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The 2010 Midterm Elections^(*)

On November 2nd 2010, Americans will elect 469 out of 535 members of the US Congress and 37 Governors, during the "Midterm Elections" – so called because they take place halfway through the four year Presidential mandate. A long and almost always consistent historical record shows that the President's party loses seats in the Congress in these elections due to the different composition of the electorate in the Presidential and the Midterm Elections. Simply put, voters who were responsible for electing the President are not likely to participate to the Midterm Elections precisely because the President is not on the ballot.

And yet voter turnout constitutes a wild card for the 2010 Midterm Elections. Will political participation in the 2010 elections translate into an unprecedented number of voters showing up at the polls on Election Day? If so, which party will benefit from this phenomenon?

The 2010 Midterms in perspective

The 2010 Midterm elections are politically very consequential. In the *short term*, the Democratic Party might lose the majority in the Congress. Even if this does not happen, the Party might still witness a substantial reduction of its margins in both the House and the Senate - 77 and 18 respectively. As Tomasky notes, an increased presence of Republicans might slow down the legislative activity of the Congress by dramatically increasing the number of investigations launched into the Obama administration.¹

In the *long term*, the stakes are even higher: 37 states will now elect governors who will be deeply involved in redrawing the congressional and legislative district lines according to the results of the 2010 Census. The redefinition of district lines can have a substantial impact in determining the battleground of future elections, and thus the composition of the Congress and even the President's party for many years to come. As Liasson put it, redistricting represents an instance in modern democracy

¹ M. TOMASKY, *The Elections: How bad for Democrats*, in «The New York Review of Books», October 28, 2010.

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Abstract

Historically, Midterm Elections in the United States tend to translate into a loss of seats for the President's Party, thus in some cases powerfully re-shaping the equilibrium between the two federal elective bodies. However, recent developments in the American political scene seem poised to make predictions on these 2010 Midterms more uncertain. In this sense November 2nd might come to represent a turning point in the ways and levels of political participation in the country.

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where «instead of voters choosing politicians, the politicians get to choose their own voters».²

In the wake of the 2010 Midterms, the Democratic Party controls 59 seats in the Senate and 257 seats in the House. This political configuration was a function of substantial gains for the Democrats in two consecutive electoral cycles, so that after the 2006 and 2008 elections, in an extremely rare fashion the Party gained a total of 55 seats in Congress. Such outcomes led some commentators to talk about a possible *realignment* in the electorate, that is a *durable* shift in a *substantial* portion of the electorate that manifests itself in consistent victories by one specific Party in elections. It might be still early to assess how durable the support for the Democratic Party shown in the past elections will be. The analysis of the 2010 census data will disclose more information on the demographics of 21st century America, and future elections will show how much of a substantial shift this is.³

Historically, the President's Party has always tended to lose seats during Midterm elections. Various theories have been advanced to explain the outcome. Firstly, turnout for midterm elections is often a third lower than in presidential years, and since the President is not on the ticket, the elections are far less salient (the so-called theory of surge and decline). The voters that do show up at the polls, on the other hand, tend to vote for the party opposite to the President either because they intend to enhance the constitutional system of "checks and balance" (balancing theory) or because they wish to express dissatisfaction with the job the President has done (referendum theory).⁴

In this sense, the 2010 Midterm elections have often been compared to the Midterms in 1982. Reagan, in an economy with an unemployment rate similar to that of 2010 and with approvals ratings not too far from those recently registered by Obama, managed to contain the losses limiting them to 24 seats. But in 1994 another Democratic President with similar approval ratings, Clinton, lost 60 seats (see Figure 1).⁵

Who is running, and who might win

During the 2010 midterms, the Democratic Party is divided between those who decided to embrace the Obama Administration record - like Tom Perriello in Virginia - and those who did not - like Joe Manchin in West Virginia. The variation among these approaches is in a large part a function of the local electorate, but it nonetheless will help understand whether, as recently argued by some, these elections look bleak for the Democrats partly because they have failed to promote their own record in office in the past two years, in a political climate fairly hostile to incumbents.⁶

On the Republican side, a new type of candidate has emerged and has managed to defeat better-established Republicans in several Primaries. Supported in most cases by the Tea Party (more on this in the next session), some of these candidates have held local offices before (like Sharon Angle in Nevada) while others have not (like Joe Miller in Alaska). They claim to be tired of the politicking of the Washington establishment, which is in their eyes guilty of being so far removed from common people's problems, and they describe themselves as being "mad as hell" - as Carl Paladino, the Republican candidate for governor in New York, famously said.

² Mara LIASSON, *Midterm Elections Play major Role in Re-districting*, NPR, September 21, 2010.

