The US 2014 Midterm Elections and their Aftermath

The Republican Party won big in the 2014 midterm elections in the US. Alan Draper examines the Republicans’ success and its consequences for an increasingly polarised American politics ahead of next year’s presidential vote.

And then there were none. In the 2014 midterm elections Representative John Barrow, the last surviving white Democratic member of Congress from the Deep South, was defeated. Forty years ago, following the 1974 elections, white Democrats composed three-quarters of the congressional delegation in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Now, the Republican realignment of the Deep South was so complete that none were left. Eight black Democrats from majority-minority districts spread across the six states were the only vestige of life left in what had once been a Democratic stronghold.

Nor did any Senate Democrat from the Deep South survive the 2014 midterm elections. In 1974, every senator from the heart of Dixie was a Democrat, with the exception of one. In 2014, with the defeat of two Democratic incumbents in 2014, Mary Landrieu from Louisiana and Mark Pryor from Arkansas, all were gone. The same process of extinction evident at the federal level in the Deep South was also...
apparent below it. Republicans control every governor’s mansion and have a majority in every state house in the region.

**Republican Success**

Republican success in the 2014 midterm elections went beyond the Deep South. Republicans in the House extended their majority from 33 to 46 seats, the largest congressional majority for the Grand Old Party (GOP) since Herbert Hoover (1928-1932) was President. They did so by taking seats from Democrats in Republican strongholds in the South, Plains, and Mountain states, turning these areas a deeper shade of red, and by breaking out of the Republican ghetto to win some races in the traditionally blue New England and mid-Atlantic regions.

Despite the Republican House Conference’s broader geographic reach, its southern, most conservative wing, will still be well represented within it. Almost half of the Republican House Conference members come from the 11 states that formed the Old Confederacy, and 43 per cent of the House’s powerful committee chairs hail from Dixie. (The Republican realignment of the South is captured in figure 1.)

While the 2014 elections increased the Republican majority in the House, it also lifted the GOP from the minority to the majority in the Senate. Republicans won nine Senate seats from the Democrats in 2014, giving them a 54-46 majority. This was the largest turnover in Senate seats since 1958 and gave the GOP its largest Senate majority since 1930.

Democrats went into the election expecting to lose some seats since a disproportionate number of Senate races were in red states. Only 14 of 36 (39 per cent) Senate contests were in states that Obama carried in 2012, with Democrats losing only three of the fourteen races: one in a competitive ‘purple’ state (Colorado), another where a popular Democratic incumbent retired creating an open seat (Iowa), and a third where Democrats had no chance of winning against a formidable Republican incumbent (Maine). As challenging as the electoral geography was, Democrats were still surprised by the scale of their defeat. They did a good job of defending seats in states that Obama carried just two years earlier. The problem was they did not win any of the 22 Senate races in states that Obama lost in 2012.

The Republican victory at the federal level was notable, but the GOP’s success in down ballot races at the state level was even more impressive. Republicans won control of two-thirds of all state legislative chambers – the best the GOP has ever done – in addition to commanding a majority of all governorships and other state offices, including lieutenant governors, state attorney generals, and state secretaries. Republicans now have party control of the government – both legislative houses and the governor’s mansion – in 24 states, while the Democrats dominate all state offices in only seven.

**Record spending**

Every election sets a new record for spending and 2014 was no exception. The Senate race in North Carolina between Democrat Kay Hagan and Republican Thom Tillis was the most expensive Senate election in the nation’s history, totalling more than $111 million (£73m). Total cost for the 2014 election cycle came in at $3.67 billion (£2.4bn), also a record for a midterm election. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision (2010), outside groups continue to account for a larger proportion of all spending at the expense of candidates and parties. Shadow actors are increasingly overtaking the traditional campaign apparatus. Large donors whose ‘speech’ is drowning out the voice of smaller donors who cannot write million-dollar checks, often fund these outside groups.

Exit polls provide some clues as to why Republicans fared so well. Turnout is lower and the electorate is less representative in midterm than in general elections. (See figure 2.) Turnout was just 36.4 per cent, down five per cent from the last midterm in 2010 and lower than any other midterm going back to 1942 when Americans were distracted from voting by a war.

Just as Democrats faced an unfavourable electoral geography in trying to hold on to the Senate, so did they meet an adverse electorate that tilted away from their base and towards Republicans. The midterm electorate was whiter, older, and wealthier – all demographic groups that favour Republicans – compared to presidential elections. Nonvoting was disproportionately concentrated among core Democratic constituencies – young people, non-whites, less educated and low-income voters – whose turnout rates were lower than in 2012, and lower than the last midterm election in 2010. It is unclear how much new
voter-identification laws that some states passed were responsible for depressing turnout generally and suppressing it among the Democratic base – their intended target – in particular.

Midterms are often a referendum on the Administration in power and that did not bode well for Democrats who were on the ballot in November. Low public approval for President Obama depressed support for the Democratic brand all the way down the ticket. 55 per cent of voters told pollsters they disapproved of Obama’s record, while only 44 per cent approved of his performance. In some states Democratic candidates perceived President Obama as such an albatross that they tried to distance themselves from him. For example, in Kentucky, the Senate Democratic candidate Alison Grimes refused to divulge to the press whether she had actually voted for Obama in 2012. The President’s falling popularity was due, in part, to a growing distaste and distrust of government that the Republican strategy of obstruction helped create.

