the Senate will be more left-leaning than before the election.⁸

⁶ ['Democrats fail to get out the vote'](#), *Financial Times*, 5 November 2014

⁷ ['Transcript: President Obama's Nov. 5 news conference on midterm election results'](#), *Washington Post*, 5 November 2014

⁸ ['Morning Plum: Get ready for more gridlock and dysfunction'](#), *Washington Post*, 4 November 2014

Senate procedure allows the minority party to talk legislation out or 'filibuster' it, if the larger party does not have a super majority to force a cloture, or closure, of the debate. The Republicans still do not have such a majority and the Democrats may be tempted to use their power to talk out Republican-proposed bills in the Senate, just as the outgoing Republican minority has done to Democrat legislation and, indeed, many Democratic nominations to public office, where the Senate has oversight.

However the Democrats' own action over appointments in 2013 has reduced their room for manoeuvre on appointments. The ability of the Senate minority to block White House appointments was sharply reduced in November 2013, when the Democratic majority changed Senate procedure to prevent these filibusters from taking place except on the appointment of Supreme Court Justices. This 'nuclear option', aimed to prevent the Senate from continually blocking government appointments, meant that appointments can now go ahead to a confirmation vote on a simple majority, rather than only on a super majority of 60 votes, as was the case before. It represented a significant shift of power from the Senate to the Administration, which should now be able to get its public appointments through much more easily when the President's party has a majority in the Senate.⁹

Some commentators have urged the Democrats to be ruthless in using their remaining minority blocking powers, so that the Republicans can't say that it was them who made Congress work.¹⁰ The trick would be not to get blamed by the electorate for continued Washington gridlock.

The Republicans have called on the White House not to act unilaterally to implement its immigration reform, a long-standing White House aim that could be achieved by presidential decree. Obama was planning to do this before the election, to grant some 5 million immigrants out of a total of 11 million the right to work in the US and to protect more from deportation. The move was put off for fear of damaging the prospects of Democratic candidates in marginal Senate races, although the delay angered some Latino voters. After the election success, Mitch McConnell, new Senate majority Leader, warned the President against doing this, saying that it would "poison the well" of future cooperation between the White House and Congress and be "waving a red flag in front of a bull."¹¹ A bill providing for immigration reform has been stalled in Congress for some time.

6 Presidential election predictions

It had been received wisdom that the Democrats, with their growing minority ethnic constituency, could become the natural party of government for decades. Republicans, in contrast, depended on the ageing white population, which was shrinking as a proportion of the electorate. Hillary Clinton, the favourite to win the Democratic presidential nomination, was thought to have a very good chance of succeeding Barack Obama in the White House.

The 2014 mid-terms have led commentators to reassess that prediction. Republican politicians have for some time said that minority ethnic voters, although traditionally more likely to vote Democrat, should be fertile ground for Republicans, arguing they share more conservative social and economic values. Nor are parties completely bound by their ideology: if the electorate changes, parties can and indeed must respond by changing their

⁹ ['Reid, Democrats trigger 'nuclear' option; eliminate most filibusters on nominees'](#), *Washington Post*, 21 November 2013

¹⁰ ['Democrats Should Use the Filibuster Ruthlessly Against the Republican Senate'](#), *New Republic*, 4 November 2014

¹¹ ['Boehner Says Obama Immigration Action Will 'Poison The Well''](#), *Bloomberg*, 6 November 2014

policies, so it is possible to imagine the Republican Party changing to keep itself attractive to a changing electorate (Republican proposals for reforming the immigration system are a sign that this is happening).

Hillary Clinton's packed schedule of campaigning for the mid-terms means that she will almost certainly be running for the Democratic candidacy for 2016, according to US commentators. Her visits to towns and cities in the US were intended to keep her profile high among governors, congressmen and party activists. Even though the election was a serious setback for the Democrats, she would still hope to benefit from the high-profile campaigning: "If the party does better than expected, Clinton shares in the credit. If the party does worse than expected, Clinton offers a road back."¹²

Hillary Clinton will face some competition for the nomination, probably from Martin O'Malley, Governor of Maryland, and maybe others, but she is thought to be easily the strongest candidate. In some ways the unpopularity of President Obama is no disaster for Clinton (after all, she is not Obama, opposed him in the primaries for the 2008 presidential election and left the Obama Administration at the beginning of 2013). But confident predictions of a rising Democratic tide have been called into question.

On the other hand, voters' general disenchantment with Capitol Hill may be turned more against Republicans by the time of the Presidential election in 2016, especially if they take a much higher profile in the remaining two years of Obama's term and if they are blamed for the increased gridlock that many commentators predict. Depending on the nature of their own election battles, some Republican incumbents and potential candidates may want to start taking a more centrist line and appeal to the middle ground to boost their chances in 2016.

Turnout for the Democrats is also likely to improve for the presidential election; young people, minorities and unmarried women often fail to turn out for mid-terms.¹³ The president's party is in any case often punished at mid-term elections only to recover for the subsequent presidential election.

¹² 'Hillary Clinton's Midterm Schedule Makes It Clear: She's Running', *The Nation*, 6 October 2015

¹³ 'GOP's 2016 Hopes on Rise', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2014,