

Potential Impacts of The 2010 U.S. Midterm Elections

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The November 2 U.S. midterm elections have particular significance not only domestically but also internationally. Their importance is due to the arrival of a very defined, ideologically conservative group of congresspersons. As this article shows, predicting domestic politics in the U.S. is becoming more elusive and complex; and as new political leaders arrive the repercussions on international issues get murkier. This is especially critical for the relationship between Mexico and the United States.

This article will first present the aftermath of the political change in Congress and in several gubernatorial seats, and then explore the potential consequences of these shifts

on Mexico and bilateral relations. It will also explain that U.S. domestic politics is having fundamental impacts on the legislative agenda that will impact border security issues with Mexico and immigration regulations.

Underlying most analyses are the dire straits of the U.S. economy, which, despite efforts to stimulate job creation, has had dismal results. In 2010, for instance, the high national unemployment rate continued at around 10 percent, and even though there was a slight recovery in October, the rate was still 9.6 percent. While unemployment is high nationally, it is even higher in states like Michigan, California, and Nevada, where it ranges from 12 to 14 percent.¹ Added to low employment is the deficit: for fiscal year 2010 it came in at US\$1.46 trillion, more than triple the record set just

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last year. This will make it very difficult to continue any efforts to invigorate the economy while there is general resistance to borrowing more.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2010 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

The midterm elections results show that in the United States, political forces are completely independent from the political power of the presidency. President Obama, who has enjoyed for most of 2010 a constant approval rating ranging from 51 percent March 4 to 46 percent November 15, had no influence on his party's candidates results.² Moreover, despite the president's approval ratings, the White House decided not to actively and openly engage in the elections, with the clear results of a no-show.

Democratic Party losses were very significant, but not as bad as many predicted. They lost Congress, kept the Senate, and lost some gubernatorial seats. Out of the total 430 congressional seats, the Democrats lost 61, and the tally is now 190 Democrats and 240 Republicans. In the Senate, despite losing six seats, the Democrats retained their control, with 53 Democrats and 47 Republicans. They also lost 7 gubernatorial seats, making for 29 Republican governors and 19 Democrats. The U.S. political map looks clearly more red than blue at all levels, federal, state, and local.

Consequently, the shift from Democratic control to a Republican-dominated political scene will bring important changes to reforms and budget allocations. During their campaigns, conservative candidates, especially in states where Republicans gained control of their legislatures, proposed major changes in bills passed by President Obama and the Democrat-controlled Congress. Three major targets are to deter and push back the federal health care law, to reduce the social agenda, and to enhance actions by states to control undocumented immigration.

CAUSES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE REPUBLICAN GAINS

The reasons the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives, six Senate seats, and seven state houses will be fertile material for political, sociological, and communication research. As the results become clearer, two dominant interpretations of the Republican gains are the role of Pres-

ident Obama in the midterm campaigns and effective political campaigning by Republican candidates.

The first interpretation suggests that the election was a referendum on the Obama presidency and the liberal Democratic Congress. This interpretation is popular and commonly spread by conservative analysts, media commentators in conservative news outlets, and Republican strategists like Karl Rove. In the first post-balloting interviews and analyses of the elections, these conservative actors very insistently stated that Americans had voted on the presidency, rejecting Obama's liberal, "socialist" policies. They also linked the "generalized" American discomfort with the liberal Congress dominated by the Democrats and Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The second interpretation relates to the well financed and organized campaigns by most Republican candidates. This interpretation is more popular among Democrats and liberal media commentators. The main premise is that due to the unprecedented sums funneled into conservative can-

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didacies, Republican strategists were able to prepare very focused campaigns. Also, campaign contributions allowed the Republican Party to buy prime time advertising on television stations that distort many of the Democrats' achievements. Jim Carvill, one of the Democratic strategists, repeated this assessment on national TV after the results clearly indicated that the Democrats had lost control of Congress.

My interpretation offers a third way of understanding the results. It is a composite of three factors: first, President Obama's participation in the elections was very timid and weak; second, the emergence of the Tea Party during the elections played a prominent role in promoting its candidates; and third, the shift from one political party to another is a cyclical change of political alternation and balance of power that Americans tend to like.

