

October 26, 2010

To: Interested Parties

From: Lorraine Minnite, Ph.D.

Re: Debunking the Tea Party's Election Night Message

Pundits are predicting major Democratic Party losses in 2010's midterm elections, claiming that this year's unusually competitive cycle is a referendum on the size and reach of government in a year dominated by Tea Party conservatives.¹

There is little doubt that the electoral groups that in 2008 embraced Barack Obama's message of "hope, action and change" in 2008 and brought Democratic control to Washington are less engaged and less likely to vote this year.

Yet many of the features of the upcoming election, from the drop-off in voter turnout, to swings in political representation, and the uptick in activity by partisan idealists, are predictable outcomes that have distinguished midterm from presidential election cycles in recent years.

Midterm elections are always lower-turnout, more localized contests. It would be a mistake to characterize the November 2nd results as a nationwide mandate or political realignment. Nowhere is this more important than for what the media have identified as the top issue in this election: the scope and size of government.

Tea Party candidates and their policy ideas are not representative of most Americans, just as midterm elections are not national plebiscites. The Tea Party movement should be understood as a reflection of the discontent of its followers, primarily white, better-off, older, libertarian-leaning Republicans, rather than as a new majority in the American electorate. Polls find the Tea Party represents about 20 percent of likely 2010 voters, which is on par with support for Ross Perot's 1992 presidential candidacy.

The anticipated Republican gains are part of the rebalancing that occurs between presidential elections, rather than reflective of ideological shifts in the electorate. Despite 2010's political rhetoric, academic and media surveys from 2007 through today repeatedly find that most voters want government protection from economic hardship and continuity of core programs, such as Social Security, Medicare, in education and infrastructure spending.²

Most Americans want government to work on their behalf, regardless of which political party holds majority power. When government is not seen as effective, then voters across the political spectrum react differently. In 2010, many presidential-year voters will stay home. At the same time, critics of incumbents and those in the minority are energized and stand to make electoral gains. Such political transitions are normal.

I. Voting Behavior in 2010: Stability in Long-term Trends

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 as the first African-American U.S. president was a milestone. It capped an exciting campaign where unprecedented numbers of younger voters and people of color contributed to the highest voter turnout in a generation.³ Part of the year's enthusiasm and turnout was due to efforts by numerous civic groups apart from the political parties to register and mobilize eligible individuals from historically underrepresented constituencies, including millions of first-time and minority voters.⁴

Historical patterns in mid-term electoral participation suggest that, despite high levels of enthusiasm and participation in the 2008 presidential race, turnout will fall precipitously in 2010, as it has in mid-term elections for 170 years.⁵ Scholars refer to a "surge and decline" in presidential-to-midterm turnout, and debate why this is so.⁶ In general, contributing factors include the absence of a unifying campaign at the top of the ticket and differences in media coverage given presidential and congressional candidates, weaker voter mobilization efforts in presidential off-years, the significance attached by voters to the offices at stake, the competitiveness of the contests, and the peculiarity of local conditions that mostly set the terms for congressional races.⁷

Despite reports of a Democratic Party effort to turn out African-American voters this year,⁸ 2010 will be marked by far fewer voter registration drives and get-out-the-vote efforts than there were in 2008,⁹ including less door-to-door canvassing which is "by far the most powerful way to increase a person's likelihood of voting."¹⁰ Moreover, various polls since 2009 of constituencies that yielded large numbers of Obama supporters, notably people of color, young people, women and lower-income people, have found eligible voters discouraged by the job market and federal efforts to stimulate the economy, which might keep these voters at home.¹¹

In contrast, newfound activism and organizing by right-wing Tea Party campaigners, who have been very critical of the Obama administration and whose backers almost always say they support Republicans¹² has motivated individuals on this side of the political aisle in an otherwise "low salience" election year.¹³ Experienced analysts such as Larry J. Sabato of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, suggest this momentum will motivate independents to turn out for Republicans much as independents voted for Ross Perot for president in 1992.¹⁴ Additionally, a January 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision deregulating corporate spending in federal elections has led to an increase in financial underwriting of Tea Party activity.¹⁵ All of these facts have contributed to changing partisan voter registration margins, tightening races in many states.¹⁶

Turnout and Drop-off, 1998 – 2010 (projected)

	1998	2002	2006	2010
Turnout as a Percentage of Voting-Eligible Population	37.4	39.0	40.5	42.0
Drop-off as a Percentage of Presidential Vote	27.2	27.8	32.5	32.1

Source: Lori Minnite, "Sustaining Voter Participation Levels in 2010," Memorandum, Project Vote, February 19, 2010, 11.

