

Growing disaffection with the two-party system

US elections deal rebuff to Republicans and impeachment drive

Editorial Board
5 November 1998

The November 3 midterm elections were a debacle for the Republican Party and a setback for the impeachment drive against Clinton. The Republicans lost a net of five seats in the House of Representatives, reducing their majority to 223, compared to 211 for the Democrats and one independent. The 11-seat majority is the narrowest margin of control in the House this century.

In the Senate, where the Republicans had expected to increase their majority because more Democratic seats were at risk, there was no change.

Each party won three seats previously held by the other, leaving the Republicans with a 55-45 edge, well short of the 60 votes required to cut off debate and force a vote on legislation, and far below the 67 votes required to remove Clinton from office if he is impeached by the House.

Two incumbent Republican Senators who have been closely identified with the investigations into Clinton went down to defeat: Alfonse D'Amato of New York, chairman of the Senate committee which held well-publicized hearings on Whitewater, and Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina, who played a key role in the selection of Kenneth Starr as independent counsel. The Republican Party also lost ground in contests for state government, including a heavy defeat in the race for governor of California, the most populous US state.

While House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott tried to downplay the significance of the defeat, the outcome has clearly staggered the Republican Party and set the stage for a post-election crisis. Gingrich and Lott are under fire from within their party for allegedly squandering the opportunity to rout a weakened administration.

The results of the voting shocked not only the Republicans, but the Democrats and the media. An election eve survey by the *Washington Post* found that all the 'experts' questioned--academics, historians, media commentators and campaign consultants, both Democratic and Republican--predicted significant Democratic losses.

These analysts cited longstanding historical precedents: no party in control of the White House has gained congressional seats in a midterm election since 1934, the first under Roosevelt's New Deal. No party in the second term of a presidency has won seats in a midterm election since 1822, when James Monroe was in the White House.

The general astonishment among the pundits after being blindsided by the election results only demonstrates the enormous distance of the whole political establishment from the concerns and sentiments of the great mass of working people.

A distorted mirror

The election dealt a major blow to the right-wing political destabilization campaign headed up by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. Voters who were opposed to the Starr investigation and hostile to the political agenda of those seeking to remove Clinton turned out in significant numbers.

This was not the product of any effort by the Democrats themselves, who joined with the Republicans and the media in denying that the elections were a 'referendum on impeachment.' Only a handful of Democratic congressional candidates raised the issue, although one, Jay Inslee in a suburban Seattle district, defeated a Republican incumbent who had voted for the impeachment inquiry. The Republicans raised the issue themselves in last minute campaign commercials approved by Gingrich personally, but broadcast in only 30 congressional districts. Eighteen of these districts were won by the Democrats.

Election day exit polls showed overwhelming opposition among voters to the Republican-led impeachment drive. Majorities of more than 60 percent opposed impeachment or forced resignation, and a clear majority favored dropping the congressional investigation into Clinton's sex life without any further action.

These sentiments were strongest among working class and minority voters, who turned out in considerably larger numbers than in the last mid-term election, in 1994, when the Republicans won control of Congress. Black and Hispanic voters made up 16 percent of the electorate in 1998, up from 12 percent in 1994. Voters in trade union households made up 22 percent of the electorate in 1998, up from 14 percent in 1994.

The US electoral system provides only the most distorted reflection of the feelings and opinions of the broad masses, because of the monopoly enjoyed by the two big business parties, the influence of corporate money, and the powerful role of the mass media, whose combined effect is to bar any discussion of programs and policies which might threaten the interests of the capitalist class.

Those who voted saw no alternative to the Republicans except Democrats campaigning on equally reactionary platforms--and in some cases not even that, since nearly one quarter of all congressional seats were uncontested. The popular support for an alternative to both parties could find no outlet in the vote except in Minnesota, where it took a bizarre but politically revealing form.

Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura, a former professional wrestler, won the governorship, reducing Democrat Hubert Humphrey

III, son of the liberal icon, to third place. Ventura campaigned as a non-politician with little more of a program than hostility to the two entrenched parties. This was sufficient for him to carry the state's major metropolitan area, Minneapolis-St. Paul, to win more than 50 percent of the vote in the working class suburbs of the Twin Cities, and to win well over 50 percent of the vote among young men aged 18 to 30.