First, President Obama's lack of participation in the elections is one of the most evident factors affecting the outcome. He was absent in state elections, in areas where Democratic

candidates needed support, and in making clear the benefits of his policies. The White House had a serious communications problem during the month before the elections. For instance, Obama did not establish the clear benefit of all of his reforms, nor did he underline the importance of keeping or electing Democrats to consolidate them. His reforms and proposals were—and are—for the most part misunderstood by most Americans. Then, the departure just before the elections of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, the political architect of the Democratic control of the House in 2006 and a central advisor for the Obama's own political bid for the presidency, seemed to send the message that the Obama administration was falling apart.³

Secondly, the Tea Party's arrival on the scene is an important variable for understanding the election outcome. The Tea Party's name refers directly to the Boston Tea Party, the 1773 incident in which colonists destroyed British tea rather than pay taxes on it. They argued that taxes violated

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the concept of "no taxation without representation," which in turn became the basis for independence from Britain. The current movement arose as result of the Bush and Obama administrations' bank bail-outs during the 2008 financial crisis. As the movement increased, the Tea Party put pressure on Republican candidates to exercise more fiscal discipline and to reduce taxes and the role of government. For the midterm elections, it is unclear who benefited from Tea Party support: the analysis needs to be done election by election. In some cases, like Delaware, candidate Christine O'Donnell lost the election; in others, like Kentucky, Rand Paul won. Another unclear case of direct influence is the one of charismatic Republican Marc Rubio, a Latino candidate who won a Florida Senate seat on a very conservative agenda with wide support from an aged, conservative electorate.

The Tea Party movement has gained visibility and support from conservative white, middle-class, middle-aged, suburban Americans who feel unrepresented and ignored by

the Democratic administration and Congress. Also, supporters believe that the reforms proposed by President Obama and his party are costly, intrusive, and unfair. Ideologically, followers are against increasing the role of government, increasing the deficit, and more importantly against any form of tax hikes. One of its symbolic leaders linked to the party is former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. Some analysts believe that the Tea Party movement is a franchise of marginalized Republican supporters who do not fit into the party's conventional strategies.

The third factor seems to be more obvious for many political analysts, that is, the cyclical alternation of political parties in control of the White House and Congress. This tends to be clear at midterm after a new president is elected or reelected. President Clinton's 1994 midterm elections lost the Democrats control of Congress and heralded the arrival of Newt Gingrich as speaker. Similarly, in 2006, after the reelection of President George W. Bush, Democrats gained control of Congress making Nancy Pelosi its first woman speaker. The balance of power and party alternation is a model Americans prefer, as opposed to total control by a single party.

The transition of political parties is predictable, and when one party controls more than one branch, American voters cast their ballots to reestablish what they perceive as equilibrium. So, the shift was no surprise; the surprise was that after Barack Obama's remarkable election, the White House did not use its political image to aid Democratic candidates.

THE NEW CONGRESS'S POLITICAL FIGURES AND THEIR PLATFORMS

So, with a new political group of actors on the national scene, how likely is it that will they be able to make or induce significant policy changes? And more importantly for Mexico, what do the new leaders think about issues that affect bilateral relations? Rather than restricting our analysis to only newcomers on the political scene, I am including figures who will play a role in bi-national affairs like Jan Brewer, the newly elected governor of Arizona, and Sarah Palin a political figure who wants to bridge Republican and Tea Party strategies and who has presidential aspirations for 2012.

Below is a table showing the views of John Boehner, the next speaker of the House; Rand Paul, senator-elect for the state

of Kentucky who is a major figure of the Tea Party movement; Marco Rubio, the new Latino senator for Florida who is touted as the next Republican leader; Jan Brewer, Arizona’s conservative governor who will continue drastic, antagonistic policies against immigrants; and Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska, a strong supporter and influence in the Tea Party and Republican 2008 vice-presidential candidate.

The table summarizes the positions and statements these political figures have made public. The two topics selected include their views on border security (second column) and on immigration, citizenship, rights, and even benefits for immigrant children (third column). As the table shows, prospects

do not look promising in either area, both of which have direct implications for Mexico.

First, John Boehner, Republican congressman from Ohio, who will become speaker of the House, has very strong views on border security. He states, “We need to have stronger border protections and full enforcement of our immigration laws. America is a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws —those laws must be obeyed and enforced.” Coming from a leader of Congress, this is a clear signal of non-tolerance of illegal immigration regardless of the measures and cost. He wants to keep taxpayers’ money from benefiting illegal immigrants (see table).⁴

TABLE
RELEVANT POLITICAL FIGURES PERSPECTIVES. 2010 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

	On Border Security	On Immigration
John Boehner Next Speaker Of the House	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Securing borders and stopping the flood of illegal immigration is first priority of the new Congress * Increase funding for the “Secure Fence Act” * Secure America through “Verification and Enforcement Act” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * America is a nation of laws. Laws must be obeyed and enforced * No public money to benefit illegal immigrants * Assimilation, learning English, and embracing common identity as Americans
Rand Paul Senator, Kentucky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Stricter control of the border * Electronic fence * Helicopter stations near the border * Construction of military bases to monitor the border 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * No support to amnesty * No birthright citizenship for children of illegal immigrants * Removal of public subsidies for illegal immigration * Making English the official language of the United States
Marco Rubio Senator, Florida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Supports states like Arizona in trying to control the border * States can act when the federal government is inefficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * No public support to illegal immigrants * No counting illegal immigrants in the census
Jan Brewer Governor, Arizona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Place the National Guard on the border * Local law enforcement needs to enforce immigration controls * Completion of the border fence and the double-layered fencing * Heavy penalties for criminal aliens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Strict enforcement of immigration laws * No public services, including education and health, for illegal immigrants and their children * No support to amnesty * Considers illegal immigration a hidden tax * Signed the Immigration Control Arizona Law (HB1070)
Sarah Palin Ex-governor, Alaska	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * States can take any measure to protect their borders * Secure borders are a government priority * Equates border security with terrorism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Only legal immigration helps the U.S. * Laws should not help illegal immigrants * No support to amnesty * Strong support for Arizona Law