Debunking the Tea Party's Election Night Message

Turnout in 2006, the last federal midterm election, was 40.5 percent of the voting-eligible population. After factoring in U.S. population growth (2.1 percent every two years), and keeping within recent trends in turnout from midterm elections in 1998, 2002 and 2006, it is likely that turnout in the 2010 election will hover about 20 percentage points below 2008's levels, where 62.2 percent of eligible voters cast ballots.¹⁷

II. Presidential and Midterm Elections and Electorates Are Different

While it is tempting to see each federal election as a national referendum on key issues, midterm and presidential elections differ in political characteristics and voter composition, and are not equivalent indices of national mood and sentiment.

In higher turnout presidential elections, the views of activists on either end of the political spectrum are diluted by larger numbers of moderate or more centrist voters. Additionally, there is the leavening effect of presidential nominees who tack to the center after nominating conventions and adopt campaign themes targeting majorities of voters. These appeals increase voter interest and turnout.

In contrast, in presidential primaries and midterm elections, which are state-based or district-centric, there is a greater potential for people holding more extreme views to influence or even dominate campaigns. The Tea Party's ascent is an example of this dynamic. However, it is important not to confuse views from a minority of voters, even in smaller turnout midterm elections, with the views of a majority of voters in a presidential cycle.

III. Partisan Shifts in Congress Do Not Reflect Ideological Shifts in the Electorate

Midterm voters resemble party primary voters, who often are more strongly partisan than general election voters and the public at large.¹⁸ In the absence of big, visible, national campaigns to mobilize interest among younger voters and minorities, contemporary midterm electorates tend to be older and whiter than the general population. This trend is long-standing and independent of any Tea Party effect.

Polls targeting specific constituencies of voters who increased their electoral participation in 2008, as well as surveys of likely 2010 voters conducted in recent months, portray a range of values and attitudes toward the desired role and scope of the federal government.¹⁹ Key constituencies who helped elect Obama – blacks, Hispanics, youth and women – generally support a government buffer against the vagaries of the marketplace. For example, a 2008 survey of young Hispanics found these voters “fairly liberal in their political thinking,” stating “large majorities believe in a strong role for government in our society and that government should be heavily involved in the creation of jobs and improvement of the economy.”²⁰ Nearly two-thirds agreed that, “government does a better job than people give it credit for.”²¹ A January-February 2010 survey of 2008 voters, which included special samples of African-American women, Latinas, low-income women and single mothers, found overwhelming concern about deteriorating economic conditions and a widespread belief across party lines that the federal government can and should “take a larger, stronger role in making the economy work.”²²

Debunking the Tea Party's Election Night Message

Notably, voters in the political center hold similar pro-government beliefs. A report on an October 2010 poll by *The Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University said, “Americans continue to see major areas of government spending as essential. Whether it is Medicare, Social Security, national defense, food stamps, education, unemployment benefits or environmental protection, about nine in 10 (voters) call these programs at least somewhat important.”²³ Furthermore, it noted that, “most Americans who say they want more limited government also call Social Security and Medicare ‘very important.’ They want Washington to be involved in schools and to help reduce poverty. Nearly half want the government to maintain a role regulating health care.”²⁴

An April 2010 survey of 1,546 adults by the Pew Research Center tested reactions to nine words and phrases used frequently in contemporary political discourse. We cannot know what people mean by the terms, so the results should be interpreted with care. Nevertheless, the findings regarding reactions to the words “capitalism” and “socialism” cast doubt on the claim that the U.S. is a center-right country. Only a bare majority (52 percent) reacted positively to the word “capitalism,” and majorities of Democrats (81 percent), independents (64 percent) and Republicans (56 percent) react positively to the word “progressive.” Similarly, a 2009 Rasmussen poll found that only 53 percent of Americans described capitalism as “superior” to socialism, while a 2010 Gallup poll found that 37 percent of all Americans prefer socialism as “superior” to capitalism.

