

Two weeks before US midterm election

Democrats embrace right-wing austerity policies

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With only two weeks remaining in the 2010 election campaign, Democratic Party candidates in closely contested races for the Senate, the House of Representatives and many statewide offices are highlighting their right-wing policies and minimizing any differences with their Republican opponents.

Opinion polls and media analysts are generally forecasting a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, now held by the Democrats by a margin of 255 to 178, and significant Republican gains in the Senate, where the Democrats hold 59 seats out of 100, counting two independents who vote with them.

Some 40 states are electing governors as well, with Republican candidates expected to sweep a belt of economically devastated industrial states—Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin—from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes. There are more closely contested gubernatorial races in three of the four largest states: Florida, Texas and California.

The right-wing policies of the Obama administration, above all its failure to take any significant measures to alleviate mass unemployment, have opened the doors for a revival of political influence for the Republican Party, which was thoroughly repudiated by the American people in the past two elections, losing control of both houses of Congress in 2006 and losing the White House in 2008.

The anticipated Republican victories are due mainly to a projected collapse in turnout by those who voted for Obama and other Democratic candidates in 2008, not to any great surge of popularity for the Republican candidates, many of them associated with the ultra-right Tea Party movement. An Associated Press-Knowledge Networks poll published over the weekend found that one-quarter of Obama voters were considering voting against the Democrats this year, and an even larger number were not planning to vote at all.

A Quinipiac poll published in the *Wall Street Journal* last week detailed a major demographic shift in projected voter turnout in the state of Ohio, where as many as six incumbent Democratic House members could be turned out. In 2008, voters aged 18-29 and those aged 65 and older each comprised 17 percent of the electorate. The poll projected that in 2010, the youngest age group would be only 10 percent of likely voters, while those 65 and older would account for 25 percent.

Similar figures are reported for other states, reflecting the

widespread disillusionment with the Obama administration among young people, who are the most opposed to the continuing war in Afghanistan, the most affected by the destruction of jobs, and the most alienated from the official two-party system.

The Obama White House, like the congressional Democratic leadership, has already begun planning for an expected Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, if not the Senate. Obama gave a lengthy interview to Peter Baker of the *New York Times*, published in the newspaper's Sunday magazine, in which he suggested in broad strokes the coming shift further to the right.

Baker writes that according to Obama, "He let himself look too much like 'the same old tax-and-spend liberal Democrat.'" Obama virtually parroted the right-wing rhetoric of the Republican election campaign, describing the response of "average Americans" to his administration in the following terms: "They started feeling like: Gosh, here we are tightening our belts, we're cutting out restaurants, we're cutting out our gym membership, in some cases we're not buying new clothes for the kids. And here we've got these folks in Washington who just seem to be printing money and spending it like nobody's business."

This reinforces the myth promoted by the corporate-controlled media that concern over federal deficits—rather than anger over unemployment and the refusal of the Obama administration to do anything about it—is the driving force of the coming Democratic electoral defeat.

Obama promised to engage in a more intensive effort to win Republican congressional support during the next two years. The contours of "Obama 2.0," as White House aides described it, include seeking even closer relations with corporate America, and working with the Republicans to cut federal spending, particularly through the bipartisan deficit reduction commission that is to issue its report in early December.

Asked to name Republicans on Capitol Hill with whom he could work, Obama singled out Senator Judd Gregg and Congressman Paul Ryan, both of them identified with plans to cut spending. Ryan, a member of the deficit reduction commission, has issued a plan to privatize Medicare, the federal program that underwrites medical care for the elderly.

Obama made it clear that he was prepared to ride roughshod over popular resistance to the destruction of social programs. "If the question is, Over the next two years do I take a pass on tough

stuff,” he told Baker, “the answer is no.”

Congressional Democrats have responded to the polling numbers—and the flood of campaign cash into the coffers of the Republican Party, mainly from the wealthy and big business—in two ways: moving further to the right politically, and throwing in the towel outright in an increasing number of campaigns.

The Democrats have effectively conceded several Senate seats. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran profiles Sunday of the collapsing campaign of Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, who has been virtually abandoned by the national party and trails by 20 points to a Republican challenger.

Democratic candidates in North Dakota, Indiana, Ohio, North Carolina and Louisiana have also been largely written off, and in Florida, Democrat Kendrick Meek is denying reports that he will withdraw from the race and throw his support to Republican Governor Charlie Crist, who is running as an independent.

