

# AFTER THE US MIDTERMS: A WHOLE NEW POLITICAL GAME

Pierre Martin, Richard Nadeau and Antoine Yoshinaka



Needing a gain of 15 seats to win control of the House of Representatives, the Democrats won 29 more. Needing 6 seats to wrest control of the Senate from the Republicans, they won exactly that number. Of the 15 GOP Senate seats among the 33 in play, the Republicans retained only 9, a feeble incumbency re-election rate of only 60 percent. Yet given all that the Republicans had going against them — from incompetence to corruption — the results can be viewed as more a loss for the GOP than a victory for the Dems. It was strictly a throw-the-bums-out election. George W. Bush may not have been on the ballot, but his presidency clearly framed the ballot question. For the rest, the decisive defeat of same-sex-marriage initiatives in seven out of eight states indicated the US was not moving to the left, just away from Bush. It's now a whole new game in Washington, with committee chairs in both houses of Congress moving to the Democrats, whose protectionist tendencies on trade issues may not be helpful to advancing Canada's commercial interests.

Les démocrates devaient gagner 15 sièges pour prendre la tête de la Chambre des représentants : ils en ont raflé 29 de plus. Il leur fallait six sièges pour mettre les républicains en minorité au Sénat, et c'est exactement ce qu'ils ont obtenu. Sur les 33 sièges en jeu, les républicains n'ont conservé au Sénat que neuf de leurs 15 sièges, un taux de réélection de 60 p. cent. Mais étant donné tout ce qui jouait contre eux, de l'incompétence à la corruption, on peut y voir une défaite de leur part plutôt qu'une victoire des démocrates. Car il s'agissait avant tout d'évincer les incapables. Le poste de George W. Bush n'était pas en jeu, mais les électeurs ont clairement remis sa présidence en question. Pour autant, les États-Unis n'ont pas viré à gauche, comme l'indique le rejet du mariage homosexuel dans sept États sur huit. Ils se sont simplement éloignés de Bush. Tout n'en est pas moins chamboulé à Washington, où la présidence des deux chambres du Congrès est passée aux mains des Démocrates, dont les tendances protectionnistes en matière de commerce pourraient compliquer la défense des intérêts commerciaux du Canada.

The Democrats emerged as the clear winners of the midterm electoral contest in the United States. For the first time since the 1994 “Republican Revolution,” majority control of the US House and — by a hair — of the Senate will be in their hands. As such, the 2006 elections arguably fall in the category of “watershed” elections. These results raise important questions, some of which are addressed in this overview. Why were the results so close, notably in the House, where the Republicans managed to lose proportionally less than in the Senate? What explains this simultaneous loss of majority status for the GOP in both chambers? Also, considering this shift in majority, will this new Congress be notably more liberal than the previous one? Will this Democratic domination of the Congress, and the ensuing responsibility to share power with the outgoing Republican administration, be a blessing

or a curse for the Democratic Party in the two-year run-up to the 2008 presidential election?

As of November 16, 2006, the vote tally of Democratic House candidates approached 54.1 percent of the total two-party vote. This represents a net increase of 4.6 percentage points from 2004. This support gave Democrats at least 232 seats, or 53.3 percent of the House, with 6 seats still too close to call as this article goes to press. As it stands, this result is a net gain of 6.8 percent in seats for the Democrats compared with 2004, with the possibility of gaining still a few more decimal points.

How does this compare with other election results in the postwar (1946-2004) era? Democrats won a majority of the two-party vote 23 times out of those 30 elections, averaging 53.6 percent in those victories. But those majorities were noticeably larger in terms of seats, with an average of 59.3 percent of the House each time. Thus what is evident is that this

year's majority of the vote for Democrats was translated into fewer seats than most Democratic majorities in recent history (with actually a smaller share of seats than of votes this year).

For outside observers, the first question that springs to mind when considering these results is: Why was it so close? With a president so out of favour with his own electorate, and who has managed to alienate citizens of almost every country on the planet, how could the Republicans manage to keep so many of their House seats? In fact, even if the framers of the US constitution thought that the House would embody the shifting whims of public opinion, it has turned out to be extraordinarily stable.

Three factors give US representatives a job stability that elicits envy from many of their compatriots.

For starters, the advantage that incumbents have in elections is bigger now than it was during the 1950s or 1960s. Now more than ever, incumbents have a huge advantage in the race for money and votes. Related to this is the fact that Americans are generally prompt at unloading their frustration on Congress, but they hold a sweet spot in their heart for their own representative.

It is noteworthy that, even in this watershed election, more than 90 percent of House incumbents were re-elected. Given that a majority of incumbents running for re-election were Republicans, this

had the effect of insulating Republicans from an even bigger landslide loss. That Democrats were still able to pick up all these seats in such an incumbent-privileged environment is a testament to how well they actually did.

