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## 2010 Elections: What Went Wrong for the Democrats?

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While the Republican Party rode the midterm election tsunami, Democrats were pulled under the tide.

In only two years, Democrats lost their strong majority in the U.S. House of Representatives and effective supermajority in the Senate, and America's confidence in the President who had been elected with a resounding "yes, we can" has waned into either "oh no, you can't" by antagonists or a more tepid "we're not so sure anymore" by supporters. So, what caused this change and sunk the Democrats on November 2?

First, the midterm election of a president's first term has historically almost always gone poorly. Whether this loss is a case of "voter's remorse" and/or a desire to provide more checks and balances, President Obama is hardly unique in suffering this setback. Indeed, for 15-straight midterm elections, from 1938 to 1994, the party holding the White House lost Congressional seats. Thus, almost predictably, President Obama's party lost over 60 House seats, six Senate seats, and scores of state offices.

Second, more recent history propelled Democratic losses this year as anti-Bush sentiments in 2006 and 2008 caused the GOP to lose more than 50 seats, many in swing districts. Like the tides of the ocean, the Republicans came back in 2010 to beat these more vulnerable, newly minted incumbents.

Third, Independents flowed back to the Republican side as the pervasive anti-incumbent sentiment has been especially manifested by Independent voters. According to the Democracy Corps/Resurgent Republic poll, 56% of Independent voters voted Republican while just 36% voted Democratic, a 26-point swing from the last presidential election and a 36-point swing from the 2006 mid-term. Pew Research Center President Andrew Kohut told *TIME* magazine that 2010 is the third consecutive election that independents have "voted against the powers that be."

Fourth, the 2010 Republican wave was propelled by voters older than 65 (up 9 percent from 2006). This immense turnout clearly trumped the Democrats' low turnout, especially among youth voters. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, the percentage of young voters in 2010 was comparable to other midterm elections but fell from 23.5 percent in 2006 to 20.9 percent in 2010. Youth voters have tended to support Democratic candidates in recent elections and even in an election when Obama was unpopular, the 18-29 demographic still supported him by 60 percent. If the Democratic Party could have brought out more young voters, as they did in 2008, perhaps their losses would not have been so great.

Fifth, of course, there is the Tea Party factor, which brought out a reportedly four million new GOP primary voters. General election exit polls showed that 40 percent of all November 2 voters supported the Tea Party, with 21 percent strongly supporting the movement. While the Tea Party's success on Election Day was mixed—winning key Senate seats such as with Florida's Marco Rubio and Kentucky's Rand Paul, but snatching defeat from the jaws of victory against a victorious, yet unpopular Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in Nevada and a very winnable open Delaware Senate seat—there is no question that the Tea Partiers' passion and participation provided the fuel for Republican success.

Finally, President Obama clearly bears some personal responsibility for the magnitude of the loss—the largest swing since 1948 during Harry Truman's presidency, according to *The New York Times*. Ninety-three percent of those who voted for a Republican House candidate expressed the sentiment that their vote was meant to send a message of opposition to Obama. The "shellacking," as Obama described the losses, follows his rapid descent from a political superstar to *TIME*'s label, "Mr. Unpopular." At the end of October 2010, Obama's approval rating was 45.3 percent, down from as high as 72 percent approval in early 2009. Likewise, Pew research showed that 2010 voters expressed disapproval of the President's performance by a margin of 54 percent to 45 percent, and 52 percent said they thought Obama would hurt the country in the long run.

Since John F. Kennedy occupied the White House, presidents with approval ratings of below 50 percent have seen their parties lose an average of 41 House seats in midterm elections. With this growing unpopularity and a still-struggling economy, Obama's Democrats were poised to lose a significant number of seats. Obama's



unpopularity, coupled with controversial issues like the health care reform and stimulus funding that led to far more passionate opposition than support - created an historic Democratic disaster.

All of these factors, as well as countless other more localized factors, led to the Democrats' demise on November 2. Ironically, Republicans and Tea Partiers campaigned and prevailed on the same mantra Obama used in 2008—change. Now, Democrats must attempt to recover the passion and "change they believed in" during the 2008 presidential elections while working across the aisle with new Republican colleagues. The Republicans, meanwhile, face the harsh realization that it is far easier to campaign against something than to actually govern. How successfully each party deals with these challenges will likely determine the winner of the now looming 2012 elections.

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