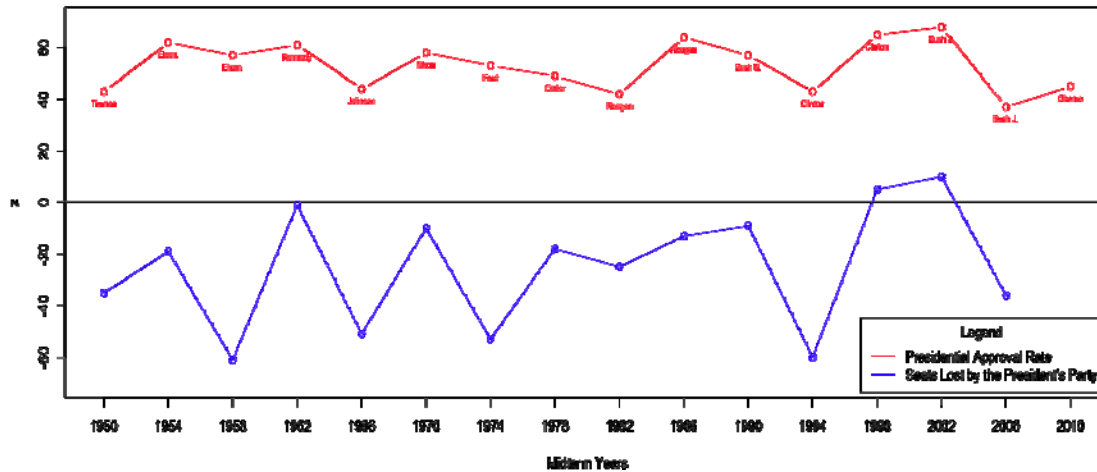
³ Arthur C. PAULSON, *Electoral realignment and the outlook for American democracy*, UPNE, 2007.

⁴ Angus CAMPBELL, *Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change*, in «The Public Opinion Quarterly», vol. 24, no. 3, Autumn, 1960, pp. 397-418; Robert S. ERIKSON, *The Puzzle of Midterm Loss*, in «The Journal of Politics», vol. 50, no. 04, 1988, pp. 1011-1029.

⁵ Data for Figure 1 are from Gerhard PETERS, *Seats in Congress Gained/Lost by the President's Party in Mid-Term Elections*, in John T. WOOLLEY - Gerhard PETERS, *The American Presidency Project*,. Santa Barbara, CA, University of California, 1999-2010.

⁶ Both Manchin and Perriello are running for Congressional seats. GREENBERG – CARVILLE, *Can Democrats still win?*, in «The New York Times», October 24, 2010.

Figure 1: President Approval Rate and Number of Congress Seats Lost by the President's Party in Midterm Elections



The elections for Senate in Nevada represent an almost archetypical case of the race between Democratic incumbents and these emerging Republican candidates. In a state most severely hit by the Great Recession - with unemployment rate up to 14% - the Democratic Majority leader in the Senate Harry Reid is running against the Republican candidate Sharron Angle. Sharron Angle has described Reid as an “out of touch” candidate on several occasions, as a part of an establishment that has proved itself unable to help Nevada out of the crisis. While presenting herself as the voice of the common people, she managed to raise 14 million dollars in contributions in the past three months alone, while refusing any interviews. Back in August, Reid became actively involved in the Republican Primary, so as to get Sue Lowden, the preferred candidate of the Republican establishment, to lose to Angle, thinking that the latter would be an easier to defeat opponent in November in that she is more apt for depiction as an extremist. They are now neck to neck in the polls.⁷

Other important electoral races where candidates are close in the polls include the gubernatorial ones in the Midwest. States like Michigan, Iowa, Illinois and Ohio, hit hard by the economic crisis and thus severely shedding population, will almost certainly lose Congressional seats, making the task of redrawing the lines in the most politically volatile political region in America all the more crucial. In all these states the incumbent governors belong to the Democratic Party, and they are all struggling to defend their record in an election characterized by a heavy anti-incumbent mood and a deep economic crisis.⁸ Republicans are favored in most forecasts. A prominent American Political Science Academic journal devoted an issue to predictions of the Midterm elections in the House. Analysts employed determinants of election outcomes such as the presidential approval rate and change in real disposable income from forecast. They all agreed that the Republicans will be likely to gain seats, but there is no consensus on how large these gains will be, and thus on whether or not there is going to be a Republican majority in the House.⁹

⁷ Nick LEMANN, *Desert Storm*, in «The New Yorker», October 25, 2010.

⁸ *The Rest of the Midwest*, in «The Economist», September 30, 2010. Atkinson and Partin claim that Gubernatorial elections are more dependent on perceived economic conditions than the President's record. ATKINSON - PARTIN, *Economic and Referendum Voting: A Comparison of Gubernatorial and Senatorial Elections*, in «The American Political Science Review», vol. 89, no. 1, March 1995, pp. 99-107.

