

US elections leave House and Senate balance nearly unchanged

Patrick Martin
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With nearly all votes counted and races determined, the 2012 US elections left the two houses of Congress virtually unchanged, with the Democrats increasing their narrow margin of control in the Senate but cutting only slightly into the Republican majority in the House of Representatives.

The results demonstrate political crisis and dwindling popular support for both parties, with the Republicans suffering a debacle in the Senate, which they had been widely expected to win, and the Democrats failing to make any serious progress in winning the House despite Obama's reelection.

The Republican failure in the Senate was particularly striking. One third of the upper house is selected every two years for six-year terms, and 23 Democratic-controlled seats were at risk compared to only 10 Republican-controlled seats because of the Democratic sweep in the 2006 congressional elections.

Coming into the election year, it was widely presumed in both capitalist parties that the Republicans would gain at least the four seats required to shift control of the Senate, now 53-47 in favor of the Democrats. Instead, the Democrats increased their majority by two seats, 55-45, by winning 25 out of the 33 contests.

A major factor in the Republican defeat was the unpopularity of the ultra-right Tea Party element. Tea Party-backed candidates won Republican primaries in Indiana and Missouri, then went on to lose the general election in states that Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney won easily. Both candidates, Todd Akin in Missouri and Richard Mourdock in Indiana, provoked widespread criticism for comments opposing abortion rights for women who have been the victims of rape.

The Republicans lost three seats, in Maine,

Massachusetts and Indiana, while picking up only one Democratic-held seat, in largely rural Nebraska.

In Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren, a liberal Harvard professor and former Obama administration official, defeated Republican Scott Brown for the seat Brown won in a 2010 special election after the death of Edward Kennedy. Joe Donnelly, a conservative Democratic congressman, won the Indiana seat held by Richard Lugar for the Republicans for 36 years, after Lugar lost the primary to Mourdock. The Maine seat vacated by retiring Republican Olympia Snowe was won by former governor Angus King, an independent who is expected to caucus with the Democrats when the new Congress convenes in January.

In five states carried easily by Romney—West Virginia, Indiana, Missouri, North Dakota and Montana—Republican Senate candidates lost, while no Republican candidate won in a state that voted heavily for Obama. Republicans lost four of the five Senate contests in the closely contested “battleground” states—Florida, Virginia, Ohio, and Wisconsin—winning only in Nevada, where the Democratic candidate, Congresswoman Shelley Berkley, was hit by ethics charges during the campaign.

In terms of the composition of the Senate, the two-seat gain actually shifts the Democratic caucus further to the right, as many of the victorious Democratic candidates openly rejected liberalism and pledged themselves to fiscal austerity and bipartisan collaboration with the Republicans. These included, besides Donnelly in Indiana and King in Maine, incumbents Jon Tester in Montana, Dianne Feinstein in California, Bill Nelson in Florida, Robert Casey in Pennsylvania, Tom Carper in Delaware, Joe Manchin in West Virginia and Claire McCaskill in Missouri, as well as newly elected Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota

and Tim Kaine in Virginia.

The 435 seats in the House of Representative had been split 240-190 in favor of the Republicans, with five vacancies, after the 2010 Democratic electoral collapse. Tuesday's vote did little to change this picture, with Democrats making a net gain of seven seats, with a handful of contests still too close to call as of this writing. The Republicans will hold a sizeable majority, perhaps as much as 235-200, once all the seats have been decided.

The two parties traded seats, with Democrats capturing five formerly Republican seats in California, four in Illinois, two each in Florida, New York and New Hampshire, and one each in Maryland, Texas and Minnesota. Republicans captured three Democratic seats in North Carolina, and one each in Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and New York, as well as gaining a majority of the new seats created by reapportionment, which took 11 seats away from the Northeast and Midwest and shifted them to the more rapidly growing South and Southwest.

Popular sentiment played little role in the outcome, which was in large measure determined by which party was in control of the redistricting process in each state, with the power to draw district boundaries and thus rig the results of the election. Democrats effectively controlled the process in New York, Illinois, Maryland and California, for a net gain of 12 seats in those states. Republicans, as a result of the 2010 rout, control more states and were able to pick up seats or minimize their losses in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida and Texas.

According to one tally, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives actually received slightly more total votes than Republican candidates, 53,952,240 to 53,402,643, although the margin would tip to the Republicans if 13 seats are included where no votes were officially tallied because there was only one candidate on the ballot, the majority of these Republican-held.

After repeated campaigns in which the Republican Party demonized the Democratic House leader and former speaker Nancy Pelosi, the failure of the Democrats even to field a candidate against John Boehner, the Republican speaker, is symbolic of the 2012 House campaign overall. The Democrats conceded nine districts without putting up a candidate,

including that held by Joe Wilson of South Carolina, famous only for interrupting an Obama state of the union speech by shouting out "you lie."

The Democrats made only the most perfunctory effort to win back control after the record loss of 65 House seats in 2010. This political fact is demonstrated most clearly by the comparative performance of the Obama reelection campaign and the Democratic House candidates in ten "battleground" states that were the focus of the election. Obama won nine of the ten states, with the Romney campaign finally conceding Florida Thursday night.

Obama won 121 electoral votes in these ten states—Nevada, Colorado, Iowa, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Virginia, North Carolina and Florida—compared to only 15 for Romney. In the congressional totals for those ten states, however, the results were 79 seats for the Republicans and 41 for the Democrats.

The Democratic Party and the Obama campaign poured in resources to win these states for Obama's reelection, but there was no comparable effort to elect Democratic congressmen. It perfectly suits the right-wing purposes of the reelected Obama White House to have a Republican-controlled House to serve as a political partner, giving the administration a ready-made excuse for its program of social cuts, tax breaks to corporate America, attacks on democratic rights, and militarism, in the face of opposition from below.



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