Partisan gridlock is not politically neutral. People tend to blame presidents, holding them accountable as the head of state, when government doesn’t work.

Finally, gerrymandering helped Republicans win more seats in the House and in state legislatures than their statewide vote warranted. Following the 2010 census, Republican state legislatures packed Democrats into districts, creating supermajorities within them. But this left Democratic candidates in surrounding districts unable to compete, since their potential voters had been transferred. This strategy was particularly evident in Pennsylvania where Democratic candidates won only 5 out of 18 (27 per cent) House seats in 2014, even though they took 44 per cent of the vote statewide. The same was true in North Carolina, where Democrats running for the House won only three out of 13 seats (23 per cent) despite receiving collectively 44 per cent of the vote in the Tar Heel state.
Divided Government

The 2014 elections produced divided government, which will contribute to gridlock and stymie policy-making. President Obama entered the elections as a lame duck president and, with Republicans now holding majorities in both the Senate and House, emerged even more disabled. Presidential nominations to federal courts and executive agencies that were slow walked through the Senate before, when Republicans were in the minority, now face an even more difficult and uncertain journey with the GOP in the majority.

President Obama will rely more upon executive orders – as he did recently on immigration reform, the opening to Cuba, and the climate change agreement with China – as well as regulatory policy to pursue his agenda, in an effort to circumvent legislative opposition. There is likely to be more fiscal drama, as the legislative and executive branches try to reach agreement on budgets, spending, and taxes. In the end, continuing resolutions that simply rollover spending allocations from the previous year, may be the best that each side can deliver. And the time frame for policy-making narrows quickly because in just one short year, interest in policy will be eclipsed by the politics surrounding the approaching presidential election in 2016.

The 2014 election not only created challenges for the Democrats, but for the Republican Party as well. With control of both legislative chambers, voters will expect it to govern. It will not be sufficient anymore for the Republicans simply to be the party of ‘no’. They will now share more of the blame with the President for dysfunction and deadlock. Governing requires the congressional leadership to strike deals with the President that will precipitate conflict between the GOP’s Establishment and Tea Party wings. The former will be concerned with trying to build a record that can attract a Republican presidential majority in 2016, while the latter will be trying to reflect the conservatism of the base to which they owe their office.

Republican problems

After the midterm elections Republican Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain warned members of his party that ‘Republicans should know, unless we can show the American people that we can govern, then we’re not going to elect a Republican president in 2016.’ In other words, the Establishment wing of the GOP will be thinking in terms of projecting responsibility that appeals to general election voters, while the Tea Party faction will be concerned with conveying conservative purity that attracts the Republican primary electorate. Consequently, despite their majority, the Republican congressional leadership may be forced to appeal across the aisle to Democrats for the votes they need to pass legislation – as occurred in December with passage of the spending bill to fund the government through September 2015. Governing will put a premium on bipartisanship and appealing to the median voter at the expense of party discipline and polarisation.

The election also did not solve any of the problems the Republicans have at the presidential level. The Democrats continue to have a built-in advantage in the Electoral College. Blue states, defined as those that went Democratic in five of the last six presidential elections, yield 257 Electoral College votes for the Democratic nominee – just 13 shy of the 270 needed to win. Using the same methodology to define red states yields just 206 votes for the Republican presidential candidate. If Democrats win just one of the competitive, purple states such as Virginia’s 13 Electoral College votes – or Ohio’s 18 votes or Florida’s 29 votes – they can lose all four of the remaining competitive states and still prevail in 2016. (Competitive states up for grabs in presidential elections are Colorado, Florida, Nevada, Ohio and Virginia, totalling 75 Electoral College votes).

Moreover, demography continues to work inexorably in the Democrats’ favour, with the electorate in presidential elections becoming more nonwhite, more secular, and more socially liberal. In addition, President Obama, who is such a polarising figure to many Republicans, will be yesterday’s news when voters go to the polls in 2016. Finally, the 2014 election did not elevate any Republican presidential contender with the stature or appeal of the putative Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton. The GOP presidential bench from which to select candidates who can appeal beyond the Republican ghetto of red states, is still pretty thin.

A truly unusual politics

Exit polls at the 2014 midterms reveal an electorate that is still ideologically polarised along partisan lines. While the demands of governing will temper polarisation in Congress, it is still the default setting. But all the commentary on the polarisation of American politics has distracted analysts from what is truly unusual about it. In contrast to much of American history, in which one party has been the dominant ruling party, the current balance between the parties is pretty even. The number of voters identifying with the Democratic Party (36 per cent) was exactly equal to those who identified with the Republicans, according to 2014 exit polls. The best example of this recent and unusual state of affairs was the 2000 Bush-Gore election that was so close it had to be decided by the Supreme Court. Since then, the even balance between the parties has been evident in the frequency of divided government and the recurrent shifts in power from one party to the other. The Senate, for example, has flipped parties seven times since 1988. And it may flip again in the next election since Republicans will have to defend 24 Senate seats and the Democrats just ten in 2016.

The 2014 election did not represent a departure from this new normal. Both parties continue to just exchange jabs in the middle of the ring, scoring points with the judges in different rounds, as Republicans did in this most recent one, but neither is able to score a decisive knockout. The American party system awaits either abrupt external shocks or the slow accretion of demographic change to disrupt this new equilibrium and return to its normal setting of either Democratic or Republican Party dominance.