Midterm Election Results Signal More Change is Ahead
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The results of the 2010 midterm elections earlier this month have impacted the balance of political power at both the federal and state levels and indicate a potential shift in public policy. In Congress, Republicans were able to take control of the House of Representatives and diminish the Democratic majority in the Senate. At the state level, Republicans gained at least 6 governorships and more than 600 seats in state legislatures nationwide. While the new composition of Congress will likely have immediate and noticeable effects, the sizable Republican acquisitions at the state level may prove to have an equally significant impact on policy and politics for the next decade.

One of the most immediate implications of the 2010 gubernatorial and state legislative elections will occur through the process of redistricting. Redistricting will have a substantial impact on federal elections for the next ten years, especially in larger states, states that are projected to gain additional congressional seats and states that are forecasted as swing states in 2012. In most states, the process of redistricting is controlled by the state legislature and is subject to the approval of the governor. A handful of states, including Arizona, California, New Jersey and Washington, employ independent commissions to limit the influence of party leadership on the process of redistricting. In states that do not employ independent methods of redistricting, the opportunity to skew electoral districts to one party’s advantage is almost always present.

Analysts predict that through the process of redistricting, several northeastern and midwestern states will cede congressional seats to southern and western states, through reapportionment. According to Election Data Services, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Washington can all expect to gain at least one additional seat. State legislatures and independent commissions will begin redrawing Congressional district lines once the US Census data is released next month.

Republicans came out on top in some of the biggest redistricting battle grounds. Texas governor Rick Perry defeated his Democratic challenger, carrying 55% of the vote. Both chambers of the State House have a solid Republican majority and the state, which is currently comprised of 36 Congressional seats, may gain as many as four additional seats through reapportionment. In Florida, Republican Rick Scott narrowly defeated Democratic candidate Alex Sink for the Governor’s job. Florida is predicted to add at least one additional Congressional seat to its current total of 26 seats. Like Texas, the Florida State House is controlled by the Republican Party. The gubernatorial race in Georgia also resulted in a Republican victory. Nathan Deal defeated former Georgia governor Roy Barnes and will become only the second Republican to serve as governor in the state (along with current Governor Sonny Perdue) since the 1870s. Like Texas and Florida, Georgia stands to gain at least one electoral district and the state legislature is firmly Republican.

Not only will the results of the midterm elections change the future political balance of Congress, it also has important implications for the upcoming 2012 presidential election. Party control typically gives presidential candidates an advantage in fundraising and in organizing rallies in states. Control of the executive and/or legislative branch, especially in swing states, can influence independent voters and have a substantial effect on the way a state will vote in a presidential election. For example, in the 2008 presidential election, 11 states were identified as swing states going into the race. Ten of the 11 states went to President Obama and of these ten states, seven were controlled by Democratic governors. With independent voters now comprising almost 40% of the voting age population in the United States, both parties understand the need to capture this substantial block of voters.

While the presidential election is still two years away, most analysts agree that Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Florida, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin will likely be the most crucial battleground states. Of these ten states, all but Colorado will be led by a Republican governor. In addition, five of the ten states are controlled by Republicans in both legislative chambers.

Some of the more notable victories for Republicans when looking ahead to 2012 are Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Ohio. All three states voted Democrat in the 2008 presidential election. Pennsylvanian residents have not voted
for a Republican presidential candidate since 1988, but with a Republican governor and a solid majority in both the state Senate and House of Representatives, the Republican Party is eyeing Pennsylvania as a potential upset in 2012. Additionally, at least half of Pennsylvania’s districts are considered competitive and redistricting could easily tip the balance of power in favor of the Republican Party. The midterm elections in Wisconsin saw an almost absolute turn over from Democratic to Republican control. Republicans picked up the governorship, with Scott Walker defeating Tom Barrett, both chambers in the State House, incumbent Democratic US Senator Russ Feingold’s seat and two additional seats in the US House of Representatives (one of which has been in Democratic hands for over 40 years). The president’s approval rating is currently at 45% in this state and Republicans hope to channel this partisan shift into a victory in 2012.

Arguably the most telling decision in the midterm elections was in Ohio. Ohio voters have accurately chosen the President in the last 11 Presidential elections. President Obama won Ohio in 2008 with a fairly narrow margin of about 4%. Democrats lost control of the Ohio House of Representatives and the governorship, with Republican John Kasich defeating incumbent Democratic governor Ted Strickland. Coupled with the loss of four democratically held Congressional seats, the 2010 election results indicate a shift to the right for Ohio voters that could have substantial consequences in 2012.

Changes in leadership in key states could signify transformations in state policy agendas and problems for the Obama administration over the next two years. Republican victories in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Oklahoma indicate that these states will likely join a handful of other states currently considering the passage of an Arizona-style immigration bill. All four states have been historically tough on illegal immigration and each governor-elect campaigned on a platform of immigration reform. In healthcare, President Obama is likely to see increased opposition to the comprehensive package passed earlier this year. The healthcare overhaul requires a great deal of cooperation from state governments for implementation. The states are charged with running the insurance “exchanges” which includes management, staffing and oversight responsibilities. Newly elected Republican governors from Kansas, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Wyoming have already indicated their intent to sue over the law’s requirement that all citizens must be insured by 2014.

While nothing is absolute and only time will tell how the recent elections will impact governance at the federal and state levels, one thing is certain: the structure and balance of the country’s political system is changing.

11 "Map of Post-Election Partisan Composition of State Legislatures" National Conference of State Legislatures (2010).


17 "2010 Election Map." Politico.

18 "Map of Post-Election Partisan Composition of State Legislatures" National Conference of State Legislatures (2010).


23 "Map of Post-Election Partisan Composition of State Legislatures" National Conference of State Legislatures (2010).

24 Rogers, David "David Obey Surveys the House than and now.” Politico (2010).


28 "Map of Post-Election Partisan Composition of State Legislatures" National Conference of State Legislatures (2010).


30 "To Copy or Not to Copy? State Lawmaking on Immigration after Arizona Sb 1070." Immigration Works USA, 2010.

31 "To Copy or Not to Copy? State Lawmaking on Immigration after Arizona Sb 1070." Immigration Works USA, 2010.