Favorable reactions to the word “socialism” are notable among the young, who are more positive toward socialism and more negative toward capitalism than older adults. Equal percentages (43 percent) of adults under the age of 30 react positively to capitalism and socialism. Among women, low-income groups and less educated adults, less than 50 percent describe capitalism as positive.

In a comment on the Pew findings and his own research, noted sociologist Charles Derber, a prolific writer whose work analyzes the individualism that defines American life, writes, “On nearly every major issue, from support for the minimum wage and unions, preference for diplomacy over force, deep concern for the environment, belief that big business is corrupting democracy, and support for many major social programs including Social Security and Medicare, the progressive position has been strong and relatively stable.”²⁵

In contrast, Tea Party conservatives, who, according to an April 2010 *New York Times*/CBS survey, are older, wealthier and whiter than the population and electorate at large, oppose affirmative governmental action on a range of issues, from economic assistance to civil rights, and believe that people should fend for themselves.²⁶ The *Times*/CBS poll found “18 percent of Americans... identify themselves as Tea Party supporters.”²⁷ According to a mid-October *USA Today*/Gallup Poll, these voters represent about “22 percent of Americans at one end (of the political spectrum) who want government out of their lives – among them many Tea Party supporters – to the 20 percent at the other end who endorse an expansive government that protects its citizens from life’s travails.”²⁸

Thus, while the Tea Party movement has been ascendant since Obama’s election, their percentage among likely voters is modest. “The government is the problem mantra draws only about one in five voters,” *USA Today*/Gallup’s poll found.²⁹ In contrast, “there is a broad consensus that the government ought to build transportation systems, protect consumers from unsafe products, preserve the environment and combat discrimination. Nearly six in 10 say government should make sure all Americans have adequate health care, despite qualms about the health care overhaul President Obama signed this year.”³⁰

Curiously, many Tea Party supporters “say they’re for small government, but don’t want anyone to touch their Social Security and Medicare,” which was how a conservative *New York Times* columnist put it in an October 2010 op-ed that asked if Tea Partiers are hypocrites?³¹ The analysis accompanying the *USA Today*/Gallup poll had a more nuanced explanation of conflicting attitudes among many likely voters in 2010—not just Tea Party supporters. Their survey “reveals a complicated landscape of beliefs: Most Americans endorse government activism—not only national defense but also the environment, civil rights and consumer protection—but doubt the competence of

Debunking the Tea Party's Election Night Message

government to deliver results effectively and efficiently.”³² A July 2010 poll by the left-leaning Center for American Progress similarly found most Americans want “better, not smaller” government. The report concluded from the survey findings that, “People would rather improve government performance than reduce its size.”³³

While strident partisans and supportive media outlets will be tempted to over interpret 2010 electoral victories as new mandates to downsize or curtail government, surveys by academics and reputable polling firms during the past several years have repeatedly found voters want government to be *effective* where a government role is warranted.

Pollsters know they can skew results by the way they pose questions. Whether someone is concerned about ‘big government’ is not the same question as whether that person is concerned about ‘effective government.’ Whether someone fears a future governmental policy, such as health care reforms that have not taken effect, is not the same as how they feel about a current policy decision, such a recently announced suspension of the cost-of-living increase for Social Security beneficiaries for the second year in a row.³⁴

What is clear from a range of recent surveys about government performance is that most eligible voters want government to be effective, but a sizeable percentage of these voters are disappointed with the impact of federal actions taken by the Obama Administration or the preceding Administration to revive the economy and stimulate job growth.

A 2007 survey conducted by political scientists Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs provides a baseline. Taken before the first federal subsidies to Wall Street institutions by the previous administration, the survey found a majority of middle-class voters want government to play a constructive role and maintain safety nets, even as they said public officials do not pay attention to people like them.³⁵ That last qualification, that respondents want government to be effective even as it does not appear to be helping them, is critical to understanding voter dynamics in the 2010 midterm election.

Page and Jacobs’ findings have been confirmed by a number of surveys conducted since the Obama Administration took office. For example, a January-February 2010 poll that over-sampled minority and low-income women found that economic issues such as jobs, health care, everyday expenses were the top concerns. A majority of respondents said they wanted government relief, but did not see it yet.³⁶ In August 2010, Project Vote conducted a poll that over-sampled African American, young, and low-income voters and found majorities did not approve of the federal government’s use of tax dollars to bail out major banks and car makers; instead, these voters said that government should do more to help people in economic distress.³⁷ Findings such as these in part explain voter drop-off in 2010 among these groups.

