

//Notas de Análisis//

There we go again - Voters' discontent results in huge gains for Republicans?

**By Maria L. Fornella*

In a strong repudiation of the President's policies, voters have given the Republican Party a major victory in the House of Representatives, but not in the Senate. Only twice in the last thirty years have the two chambers been controlled by different parties. Sadly for voters, the reality of divided government, with the Democratic Party in charge of the Senate, a Democratic President in the White House and a huge Republican majority in the House, will most likely result in more, not less, gridlock in Washington. Republicans will try to repeal the health care legislation and extend Bush era tax cuts indefinitely, but their attempts will be at least partially thwarted by the double firewall of the Senate and the Presidential veto.

This is the third election in a row in which voters reject the party in power. Many of the House seats lost in this election had only been in Democratic hands since 2006 or even 2008. A discouraged, apathetic Democratic base, especially youth and minorities, expressed their discontent by not showing up at the poll stations, while Republican and Independent voters turned out in huge numbers to drive out the incumbents.

Although Tea Party candidates did well in some cases (Rand Paul taking the Senate seat in Kentucky and Marco Rubio in Florida), their most unsavory candidates could not capitalize on the GOP's momentum: in Delaware, former self-avowed witch Christine O'Donnell was beaten in double digits by Democratic candidate Chris Coons, and in Nevada, Sharron Angle, of "Bikers for Jesus" fame, was defeated in a very tight race by Senate majority leader Harry Reid, who managed to hang on to his narrow lead. This is a sign of sobriety on the part of some conservative voters. It remains to see how much impact the Tea Party will have in the new Congressional Republican Caucus.

By and large this tidal wave that has swept Washington has been interpreted as another anti-establishment vote similar, even if in the opposite direction, to the 2006 and 2008 elections. Then, Independent voters angry at Bush had expressed their discontent by leaning left in the hope of "real change". Frustrated by high unemployment, a weak economy, government deficit and an unpopular health care law, this time they voted out many of those they themselves had elected not that long ago.

In a dysfunctional political system where bipartisan cooperation is non-existent, political polarization at an all time high, and the economic prospects grim, the defining trait of voters' behavior is volatility. Voters express anxiety over the budget deficit and the national debt, while at the

same time demanding extension of tax cuts across the board. They are mad at Obama's bailout of Wall Street and vote for the party that is the most closely associated with bankers and corporate excesses. Kudos go to the Republicans who by attacking the government's policies and never giving any specifics of what they would do (or would have done) differently, have managed to control the message, pulling the wool over the electorate's eyes and making empty promises they won't be able to deliver on. They now go to Washington with a mandate to balance the budget and reduce the debt, without raising taxes and without reducing spending on defense, Medicare or Social Security. Never mind that this is an impossible proposition. The important thing is to get elected. Thus the Sisyphean tide of rising and falling electoral waves continues, on and on, through eternity.

Democrats look back at the Clinton odyssey of 1994, when Republicans won both houses on the legislative election but the President was still re-elected in 1996. Clinton heeded the voters' message, compromised with the opposition in balancing the budget and brought about welfare reform. His new strategy of triangulation was so successful that it was imitated with equal success by Tony Blair and his "Third Way". But the economic circumstances in 1994 were very different from today. Unemployment was at 5% and the only cloud in the horizon was that of inflation, which was solved through a tighter monetary policy by the Federal Reserve. The President did not need Congress for this. Today unemployment is hovering around 11% and the main problem is deflation in a context of interest rates close to zero, so there is little the Fed can do to stimulate the economy. Obama thus faces greater challenges, all the more so when Republican Mitch McConnell, Senate minority leader, said in an interview that his party's main goal in the next two years was to make sure Obama would not get re-elected.

The President will be addressing the nation this afternoon. He is expected to say that he understands the message, and that there are lessons in it not only for Democrats but also for the other party: that this was not a vote for more obstruction but for more partisanship.

The larger message for us is that Republicans were able to capitalize on public angst about the economy much better than the President, that their message was clearer because it was an oversimplification of the woes that are affecting the country, namely, its inability to pull itself out of recession in a newly globalized economy while still mired in Afghanistan and partially in Iraq. They focused on demolishing every decision the government made without proposing serious alternatives. Funny, the war in Afghanistan was not even a subject of debate in this election, and the only logical explanation is that neither side had political points to gain from a debate on it. To those who are expecting more bipartisanship in the 112th Congress, please don't hold your breath.

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