⁹ *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol 43, no. 4, October 2010.

Similarly, polls have favored the Republicans, predicting different margins of victory. The latest Gallup poll shows that the Republicans have consistently led in voters' preferences for most of the month of October. The NPR's final battleground poll conducted by a bipartisan team predicted a bleak year for Democrats in 86 hotly contested districts, noticing nonetheless that support for Republican candidates seems to have decreased substantially since June among Independent voters.¹⁰

It is unclear how useful predictions cast using either general historical trends or timely polls can be in these elections. Neither of these heuristics allows us to directly take into account actual voter turnout. Statistical approaches applying regression analysis focus on capturing macro-trends in the electorate, basing predictions on how closely the political context in the current Midterms resembles that in previous elections on indicators such as presidential approval or the unemployment rate. Polls, on the other hand, base their predictions on a sample of *registered voters*, that is adults 18 years of age and older who are registered to vote in their precinct or election district. It is only by making recourse to complex algorithms that pollsters can then deduce the population of *likely voters*, that is voters whose socio-economic characteristics make them more likely to actually go out and vote on Election day.¹¹ And yet these 2010 Midterm elections are characterized by high political participation, thus making voter turnout even harder to ignore (as in statistical models) or to infer deductively (as in polls).

Who will go to the polls on November 2nd?

There is a clear distinction between voter turnout and political participation. The former refers to the actual percentage of eligible adults who show up to vote on Election Day. The latter indicates a more generic involvement of the population in the political process, which might take different forms: joining rallies, watching political debates or, of course, going out to vote on Election Day. Theoretically, it could be possible for a citizen to participate in the political process without actually ending up voting: she could put a sign up on her yard to support a candidate and yet decide not to cast a ballot. Practically, increased political participation is probably a necessary condition for greater voters' turnout. In general, increasing the political participation of their own base constitutes a sound strategy for Parties that want to increase the number of their supporters that show up at the polls on Election Day.

In the American political scene, three recent developments have increased political participation and have great potential to bolster voters' turnout: the 2008 Presidential elections, the emergence of the *Tea Party* and the Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United*. The 2008 Presidential elections saw a dramatic increase in the number of people who were mobilized and participated in the political process. This was one of the greatest accomplishments of David Plouffe, the chief manager of Obama's 2008 campaign. Plouffe set in motion an incredibly powerful political machine aimed at mobilizing a grass roots movement of volunteers who canvassed door to door, made phone calls, organized meetings and in general engaged in activities that would promote the involvement of citizens on Election Day, especially targeting demographics who do not usually go to the polls, such as minorities.¹²

Not only did the 2008 Democratic campaign capitalize on a grass roots movement that allowed the Democrats to penetrate the localities. It also successfully used modern technologies – such as text messaging and emails – to keep in touch with supporters and make sure they would actually *vote* on Election Day. This impressive effort translated into voter turnout levels never seen in previous elections. Most importantly for the 2010 elections, it guaranteed access to both a wealth of volunteers and donors that could be mobilized again and to a useful pool of information on likely sup-

¹⁰ The NPR poll can be found at <http://gqrr.com/index.php?ID=2532> (last consulted: October 19, 2010).

¹¹ Frank NEWPORT, *Registered Voters vs. Likely Voters: Understanding the Difference*, in «Gallup», September 12, 2008.

¹² Kevin SACK, *Black Turnout will be Crucial for Democrats*, in «The New York Times», October 16, 2010.

porters, such as phone numbers, emails and home addresses.¹³ A recent instance of the successful employment of this very Democratic Party political machine in the 2010 Elections was the rally organized on October 18th in Columbus Ohio, where 35,000 people came to greet President Obama campaigning for the Democratic Governor of Ohio, Ted Strickland. As Balz put it, «for a few hours, it was 2008 all over again».¹⁴

However, America has been the theatre of the emergence of another grass roots movement in the past two years – the Tea Party. With a name that recalls one of the first episodes in the American War of Independence, this movement emerged in the early months of 2009, when people with similar political ideals found themselves angrily protesting against President Obama's legislative agenda, such as the stimulus bill and healthcare reform. Partly as a consequence of the spontaneous way the movement emerged, the Tea Party seems to have a very eclectic political agenda: its members declare that they are in favor of fiscal responsibility, a limited government, free markets and secure borders. Commentators have often described this Tea Party political agenda as a mix of libertarian ideals and social conservatism. There has been a tendency to downplay the diversity among the members of the group, representing them as the last specimen of a dying demographic in an increasingly multi-ethnic America. A recent Gallup poll has found that while being definitely more conservative and richer, the 18% of Americans that identify themselves as Tea Party members are not any more white, male or older than the average population.¹⁵

