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Less here than meets the eye

NCR Editorial Staff | Nov. 8, 2010

The broad outlines of the 2010 midterm elections, if not the magnitude of the Republican victory, were evident months ago. Two key indicators pointed the way.

First, and this is Politics 101, the party that controls the White House suffers significant losses in congressional races two years after it claims the presidency. There are many reasons for this, not least that many freshman and two-term representatives who ride a top-of-the-ticket presidential wave to office simply cannot sustain their positions in an off-year contest.

This doesn?t mean, of course, that the Democrats were preordained to lose control of the House of Representatives or have their majority pared back in the Senate. Perhaps with different tactics or a more refined message, Democrats could have limited their losses. That said, 2010 had all the makings of a Republican year.

Next, when the official unemployment rate hovers near double digits for two years (the ?unofficial? number being at least twice that), the incumbent party pays a price. The Great Recession likely would have been far worse without the government intervention represented by the ?stimulus bill? and other efforts. But people are hurting and, naturally enough, blame those who control the levers of power.

The Democrats would have done considerably better had the unemployment rate been at 7 percent on Election Day.

But surely there?s a broader message conveyed in the 2010 election results?

Yes, says the political left: Too many tepid Democrats ran from rather than embraced the progressive victories on health care and Wall Street reform that should have been a central part of their message. Plus, according to this critique, by failing to take on such issues as immigration reform or limiting Bush-era tax cuts, Democrats ceded too much of the ideological playing field to Republicans.

The political right, represented in the public?s mind by tea party activists, sees the landscape differently. The election results represent, they argue, a repudiation of President Obama?s ?left-wing? agenda. Americans, they say, long for smaller government, less federal spending and a return to constitutional principles.

There?s a strong tendency after an election to search for broader themes. After all, the political chattering class needs something to chatter about. But sometimes, and the message of the 2010 election is a prime example, there is less here than meets the eye.

The optimum moment for a new administration to achieve far-reaching goals is early in its tenure: Think FDR and the New Deal (1933-34), LBJ and the Great Society and civil rights (1964-65), Ronald Reagan and the military buildup and tax cuts (1981-82), Bill Clinton and economic stimulus (1993), and George W. Bush and tax cuts and ?No Child Left Behind? (2001-2002). Presidents simply have more political capital early in their terms, fresh from an electoral mandate, than they do later in their terms.

Those who value the common good over special interests should be proud that the Obama administration and a Democratic Congress, acting against a united Republican House and Senate, ensured health care coverage for all Americans. Common sense controls, enacted over near unanimous Republican objections, on the worst of Wall Street?s excesses are now in place. Unemployment assistance has been extended to millions of Americans who would otherwise face dire poverty. The worst possible outcome of our current economic catastrophe -- a full-scale meltdown on the order of the Great Depression -- was narrowly averted through prudent use of federal resources.

That the Obama administration and the Democratic Congress chose to confront tough issues is to their credit. That they suffered the no-good-deed-goes-unpunished consequences of their actions at a time of economic distress and a favorable environment for their political opponents may be distressing. But it?s not surprising.

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