Sustained economic hardship can shake faith in government. An April 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center exploring “the economy, satisfaction and trust in government” noted, “It is no surprise that trust in government falls during economic hard times.”³⁸ Moreover, the survey tracked the public’s trust in government over time and found that signature events during the final term of George W. Bush’s presidency, including the response to Hurricane Katrina, doubt about the war in Iraq, and financial scandal, lowered overall public trust. Following Obama’s 2008 victory, Democratic trust rebounded, Pew found, although the report concludes that, “By almost every conceivable measure Americans are less positive and more critical of government these days.”³⁹

The factors discussed in this memo – surging and receding voter groups, long-term voter expectations and near-term attitudes toward government actions – all distinguish midterm elections in general, and the 2010 midterm in particular. Voters are always less engaged by congressional elections in the off-years. Whatever the electoral and political outcomes of the coming election, there is nothing in recent polling to suggest that voter expectations for government’s mission have fundamentally changed. If anything, there is an enduring expectation that government more efficiently and effectively intervene where its actions are warranted, and disappointment when the expected impact is not seen or felt.

Conclusion

The purpose of this memo is to summarize recent survey research about public expectations and attitudes toward government as the context for analyzing the 2010 federal midterm election results. There is strong support from this evidence that a majority of voters expect government to provide key services that are not offered by the private sector; and express real disappointment when policies and programs do not expeditiously address personal needs.

Small shifts in voting behavior sometimes can produce large political changes in electoral outcomes. When it comes to the important questions framing 2010's midterm elections, the role of government and what most Americans want government to do in regulating the economy and in protecting them from market failures, it will be important to parse the results with care. The rise of Tea Party politics during difficult economic times mostly reflects the growing discontent of older, white Americans with long term, secular changes in U.S. society as it becomes more racially diverse. In contrast, most Americans still want government to work on their behalf, and that view has not changed since at least 2007, regardless of which party holds majority power in Washington.

Notes

- ¹ On predictions of big losses for the Democrats, see Nate Silver, "GOP Odds of House Majority Now 3 in 4," *FiveThirtyEight*, Nate Silver's Political Calculus, *New York Times*, October 20, 2010, available online: <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/20/g-o-p-odds-of-house-majority-now-3-in-4/?scp=1&sq=2010%20mid-term%20projections&st=cse>. On the unusual competitiveness of the 2010 midterm elections, see Nate Silver, "For Politicians and Pundits, Tough Year for Predictions," *New York Times*, October 12, 2010, A15. On the theme of the election, see Jon Cohen and Dan Balz, "Beyond the Tea Party: What Americans Really Think of Government," *Washington Post*, October 10, 2010, available online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/09/AR2010100903308.html>. And on the dominance of Tea Party conservatives, see Amy Gardner, "Gauging the Scope of the Tea Party Movement in America," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2010, available online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/23/AR2010102304000.html?wpisrc=nl_pmheadline.
- ² Lorraine C. Minnite, "What Happened to Hope and Change? A Poll of 2008 Voters," Project Vote, September 2010, available online: <http://projectvote.org/voter-poll-results.html>.
- ³ Amanda Ruggeri, "Young Voters Powered Obama's Victory While Shrugging Off Slacker Image," *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, available online: <http://politics.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/06/young-voters-powered-obamas-victory-while-shrugging-off-slacker-image.html>. For data on turnout, see Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," Current Population Reports P20-562 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, May 2010); and, Michael McDonald, United States Election Project; available online: http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2008G.html.
- ⁴ Ethan Roeder, "Voter Registration Analysis '08: Evaluating Independent Voter Registration Efforts from the 2008 Election Cycle," Unpublished Report (Washington, D.C.: New Organizing Institute, December 2009).
- ⁵ Jerrold G. Rusk, *A Statistical History of the American Electorate* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2001, 46-7, and table 3.6, p. 55).
- ⁶ The "surge and decline" theory of turnout is associated with Angus Campbell; see Campbell, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24: 397-418.
- ⁷ See, "National Study of Young Hispanics," Democracia USA, June 2010; available upon request (email Info@democracia-ahora.org); "Community Voices on the Economy Survey," Ms. Foundation for Women and Center for Community Change, June 24, 2010; available online: [http://ms.foundation.org/our_work/broad-change-areas/economic-justice/community-voices-on-the-economy-;](http://ms.foundation.org/our_work/broad-change-areas/economic-justice/community-voices-on-the-economy-) Jeremy Reiss and Krista Pietrangelo, "The Unheard Third 2009: A Survey of Low-Income New Yorkers," Community Service Society of New York, May 2010; available online: <http://www.cssny.org/userimages/downloads/UnheardThird%202009%20Job%20Loss%20Economic%20Insecurity%20and%20a%20Decline%20in%20Job%20Quality%20-%20May%202010.pdf>
- ⁸ Kevin Sack, "Black Turnout Will Be Crucial for Democrats," *New York Times*, October 17, 2010.

