



ISSUE 2 : MARCH 2010

## A Bad Year for Whom?

Is 2010 a bad year for Democrats or a bad year for incumbents?

Think of it this way. Back in the 1940s, when Dorothy Schiff was the publisher, the New York Post was a staunchly liberal newspaper. Wags used to joke that when the apocalypse came, the Post's final headline would be, "World Comes to an End—Jews and Blacks Suffer Most."

That could be the story of 2010. "Incumbents Routed—Democrats Suffer Most."

There's plenty of evidence that incumbents are in trouble. In the mid-February CNN poll, 50% of Americans said their own Member of Congress deserves to be re-elected. That's the lowest number since at least 1991, when the question was first asked. In 1994, when the Democratic Congress was overthrown, 53% thought their Representative deserved to be re-elected. In 2006, when voters ousted the Republican Congress, the number was 52%.

It's always worse when people are asked whether "most Members of Congress" deserve to be re-elected. The current figure? 35%. About the same as in 2006 (34%). Lower than in 1994 (39%).

Evidence of anti-Democratic sentiment is a little less clear-cut. The Washington Post-ABC News poll shows 46% of Americans giving the Democratic Party an unfavorable rating. That's one of the most negative ratings for Democrats in 25 years. But Republican negatives are even higher (52%). That's also one of the most negative

ratings in 25 years.

When have Republicans done worse? In December 1998, just after the Republican Congress voted to impeach President Bill Clinton.

The Tea Party movement notwithstanding, public anger is not focused primarily on President Obama. While Obama's job approval is certainly down from stratospheric levels a year ago, it's

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hovering around 50%. That's not terrible. Terrible is where President Bush's was in 2006 (38%).

The public's assessment of President Obama can be described in one word: disappointment. It's a criticism based on performance more than ideology. And it's the reason Obama has been losing independents.

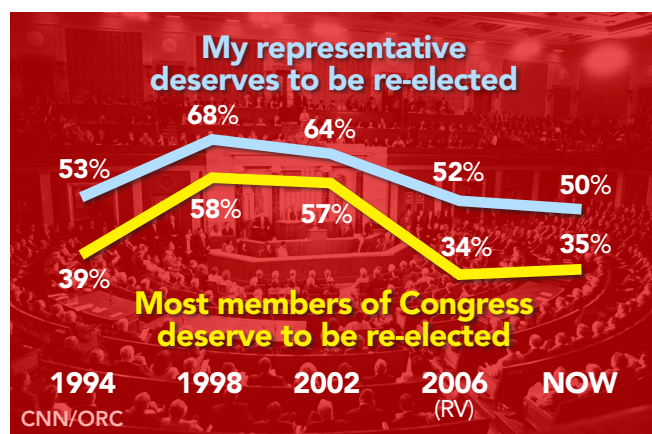
The Times-CBS poll asked, "In trying to solve the economic problems facing the country, do you think Barack Obama has expanded the role of government too much, not enough or about the right amount?" Thirty-six percent said "too much." The majority said either "not enough" (21%) or "about right" (37%).

But when asked, "Do you think Barack Obama does or does not have a clear plan for creating jobs?" roughly the same majority (56%) said he does not. The public's complaint is not that President Obama is radical. It's that he hasn't delivered.

The real target of voter anger is Congress. Congress's current job approval rating is 26% in the Post-ABC poll. The only time it's been substantially lower was in 1994 (18%). And we know what happened in 1994.

Democrats control Congress. That's one reason why they're vulnerable. Democrats are also the President's party. That's another reason why they're in trouble. The President's party almost always loses seats in a midterm election. The exceptions: 1998, when President Clinton was facing impeachment and the Democrats unexpectedly gained House seats, and 2002, the first election after 9/11.

There's a structural reason why the President's party usually loses seats in midterms. Between a presidential election and a midterm election, voter turnout typically drops by about a third. In 2004, for example, over 122 million Americans voted for President. In 2006, turnout dropped below 81 million—a 34% decline. People who vote once every four years are not strong partisans. They vote the mood of the time, which in 2004 was pro-Bush and pro-Republican. In 2006, those casual voters disappeared. And the Republicans paid a price.



## GENERIC CONGRESSIONAL BALLOT

Democrat **45%** | **43%** Republican  
Newsweek Feb 17-18

Democrat **45%** | **47%** Republican  
CNN/ORC Feb 12-15



## DOES OBAMA HAVE A CLEAR PLAN FOR CREATING JOBS?

Yes **39%** | **56%** No

New York Times/CBS

In 2008, turnout surged to nearly 133 million. Most of the new voters supported Obama and the Democrats. That was the mood of the time. Those new voters are not likely to show up in 2010. They certainly didn't show up in Virginia and New Jersey in 2009.

So Democrats will suffer most. The Cook Political Report lists 55 Democratic House seats that look competitive this year, compared with only six competitive Republican House seats. In the Senate, Cook counts ten competitive Democratic seats and four competitive Republican seats.

We usually see a populist anti-government backlash in two situations. It happens when the economy turns bad and government doesn't seem to be able to fix it. That was the case in the 1970s, when the backlash took the form of a tax revolt. It also happens when Democrats come into office with an ambitious agenda. That was the case in the 1960s with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. So what is it now, a bad economy or a big agenda? Answer: both. ■

## Parliamentary System?

Foreign observers often ask, if the President is a Democrat and the Democrats have solid majorities in both houses of Congress, why can't the Democrats just govern? The answer is, because the United States is not a parliamentary system.