The key reason for this resistance to change, however, is the persistence of gerrymandering in the confection of US congressional district maps. Indeed, the decennial redrawing of district boundaries that occurred after the 2000 census disproportionately benefited Republicans. This was due to the fact that Republicans controlled most state legislatures and governorships in 2001-02, and to the subsequent redrawing of districts in Texas and Georgia following the 2002

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elections. As a result, in Texas for instance, Republicans won 62.5 percent of the House seats with just 53.7 percent of the two-party vote. On the whole, nearly 90 percent of Republican House members running in the general election were reelected in spite of what some observers called a Democratic "tsunami."

**H**ow do Senate results stack up against results in the House? In the 33 Senate elections, the Democrats' performance was quite impressive. First, they were able to pick up six seats by defeating Republican incumbents in the general election. While the incumbency advantage is generally smaller in the Senate than in the House, since

1990 incumbent senators have nonetheless been re-elected at a rate approaching 90 percent.

The fact that 6 of 15 Republican incumbents running for re-election lost is truly remarkable, as this gives a re-election rate of only 60 percent among Republican incumbents in the Senate. Since 1954, the only times that more than six incumbents of the same party were defeated in the general election were in 1958, 1980 and 1986, all landslide elections. Coupled with the fact that Democrats did not lose any of their seats (open and incumbents), this gives Republicans a total of 9 wins in 33 senatorial contests. If we go back to the first election in 1916 to Class I

seats (those elected in 2006, 2000, etc.), only in 1934 and 1964 did Republicans do worse than their meagre nine victories in 2006 (winning only seven seats each time).

The contrast couldn't be clearer: Republican candidates for the US House won 46.7 percent of the seats with 47.6 percent of the vote. Their counterparts for the Senate won only 27.3 percent of the seats with 44.3 percent of the vote, a much lower seats-to-votes ratio. Republican candidates for the Senate were the real losers of this election. Still, because only one-third of the seats were up for election, this impressive performance allowed the Democrats to seize only a bare majority in the upper

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chamber, 51 to 49. This includes two Independents: Vermont's Bernie Sanders, who can be expected to side strongly on the left of the Democratic Party, and Connecticut's Joe Lieberman, who ran and won as an Independent after losing the Democratic nomination, and whose more centrist approach will put him in a position of strength, squarely in the middle of the Senate.

**I**n sum, given that the Congress tends to be remarkably stable, the Democrats did relatively well. Could they have done better? Critics have argued that the Democrats ran a weak and incoherent campaign, and that the results can be interpreted much more as a loss for the Republicans than as a win for the Democrats. This is a fair assessment, but in the absence of an obvious torch-bearer, the Democrats — a notoriously fractious party — could hardly have been expected to do much better under the circumstances.

Thus, the legislative branch is now in the hands of the Democrats, but does this mean that Congress itself and the country as a whole, have shifted significantly to the left? Not necessarily.

A by-product of these elections will be the continuing decline of moderate Republicans in Congress. Of the six Republican senators who lost, two (Mike DeWine and Lincoln Chafee) were part of the "Gang of 14" which opposed the "nuclear option" envisaged by Republicans to get rid of the filibuster in the Senate. In the House, losses by moderate Republicans make the Republican House Conference firmly anchored to the right of centre.

**H**owever, this might not necessarily lead to an increase in polarization, as many Democrats elected in 2006 fall in the moderate-to-conservative range on the ideological spectrum. Such newly elected members include Jim Webb of Virginia and Jon Tester of Montana in the Senate, as well as several Democratic pickups in Indiana, North Carolina, Arizona,

Kentucky and Florida. In addition, moderate Senator Joe Lieberman was successful in defeating liberal Ned Lamont in Connecticut. Thus while Republican moderates are disappearing, the middle is now being filled by moderate Democrats and the few remaining moderate Republicans. Thus contrary to what some might expect, the direction of policy in Congress may take not an abrupt leftward turn but rather a slow, incremental move toward the centre.

Another piece of evidence suggests that the US electorate might not have taken a leftward turn either. Constitutional amendments banning gay marriage, for instance, were on the ballot in eight states, and the conservative option won in seven. So while Democratic candidates for the Senate won in Virginia and came close to winning in Tennessee, voters in those states approved such a ban by margins of 57 to 43 and 81 to 19 percent, respectively. On other issues, Michigan voters approved a ban on affirmative action programs; Arizona voters approved a series of measures targeting illegal immigrants. Thus, while voters strongly repudiated the Republican Congress, congressional Democrats should not infer that the electorate necessarily wishes to see a liberal agenda enacted.

If the country did not shift signif-

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icantly to the left and the Democrats did not seem to run a very effective campaign, then why did the Republicans manage to inflict such a defeat on themselves?