The triage process is more advanced in the House of Representatives, where as many as 100 of the 255 Democratic-held seats are believed to be at risk. Last week the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee cut off further national funding for a dozen House campaigns, effectively conceding these districts to the Republicans. These include seats held by two incumbents in Ohio and one each in Pennsylvania, Florida, Colorado and Wisconsin, as well as open seats in Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana and Tennessee.

In the dozen or so Senate races still closely fought—New Hampshire, Connecticut, Delaware, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Colorado, Nevada, California, Washington, Alaska—the contests between the Democratic and Republican candidates show a definite pattern.

Obama, Vice President Biden, and other national party spokesmen have adopted a bogus, pseudo-populist stance, seeking to motivate Democratic Party voters to turn out at the polls by bashing the Republicans as stooges of big business. But the Senate Democratic candidates have by and large refused to follow suit. They have focused instead on personal mudslinging, while distancing themselves from the Obama administration.

In West Virginia, for example, Democratic Governor Joe Manchin, who faces millionaire businessman John Raese for the seat vacated by the death of Robert Byrd, declared that he would support repeal of Obama’s healthcare legislation, at least in part, and trumpeted his opposition to any environmental restrictions on the coal industry.

In Kentucky, state attorney general Jack Conway faces Republican Rand Paul, son of the Libertarian former candidate for president and an extreme proponent of free-market policies. But Conway has declared his adamant opposition to government regulation of the coal industry, going so far as to file a suit against the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

In the only televised debate in the Delaware Senate race, Democrat Chris Coons avoided any serious discussion of the ultra-right politics of Republican Christine O’Donnell, the Tea Party candidate who upset the favored candidate of the Republican establishment. He presented himself as a responsible ally of the state’s business establishment, and responded defensively to O’Donnell’s description of him as a “bearded Marxist” in his

college days, declaring himself to be “a clean-shaven capitalist.”

In a Senate debate in Illinois, Democrat Alexi Giannopoulos and Republican Mark Steven Kirk traded accusations of personal corruption and mendacity. The Democrat has been linked to corrupt practices that led to the collapse of the bank owned by his family, while the Republican is a former military intelligence officer who lied about his service record during the Iraq war.

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the bankrupt and right-wing character of the Democratic Party election campaign came in the only debate in the Nevada Senate race, between Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid and his challenger Sharron Angle, a Tea Party favorite.

While Angle is an ultra-right, not to say bizarre, candidate—her political record includes support for indoctrination of state prison inmates by the Scientology cult, as well as abolition of the federal Department of Education—Reid was thrown on the defensive over his personal wealth and lavish lifestyle.

Reid was a multi-millionaire lawyer and property developer when he first won election to the Senate in 1992, and now enjoys a personal fortune estimated at \$3.1 million to \$6.7 million, according to documents he filed with the Senate. It was therefore difficult for him to posture as an advocate of working people against Angle, who is of modest personal means.

The Republican candidate supports draconian measures against undocumented immigrants, in a state with nearly a quarter of the population of Hispanic descent. She opposes requiring insurance companies to cover specific procedures and medical conditions, and has advocated privatization of Social Security.

But Reid did not press her on these issues, a performance that the *Washington Post* described as “remarkably restrained.” He also called former president George W. Bush a “friend” and praised right-wing Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia as a “masterful mind” on legal affairs.

In the contests for the House of Representatives, the most notable embrace of Republican talking points has been the slew of Democrats who have publicly repudiated Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of the principal targets of Fox News/talk radio venom.

Several incumbent Democrats who voted for Pelosi as speaker in 2007 and 2009 have declared that they will not do so in 2011, when the next Congress convenes. A Mississippi Democrat boasted that in 1,466 votes over the past two years, “Nancy Pelosi agreed with my vote 34 times.”

One conservative southerner, Jim Marshall of Georgia, went so far as to run television commercials showing “hippies” in San Francisco—Pelosi’s district—with the narrator intoning, “Georgia is a long way from San Francisco. And Jim Marshall is a long way from Nancy Pelosi.”

Pelosi’s response has been characteristically cynical. “I just want them to win,” she told the PBS program “News Hour”. “They know their districts.”



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