The President cannot rely on the majority party in Congress, even if it's his own party, to support him. Members of Congress are not foot-soldiers in a party army. They are independent political entrepreneurs. They're in business for themselves. They will support the President if it's good for business. If it's not, they won't.

That's why the health care bill is such an odd experience for the U.S. Democrats are trying to behave like a parliamentary majority. Critics are calling it legislative trickery. What seems extraordinary in the U.S.—the reconciliation process—is just normal politics anywhere else. Here, it's parliamentary politics without a parliamentary majority.

## Expectations

Every election includes a phantom candidate called "Expected." It's not enough to win the election. You have to do better than Expected. If you do about as well as Expected, it's no big deal. If you do worse than Expected, you lose, even if you win.

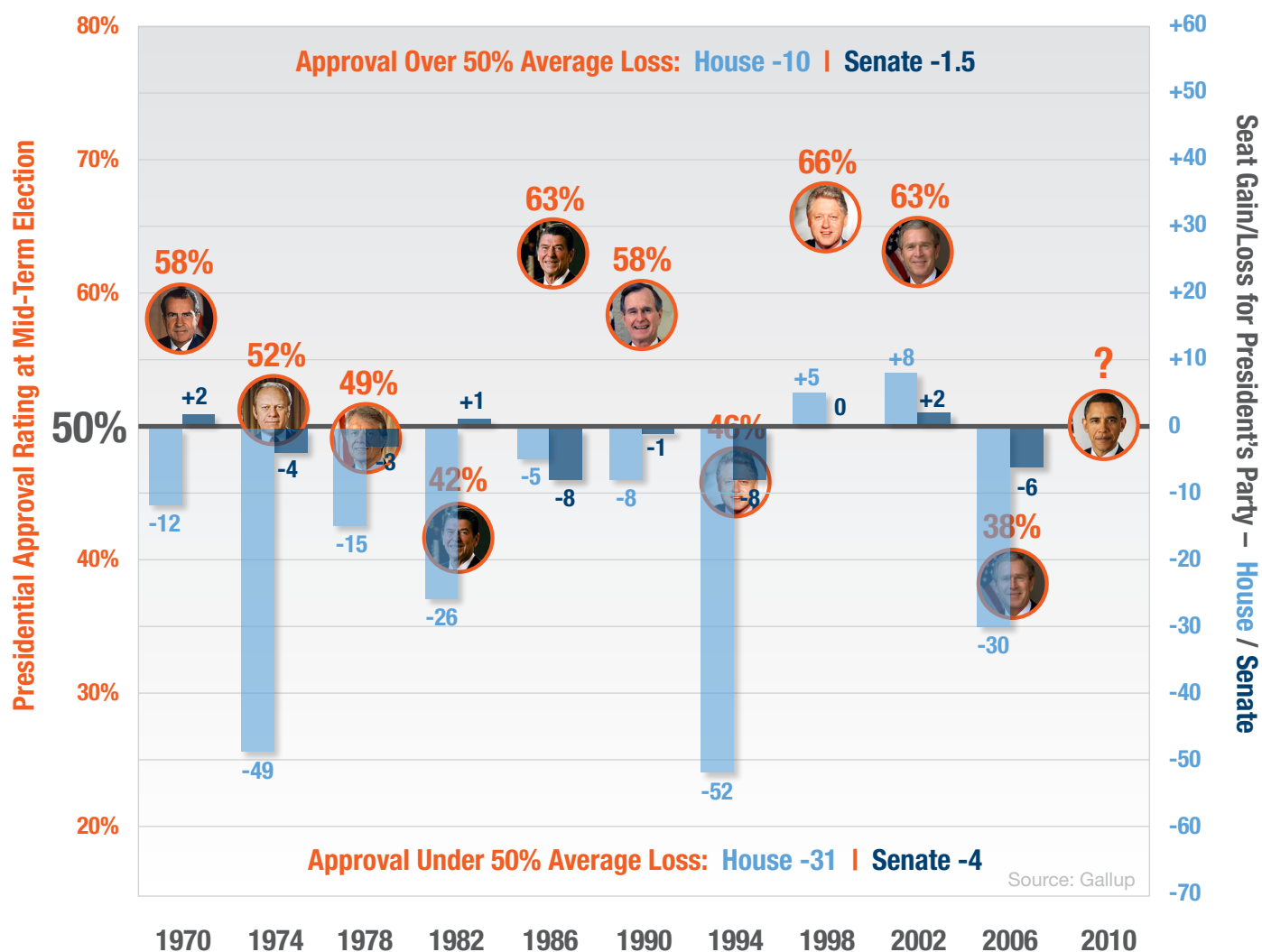
Case in point: Democrat Gray Davis ran for re-election as governor of California in 2002 after a difficult first term (remember the rolling blackouts?). Davis defeated Republican Bill Simon by a narrow margin (47% to 42%, with minor candidates getting the rest). Davis did worse than Expected. A year later, he was toast (recalled and replaced).

Who sets expectations? The media. Which is why candidates and political operatives try to spin them. They want to end up doing better than Expected.

Expectations for Republicans are rising fast for the 2010 midterms. Commentators are talking about the possibility that Republicans will win a majority in the House of Representatives. Even a Republican Senate is not looking as far-fetched as it once did. Those expectations may help Republican candidates raise money, but they could be a problem if they take hold in the press. Republicans don't want to be in a situation where, if they come short of a majority on November 2, they will be seen as doing worse than Expected.



# Midterms: How the President's Party Fared



*Inside Politics with Bill Schneider* is published by Third Way.

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