Exit polls give a few indications of the motives that led Americans to sanction the Republicans. The war in Iraq, obviously, was the first source of

dissatisfaction for voters. Also, exit polls revealed that the scandals that haunted Republican lawmakers in recent months played a larger role than most observers had anticipated.

These polls also shed light on two other considerations. The relatively good performance of the US economy as a whole did not seem to favour Republicans to any significant extent this year. Moreover, this election marked a definite change compared with the previous contest, since voters no longer seemed to place their confidence primarily in the party of George Bush as the best choice to lead the war on terrorism. If voters preoccupied with terrorism tended to massively support the Republicans in 2004, this consideration no longer was a strong predictor of the Republican vote in 2006.

How will George Bush fare with this new Congress? At the very least, he will have a much thinner margin for manoeuvre than he enjoyed in the previous six years.

In general, the capacity of a president to garner congressional support for his policies is greater when the president is in the first years of a mandate, when he enjoys public support and when his party controls both houses of Congress. None of these conditions is there since November 7. The Bush presidency is

drawing to an end; for the last several months, less than 40 percent of the public have supported the president; and his opponents now control the Congress and will occupy the chairs of the powerful committees. On top of this, it is safe to predict that several Republicans, notably those more inclined to be moderate and/or those who answer to a more mod-

erate electorate, will hesitate in lending their support to a president who has become, in their perception, a political liability. If we account for the loss of political capital that always follows a negative sanction by voters, this all amounts to a rather grim outlook for the president.

In the coming two years, George Bush will have to navigate a rather narrow channel, and if he wants to accomplish anything significant he will need to demonstrate an unusual degree of flexibility. If he manages to do it, he has some chance of making an honourable exit. If he refuses to budge, he might just bring his party's hopes for 2008 along with him in his fall.

For the Democrats, the road ahead for the next two years is also littered with obstacles. Their opposition to George Bush will have to be firm but not systematic or stubborn. For example, following their stellar performance in the congressional elections of 1994, the mood of confrontation created by the Republican majority actually turned to the White House's advantage and Bill Clinton managed to strengthen his embattled presidency in time to score a convincing win in the 1996 presidential election. It seems likely that the Democrats will want to avoid falling into the same trap.

The Democrats will also need to put forward their own solutions to the country's problems. They will need to propose an honourable way out of the Iraqi quagmire. They will have to demonstrate their capacity to wage efficiently the battle against terrorism, in a way that will make Americans feel more secure again. On the touchy issue of immigration, for

example, they will need to take a clearer stand as a majority party than they did when they sat on the opposite side.

On the economic front, they might find it hard to resist the protectionist temptation, given the inclination of some of their natural allies. For Canadians, whose prosperity depends largely on continued access to the US market, this is particularly important. We note, for example, that in the new session the Committee on Ways and Means is likely to be led by the ranking Democratic member, Charles Rangel, who is associated with the left of the Democratic Party and has rarely, if ever, cast a clear vote in favour of free trade. Although many of the issues that will occupy the committee's attention in the coming months will be focused primarily on Asian competition and Canada will barely register on the radar screen of US lawmakers, this country's interests may become collateral damage if a resolutely protectionist direction is taken.

On border security, there may be more ground for optimism, however. With the Democrats in control of the Congress, the locus of power arguably has shifted to the north, which may be good news for those who seek some sort of accommodation on border controls. It is unlikely, however, that things will ever be as they were before. Few legislators would be willing, in the current context, to oppose the reinforcement of border security as expressed in the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), enacted in 2004. The best that can be achieved on this score is likely to be an extension of the delays for implementing the WHTI rules, as it is clear that nei-

ther country is ready to implement them according to the original schedule. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that the days of carefree border-hopping between Canada and the US are just about over.

These are only some of the challenges awaiting the Democratic majority in the coming two years, and the game has yet to be played. The swiftness with which President Bush reacted to the election results, by letting go his defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, and by extending an olive branch to the Democratic leadership, shows that the Republicans have not yet thrown in the towel for 2008.

Finally, the results of the 2006 midterm elections should — at least for a while — silence those oracles who seem to read into each election the signs of a new hegemonic era in American politics.

For observers and analysts it is always tempting to generate such spectacular interpretations, which the public is often eager to buy. We hope, however, that the results of 2006 will at least serve as a reminder that American society and the US political system cannot be adequately understood, whether in their orientations or in their evolution, on the basis of hasty and superficial statements.

*Pierre Martin and Richard Nadeau are, respectively, associate professor and professor of political science at the Université de Montréal, where they are also, respectively, director and research fellow of the Chair in American Political and Economic Studies ([www.cepea.umontreal.ca](http://www.cepea.umontreal.ca)). Antoine Yoshinaka is assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside.*

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