The group's activism has attracted the attention of wealthy donors who share at least parts of the group's political agenda, but support the movement anonymously or under disguised names. So recently the Koch brothers, among the most powerful tycoons, have sponsored a summit in Texas largely attended by Tea Party activists. Their name did not appear anywhere, as their contribution was being channeled through an organization called *Americans for Prosperity*. This choice makes more sense when reading one of the advertisements at the meeting: «Today, the voices of average Americans are being drowned out by lobbyists and *special interests* [...] but you can do something about it».¹⁶ Not only did the movement successfully mobilize a portion of the population, it also proved able to draw supporters to the polls during the Primaries to elect their own candidates to represent the Republican Party in the 2010 elections. This has been the case in Delaware, where Christine O'Donnell won the Republican nomination over the popular congressman Mike Castle, and in Alaska where Joe Miller defeated the Republican incumbent senator Lisa Murowsky, but also in Kentucky, Louisiana and New York. The increasing degree to which the Tea Party has been politically active has catalyzed more and more donors' contributions to the Tea Party candidates' campaign.

In fact, the role of major donors might take on new forms and reach unprecedented levels this year, partly as a function of a juridical development. In January 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court passed a ruling commonly known as *Citizen United*. With this decision the Court established that both corporations and unions have a constitutional right to spend freely on television election commercials specifically supporting or targeting particular candidates. They can also avoid disclosing their own identity when they decide to fund such commercials.¹⁷

¹³ Joshua GREENE, *The Amazing Money Machine*, in «The Atlantic», June 2008.

¹⁴ Dan BALZ, *Obama and Clinton: a study in contrasts in Political Campaigns*, in «The Washington Post», October 19, 2010.

¹⁵ Lydia SEAD, *Tea Partiers are Fairly Mainstream in their Demographic*, in «Gallup», April 16, 2010.

¹⁶ Emphasis Added. Jane MAYERS, *Covert Operation: the billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama*, in «The New Yorker», August 30, 2010.

¹⁷ Ronald DWORKING, *The Decision that Threatens Democracy*, in «The New York Review of Books», May 13, 2010; Ira GLASSEN, *Understanding the Citizens United Rulings*, in «The Huffington Post», October 19, 2010. Mike McINTIRE, *The Secret Sponsors*, in «The New York Times», October 2, 2010.

This ruling has set the 2010 Midterm Election to break the record in terms of media spending. The ads have also shown a tendency to be more negative, that is to engage in sharper attacks on the rival candidate. As researchers have shown, negative campaign ads might be successful in getting more people to vote. It is unclear, however, which part of the electorate these ads are more likely to mobilize: mainly sponsoring Republican candidates, these ads might convince Independents to vote Republican, or Republicans to go to the polls, or both.¹⁸

More in general, the specific effects of these three recent developments in the political arena on the Election outcomes themselves are difficult to assess. Will greater political participation translate into greater voter turnout? Will greater voter turnout favor one of the Parties over the other? While these recent developments do not automatically generate very precise predictions, they dramatically increase the uncertainty associated with traditional forecasting, as categories that were very useful in making predictions in the past Midterms might not be as useful in the changing political environment of these 2010 elections.

November 2nd 2010 and beyond

Rarely have Midterm elections in the United States captured the attention of pundits and the general public alike on both sides of the Atlantic to the extent of the 2010 Elections. While previous election records and current polls have been helpful for both understanding the political climate and forming expectations on the plausible outcomes, I have argued here that the increased levels of political participation registered in the last couple of years make it harder to advance predictions.

Supporters of both parties have shown themselves to be eager to go out and vote on November 2nd. Commentators have focused on the so called "enthusiasm gap", namely the idea that Republican voters seem more impatient to vote than Democratic voters, but as Nate Silver has emphasized, the numbers show that the emphasis should be on "enthusiasm", not on "gap". In other words, there is some difference between the percentage of Democratic and Republican supporters who claim to be eager to vote in these 2010 Elections. But there is also a great difference between the eagerness to vote registered in these Midterms and that recorded in previous ones, across Party affiliation.¹⁹

In the wake of these 2010 Midterm elections, it is difficult to predict how big of a win the Republicans will achieve. Whatever the outcome, political participation in the 2010 Midterm elections is likely to be studied, dissected and theorized about a lot in the years to come.

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¹⁸ K. GOLDSTEIN - P. FREEDMAN, *Campaign advertising and voter turnout: New evidence for a stimulation effect*, in «Journal of Politics», vol. 64, no. 3, 2002, pp. 721-740.

¹⁹ Nate Silver "Understanding and Misunderstanding the Enthusiasm Gap", *The New York Times*, October 6th, 2010.