Debunking the Tea Party's Election Night Message

- ⁹ Minnite, "Sustaining Voter Participation Levels in 2010."
- ¹⁰ Todd Rogers and Regina Schwartz, "Measuring GOTV Effectiveness: What Works and What Does Not?" Memorandum (Washington, D.C.: Analyst Institute, June 2008).
- ¹¹ See, "National Study of Young Hispanics," Bendixen and Amandi, Democracia USA, June 2010; available online: http://www.democraciaahora.org/national_study_of_young_hispanics_signup/; "Community Voices on the Economy Survey," Ms. Foundation Center and Center for Community Change, June 24, 2010; available online: http://ms.foundation.org/our_work/broad-change-areas/economic-justice/community-voices-on-the-economy-; "The Unheard Third 2009: Job Loss, Economic Insecurity, and a Decline in Job Quality," Jeremy Reiss and Krista Pietrangelo, Community Service Society of New York, May 2010.
- ¹² Kate Zernike and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated," *New York Times*, April 14, 2010, available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/15/us/politics/15poll.html>.
- ¹³ On congressional elections as "second order" elections, see Franklin and Evans, "The Low Voter Turnout Problem."
- ¹⁴ Larry J. Sabato, "Sabato's Crystal Ball: Notes on the State of Politics," February 11, 2010; available online: <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/ljs2010021102/>.
- ¹⁵ Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations: The Billionaire Brothers Who Are Waging A War Against Obama," *New Yorker*, August 30, 2010; available online: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer?currentPage=all
- ¹⁶ Michael P. McDonald, "Partisan Voter Registration Totals," *Huffington Post*, October 13, 2010; available online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-p-mcdonald/partisan-voter-registrati_b_761713.html?view=print.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Flanigan and Zingale, *Political Behavior in Midterm Elections*, 27-28.
- ¹⁹ Ruggeri, "Young Voters Powered Obama's Victory."
- ²⁰ "National Study of Young Hispanics."
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² "Community Voices on the Economy."
- ²³ Cohen and Balz, "Beyond the Tea Party."
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Charles Derber, "Capitalism vs. Socialism: Big Surprises in Recent Polls," *CommonDreams*, May 18, 2010; available online: <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2010/05/18-3>.
- ²⁶ Zernike and Thee-Brenan, "Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated."
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Susan Page, "From Right and Left, Differing Views of the Government's Proper Role," *USA Today*, October 11, 2010; available online: <http://www.usatoday.com/clean-print/?1286920445926>.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Ross Douthat, "Tales of the Tea Party," *New York Times*, October 17, 2010, A35.
- ³² Page, "From Right and Left."
- ³³ Guy Molyneux, Ruy Teixeira, John Whaley, "Better Not Smaller: What Americans Want from Their Federal Government," *Center for American Progress*, July 27, 2010; available online: http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/07/what_americans_want.html.
- ³⁴ Matt Sedensky, "Seniors Prepare for a Social Security Freeze," *Associated Press*, October 11, 2010; available online: http://www.salon.com/news/great_recession/?story=/news/feature/2010/10/11/us_social_security_no_cola.
- ³⁵ Benjamin I. Page and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Class War: What Americans Really Think About Economic Inequality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- ³⁶ "Community Voices on the Economy."
- ³⁷ Minnite, "What Happened to Hope and Change?"
- ³⁸ Pew Research Center Publications, "Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor: The People and Their Government," April 18, 2010; available online: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1569/trust-in-government-distrust-discontent-anger-partisan-rancor>.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*

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