

What Really Happened Tuesday Night

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: November 3, 2010 12:31 AM

The 2010 elections were characterized by extremist rhetoric, intense partisanship and numerous candidates who have been memorable for their thuggish behavior, ignorance of basic facts of political history and radical positions. The result, of course, has been a big Republican victory. The Republican Party won back control of the House of Representatives and significantly narrowed the Democratic margin in the US Senate.

In the aftermath of this election, there will be efforts to explain Democratic losses as an important political turning point or a rebuke of President Obama. Before the Democratic Party and progressives descend into paroxysms of introspection trying to determine what went wrong, it might be useful to place this election in some context. The strange candidacies of Republicans like Carl Paladino and Christine O'Donnell as well as those of new US Senators like Rand Paul and the radical platforms on which they campaigned, may be more of a distraction than anything else.

It is tempting, for people on both sides of the aisle, to see this election as a paradigm shift or a new development in American politics, but there is also much about this election that is not new at all and that fits neatly into patterns that have characterized our political history for at least a few decades. Every midterm election for more than half a century the president's party has lost seats in congress; the only exceptions were 1998 and 2002. This is a natural part of politics that occurs even when presidents are viewed relatively successful, even during periods of peace and prosperity.

Similarly, for more than half a century, when the economy is doing poorly, the president's party has not done well. This has been the case regardless of the extent to which the president can be reasonably held responsible. Although it was surprisingly absent from the campaign, which is fitting for an election season where there seemed to be an agreement between the two parties not to talk about anything real or important, the war in Afghanistan did not help the incumbent party either.

To a great extent, the 2010 election was a difference of degree, not of kind from previous midterm elections. It was a bad loss for the Democrats, but it was not one without precedent. The big Republican gains were far more an expression of voter discontent over the failure of Obama to solve the problems, particularly the economic problems, that face the country than an endorsement of the radical right wing policies proposed by many in the Republican Party. If the Republican Party leadership does not understand this, it will be at their electoral peril.

This election is nonetheless significant for several reasons. First, the House of Representative has now switched hands between the two major parties three times in the last nine elections. This suggests that volatility in the House of Representatives is now a constant in political life. It is unlikely that in the near future either party will dominate the House the way the Democrats did

for much of the last seven decades of the 20th Century. The Republicans may hold on to the House longer than the Democrats just have, but it will likely be only for a handful of terms, not a handful of decades as the Democrats did between 1955-1994.

Second, and more importantly, with control of the government now divided between the two parties, it will no longer be easy for the Republicans to blame the Democrats for the state of the economy. Nor will it be possible for the Republicans to simply say no to everything that is proposed in Washington. That strategy was useful when the Republicans were completely out of power, but the context has now changed.

This may lead to better bipartisan cooperation in Washington, but that is unlikely, particularly given the a real possibility that economic recovery will not happen by 2012, not because of the failure of politicians in Washington to address the problem, but because of the depth and seriousness of the problem itself. Given the difficulty of fixing the economy, even if both parties were willing to cooperate towards that end, the more potent strategy would be for both parties to increase the partisan rancor in Washington by blaming each other, accusing the other side of destroying the country and the like.

This, of course, is not good news for the country, but it is part of the new political and economic reality, one where the problems are too big for the politicians to solve so assigning blame and making accusations become more rational strategies. It is unlikely, however, that the next of American era greatness can be built on this foundation.