

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Reflections on the Midterm Elections

The 2014 election is now history and a few observations about this momentous election are now possible. Without question, it was a “wave” election for the Republican Party. Although the results are stunning, the election’s long-term potential impact is now coming into focus. Several thoughts about the election:

- First of all, the Republican Party has now established itself as the nation’s dominant governing party. Consider these facts as summarized by columnist David Brooks: Republicans now control 69 of 99 state legislative bodies. Republicans hold 31 governorships to Democrats 18; the highest total since the 1920s. When the new Congress convenes in January, Republicans will have their largest majority in the House of Representatives since 1931; they will have a majority in the Senate, dominate gubernatorial power in the Midwest, and have more legislative power nationwide than at any time over the past century. The Republican Party will now hold key decision-making positions in the Congress, especially in terms of key committee chairmanships. As Brooks observes, the Republican Party accomplished this because they have deep roots in four of the dominant institutions of American society—the business community, the military, the church and civic organizations. Consider these individuals elected on 4 November: (1) Larry Hogan, new governor of Maryland is the founder of Hogan Companies, a real estate development firm. He co-chaired a bipartisan commission to reform county government in his state and then founded Change Maryland, an activist group. (2) David Perdue, elected US Senator from Georgia, was senior VP for Asian operations for the Sara Lee Corporation. He also served as CEO of Haggar Clothing, Reebok, Pillowtex and Dollar General. (3) Thom Tillis, elected US Senator from North Carolina, led a research team for Wang Laboratories before going to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers and then IBM. (4) Illinois’ new governor, Bruce Rauner, was chairman of the private equity firm GTCR. A gracious philanthropist, Rauner has given more than \$20 million toward improving Chicago schools. (5) James Lankford, new US Senator from Oklahoma, has a divinity degree and has run Falls Creek, the nation’s largest Christian camp. (6) Tom Cotton, newly elected US Senator from Arkansas, worked at Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher, served in the Army and served at McKinsey Corporation. It is important to note that these various individuals are not from the fringe; they represent the very pillars of American society. Brooks comments that “Republicans won this election in part because they re-established their party’s traditional personality. The beau ideal of American Republicanism is the prudent business leader who is active in the community, active at church and fervently devoted to national defense.” Perhaps even more importantly, this year Republicans won among white-working class voters by 30%. They tied Democrats among Asian-Americans and severely cut their losses among Hispanics. It was indeed a “wave” election for the Party.

- Second, this election invites significant observations about the state of the Democratic Party. The Party saw the largest Democratic Senate losses since 1980. During the Obama presidency, the loss of nearly 70 House seats has resulted, producing the largest Republican majority since 1931. As columnist Michael Gerson demonstrates, the near-extinction of the Democratic Party in the South, including in Arkansas and Tennessee, which had produced the Party's national ticket in 1992 and 1996, is devastating. Furthermore, *Washington Post* analyst Dan Balz correctly concludes that, as the Obama administration comes to an end, the best-known Democrats are almost entirely from an older generation, from the vice president to the major leadership offices in the House and Senate. And, Hillary Rodham Clinton seems to be the presumptive 2016 Democratic presidential candidate—and she hardly represents new blood for the Democratic Party. Additionally, because of the results in the various state elections, the Party has a serious problem: The states have traditionally been the breeding ground for future national talent and for policy experimentation. Republicans have unified control (i.e., governor and state legislatures) in 23 states, while the Democrats have only 7. For the Democratic Party leaders, it would be difficult to be optimistic about the near-term future of the Party.
- Third, the response of President Obama is telling. During the weekend before the election, President Obama declared that “The American people are with us on all the big issues. You know it. I know it. The polls show it.” It would be very difficult to argue that the president made an accurate observation; his comments do not reflect reality! At his subsequent news conference after the election, he appeared grumpy, defensive and evidenced neither remorse nor a contrite spirit. Gerson captures the essence of the president's comments on the election: He “displayed a series of character traits that have become hardened and exaggerated under the pressure of defeat. His self-confidence has slipped into denial—imagining the election as a generalized anti-incumbent tantrum rather than a reaction to the performance of his administration. His moral certitude has turned into the graceless dismissal of opposition, who cannot be conceded anything more than a ‘good night.’ His pride of accomplishment has become a conviction that Americans are just insufficiently grateful for the ‘real progress’ of the past six years.” Anyone who is intellectually honest must conclude that the election results are a significant check on Obama's power and must be viewed as an evaluation of his presidential leadership, for he is not only the leader of the nation but also the leader of his Party.

One final thought about this election: President Obama came into office believing that he could wield his power as president and thereby use the wealth and power of the national government to make the economy, the health care system and the material well-being of the American people better. A more centralized and powerful governmental bureaucracy could be leveraged to improve life for the American people. If anything has been proven during Obama's six years as president, it is that the governmental bureaucracy is not more efficient, more effective or better equipped to serve the people. Just the opposite has been proven. Witness the catastrophic introduction of the health care overall called Obamacare. Witness the disastrous workings of the IRS, the Veteran's Administration, the Secret Service, the US Postal Service, etc. over the last six years. Enhancing the power of the centralized national government is not the answer to a

better society. Among many other things, this election demonstrated that the American voter has less trust and confidence in the national government than it did six years ago when Obama became president. It is time for everyone to admit that and seek to change the way government operates. What is occurring at the state levels of government (e.g., Wisconsin under Scott Walker, Ohio under John Kasich) needs to happen at the national level as well. May God give us the grace to effect this change!

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (6 November 2014); Dan Balz in www.washingtonpost.com (8 November 2014); Michael Gerson in www.washingtonpost.com (10 November 2014); and www.albertmohler.com (10 November 2014).