A turn in the political tide

The rebuff to the right-wing impeachment drive has political significance beyond the personal fate of Clinton. It is now clear that the 1994 congressional victory by the Republicans, far from marking the start of a new swing to the right in American political life, was the high-water mark of the period of political reaction which developed from the late 1970s.

Even the 1994 electoral victory owed less to the popularity of Gingrich's 'Contract with America' than to popular disillusionment with the Clinton administration, particularly the failure of the Democratic Congress and White House to deliver on their promise of universal health care.

Once the real social program of the Republican Party became apparent after their takeover of Congress in 1995, and especially with the series of shutdowns of the federal government in the winter of 1995-1996, public opposition to the Republicans' social agenda began to grow.

Right-wing elements initially sponsored the Paula Jones lawsuit and launched the Starr investigation to keep the administration off balance and insure Clinton's defeat in 1996. After his reelection victory, this legal assault became a full-fledged conspiracy to drive Clinton out of the White House, reflecting the belief among the extreme right wing that they could no longer advance their political aims through electoral means.

The power of political reaction in America has been wildly exaggerated by the media, which presents the shift to the right in the Democratic and Republican parties as though it were the product of popular pressure. The truth is that while both parties are moving to the right, in response to the requirements of the American ruling class, the broad masses of working people are moving to the left.

The outlook after the election

Both parties now face a period of increasing internal tensions and political crisis. The disarray on the Republican side is more obvious and palpable. The House Judiciary Committee will begin formal hearings on impeachment next week with the Republicans deeply divided over whether to press ahead and seek an impeachment vote--with virtually no prospect that the Senate would actually vote to remove Clinton--or to abandon the effort and work out a deal with the White House.

Gingrich and Lott are widely criticized among Republican presidential hopefuls and extreme right-wing activists, especially for their decision to accept a budget deal with the Clinton White House last month. But their critics have no agreement among themselves. Some denounce the congressional leadership for focusing too much on impeachment and neglecting other right-wing nostrums such as tax cuts. Others have sought an even more aggressive effort to oust Clinton from office.

The Democratic Party will interpret its victory as a signal that it must move even further to the right and make an accommodation with the Republicans. The day after the vote Clinton was already speaking in this vein, declaring that it was time to 'put the election behind us,' and for both parties to work together in a spirit of bipartisanship.

Significantly, he proposed as his first post-election move the holding of a summit conference on Social Security 'reform.' As in the case of the welfare system, the word 'reform' really means 'destruction.' There is wide support among Republicans and Democrats in Congress for at least a partial privatization of the Social Security Trust Fund, funneling some of the retirement funds into the stock and bond markets, both as a source of enrichment for Wall Street and to prop up markets badly weakened by the financial crisis which began in Southeast Asia last year.

The implicit outlines of a bipartisan agreement are evident: if the Republicans agree to soft-peddle impeachment, the White House is prepared to take the lead in the attack on Social Security and Medicare, the last major remnants of the welfare state policies which both parties now reject.

Dwarfing even these attacks on essential social programs will be the effects of the spreading financial meltdown. As layoffs, factory shutdowns and bankruptcies multiply, the working class will begin to feel the combined impact of the global economic crisis and the cuts in social programs already enacted by the Democrats and Republicans.

The outlook is for intensified social crisis and class struggle, under conditions where the working class is deeply alienated from the existing political system. The November 3 election marked a further decline in voter turnout, down to 36 percent, compared to 38 percent in the previous midterm election in 1994.

Neither of the two big business parties addresses the social crisis in the United States and the enormous growth of social inequality. On the contrary, both parties embrace policies, from tax cuts for the wealthy to slashing welfare and other social programs, which are sharpening the social antagonisms.

Regardless of the immediate impact of the election on the impeachment drive, the threat to democratic rights revealed in the right-wing conspiracy against the White House remains. These attacks develop inexorably out of a social system in which the gulf between a wealthy elite and the masses of people grows ever wider.

The working class must develop a political alternative to the Democratic and Republican politicians and the economic system which they defend. The coming weeks and months will underscore the need for the working class to build its own mass party, based on a socialist program which places the needs of working people ahead of corporate profits and the dictates of the capitalist market.

See Also:

The working class and the US elections
[3 November 1998]



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