Rand Paul was elected U.S. Senator for the state of Kentucky. As a force behind the Tea Party, he does not support amnesty and believes that arriving to the United States requires respecting the law. He wants to eliminate any public money for illegal immigrants. He also supports making English the United States' official language and building an electronic fence and helicopter stations near the border, as well as constructing military bases to monitor it.⁵

Marco Rubio, a Latino of Cuban descent, was elected as U.S. senator for the state of Florida. He was supported by strongly conservative Republican voters and endorsed by the Tea Party. He is touted as the Republican Party's rising star. Rubio has stated several times that the federal government should not interfere with the Arizona anti-immigrant law.⁶ He did not support counting illegal immigrants in the census and did not take a stand when an immigrant identification bill was proposed in Florida.⁷

Jan Brewer was elected governor of the state of Arizona in her own right in the November elections. After taking office initially after Janet Napolitano's resignation, she signed HB1070, increasing the role of law enforcement to control immigration in the state. She proposes a four-stage plan to control the border with Mexico: putting the National Guard back on the border; finishing the border fence, including double-layered fencing; enforcing current immigration laws; and reimbursing the state of Arizona for the cost of imprisoning criminal aliens.⁸ She is the most articulate official who blames all Arizona's problems on illegal immigration.

Sarah Palin is the former governor of Alaska. She is an informal leader of the Tea Party and supports Governor Brewer's measures in Arizona. She is a strong advocate of military control of the U.S.-Mexico border. She stated that President Obama does not have the "cojones" to enforce the laws on the border, and she does not support amnesty. Palin thinks the Arizona measures need to be emulated by other states.⁹

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MIDTERM ELECTION RESULTS

One of the situations that most threatens a positive relationship with Mexico is the growth and expansion of the Tea Party movement. As it grows, the chances to create bi-national solutions are more limited, since its followers only perceive one-way, traditional immigration and border controls. These general views are embraced and sponsored by its supporters.

The best indicators of how the new Congress will act are not directly related to Mexico. They include the control of the deficit, tax cuts, and limiting earmarked projects by Congress. One challenge for the new Congress and its new leaders will be to identify budget areas to target for reduction. But, this Congress will make all efforts to polarize President Obama and his administration in order to reduce his possibilities for reelection in 2012.

Fortunately for Mexico, some things are working well, like the continuing growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S., close to 70 percent of whom are of Mexican origin. Also, the current U.S. State Department, represented by Secretary Hillary Clinton, is a friend to Mexico, and more importantly, the interdependence process between United States and Mexico is more intertwined every day. Economic and commercial transactions continue unchanged: the close to one million U.S. daily inspections on the border with Mexico are not slowing down. Foreign direct investment in Mexico grew 28 percent to US\$12.2 billion in the first six months of 2010, compared to 2009. This could make 2010 the strongest year for foreign investment since 2007 when Mexico received \$23.2 billion.¹⁰

Hopefully the polarization of the U.S. domestic politics will not continue and the fragmentation and internal struggles will not affect the relationship with its neighbor to the south. Otherwise, not only Mexico and the U.S. lose, but so does the entire North American region. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>.
- ² "Obama Job Approval," *Gallup Daily*, 2010, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/113980/Gallup-Daily-Obama-Job-Approval.aspx>.
- ³ Emmanuel left because he is running for mayor of Chicago.
- ⁴ John Boehner's campaign website, accessed October 28, 2010, <http://johnboehner.house.gov/Issues/Issue/?IssueID=3945>.
- ⁵ Open statements on Mr. Paul's webpage during his 2010 bid for the U. S. Senate, <http://www.randpaul2010.com/issues/h-p/illegal-immigration/>.
- ⁶ Statements by Marco Rubio on his website, accessed November 5, 2010, <http://www.marcorubio.com/rubio-justice-departments-lawsuit-is-a-waste-of-resources>.
- ⁷ He is quoted by the political website "Politico," accessed November 4, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0810/40996.html>.
- ⁸ Gov. Brewer, quoted from <http://www.janbrewer.com/on-the-issues/securing-our-border>, accessed November 5, 2010.
- ⁹ Interview with Sarah Palin by Fox anchor Chris Wallace, November 10, 2010, <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/fox-news-sunday/transcript/sarah-palin-talks-immigration-economy-and-political-future?page=1>.
- ¹⁰ Reuters *Business Story*, accessed November 16, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN2312911920100823>.