



Strategic politicians, partisan roll calls, and the Tea Party: Evaluating the 2010 midterm elections



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ABSTRACT

The 2010 midterm elections were politically and historically significant in several respects. This article offers a concise narrative of the congressional elections beginning with a discussion of the factors influencing the outcome of the historic election. We briefly consider established research on congressional elections and analyze the degree to which these theories apply to the specific circumstances in 2010. Throughout the article, we compare the 2010 midterms to two other recent elections, 2006 and 2008. We also examine several idiosyncratic aspects of the 2010 elections, relative to the historic midterm elections of 1994 and 2006, as well as the effects of the stimulus and healthcare reform bills and the Tea Party movement. We find strong effects for member votes on the individual roll calls, but little evidence of Tea Party influence on electoral outcomes.

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The 2010 midterms will likely go down as one of the most historic elections in the modern era. With the biggest turnover at the midterm for either party since 1938, Republicans regained control of the U.S. House of Representatives, following four years of Democratic leadership. After enjoying a near-filibuster proof majority, Democrats' seat share in the Senate was reduced to just 53. Additionally, the election showcased the burgeoning Tea Party, a conservative grassroots movement with a distinct anti-Washington, anti-incumbent flavor. This article offers a narrative of the 2010 elections, examining how the results fit into our broader knowledge from the literature about congressional elections. In particular, we demonstrate how 2010 reinforces and deviates from the expectations about congressional elections set forth by previous research, as well as assess the historical consequences of this midterm election.

The paper begins with a discussion of the political environment leading up to the 2010 elections, including

economic conditions and changes in presidential approval. We discuss the election results and analyze the aggregate trends for incumbents and quality challengers, as well as the role played by the Tea Party. We also compare 2010 to two recent midterm elections in which control of Congress shifted—namely, 1994 and 2006. We then present our empirical model of vote results, which accounts for the specific factors influencing the electoral outcome in 2010. Our conclusion offers a brief discussion of the policy implications surrounding the elections as well as the potential impact on the 2012 presidential election.

1. Postscript: election 2008

Following the huge Democratic success during the 2008 elections at nearly all levels, the pro-Democratic trend shifted in the 2009 gubernatorial elections as these seats in New Jersey and Virginia switched hands from Democrat to Republican. As the calendar turned to 2010, the GOP gained even more electoral traction. In mid-January, Republican Scott Brown won a special election for the seat held by the late Senator Ted Kennedy, becoming the first Republican to represent Massachusetts in the Senate since 1979. There

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were also four special elections for House seats in 2010. Three of these seats had been held by Democrats (FL-19, HI-1, and PA-12), and one had been held by a Republican (GA-9). Republicans were able to successfully defend the seat in Georgia and picked up the Democratic seat in Hawaii. These early successes signaled a shift in public attitudes toward the Republican Party. Indeed, the GOP was able to turn favorable electoral conditions throughout 2010 into a strong field of candidates, who delivered the most successful election for the Republicans in more than seven decades.

Scholars have put forward a number of competing and complementary explanations for why the president's party tends to lose House seats at the midterm.¹ The surge and decline model suggests that in a presidential election year, a successful presidential candidate provides a surge in the vote margin of his or her party's congressional candidates, but that this surge disappears in midterm elections, aiding the out-party's vote total (Campbell, 1960, 1991). Other scholars argue that midterm losses occur because voters use the midterms as a referendum on presidential performance (Tufte, 1975; Jacobson, 2007). Another explanation for midterm shifts is the "exposure thesis," which suggests that a party with strong seat margins in Congress has difficulty adding to its margin in future elections given the large number of seats already held by the party (Oppenheimer et al., 1986). At the midterm, the out-party can recapture marginal seats won on the coattails of the president, thus returning the partisan balance closer to its equilibrium point. Researchers have also posited that American voters seek to balance competing policy preferences by electing different parties into different positions in the government. In short, Americans seek balance between branches of government during the midterm so that one party does not control all stages of the legislative process (Bafumi et al., 2010a).²

There are two factors that strongly influence midterm elections: economic conditions and presidential popularity (Tufte, 1975). Some of the earliest work argued that the influences of economics and presidential popularity were mostly found in the candidate emergence stage of an election (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). The emergence of strong candidates in congressional elections is the way in which political elites turn favorable national economic conditions into a successful election cycle (Jacobson, 1989). More recent work has shown that these factors have a measurable, independent influence on voting decisions. Indeed, Alesina and Rosenthal (1989) demonstrate that macroeconomic conditions play a role in the outcomes of congressional midterm elections. The popularity of the incumbent president also has a direct influence on vote choice, even when controlling for economic conditions (Abramowitz, 1985). Often left out of

consideration is the set of candidates fielded by each party. Candidate experience has been found to have a significant impact on individual congressional elections, yet it is rarely considered in the context of aggregate analyses of seat turnover. The findings in this paper suggest that party recruitment advantages ought to be considered alongside economic conditions and presidential popularity when analyzing aggregated election outcomes.

1.1. Economic conditions and congressional domestic policy

Much of the focus of congressional campaigns in 2010 was on the unemployment rate and job creation (Jacobson, 2011). Just as the financial meltdown and economic downturn were the key issues in 2008, by the beginning of 2010, conditions had not improved. When Obama took office in January of 2009, the unemployment rate was at 8.5%; one year later it had grown to 10.6%. The figure slightly dropped in 2010 to 9%, but with such a high number of Americans without jobs, this became the top issue for Republicans prior to the elections. Although increases in unemployment early in his term could not be blamed on Obama, by 2010 it became more and more difficult for the Democrats to pin the blame on the policies of former President Bush.

One major reason that Obama had difficulty deflecting blame for the weak economy is that Democrats struggled to tie his domestic policy initiatives to job creation. A good example of this "messaging" failure is the media's discussion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (more commonly known as the stimulus bill). Much of the rhetoric regarding the stimulus focused on the amount being spent, \$787 billion, rather than the number of jobs the legislation had the potential of creating.³ A direct consequence of this rhetorical framing was that the stimulus reinforced the Republican framing of Democrats as big government spenders.

The other piece of legislation that influenced campaigns was the Patient and Protection and Affordable Care Act. Central to Obama's 2008 campaign, the legislation's purpose was to provide health insurance to all Americans. The most controversial aspect of the legislation was the mandate that all Americans purchase some form of health insurance.⁴ Conservatives criticized this aspect of the law as evidence of government intrusion into citizens' personal liberties. Instead of becoming a success on which Democrats could campaign, previous votes in support of the bill became a potential political liability for some moderate Democrats. Holding Democrats accountable for these legislative decisions may provide support for the partisan balancing hypothesis, as a shift in voting toward Republicans may signal voters' desires for more ideologically balanced policy outcomes.

¹ For an excellent discussion that emphasizes the distinction between the determinants of congressional election outcomes and the determinants of individual voting behavior in the context of the 2010 midterms, see Clarke et al. (2012).

² An additional explanation is that voters punitively punish the in-party, even accounting for exogenous influence on voting (Erikson, 1988).

³ Steele, Michael. "It's the spending, Mr. President." *Politico*. 1 April 09. www.politico.com/news/stories/0409/20764.html.

⁴ Connolly, Ceci and Jon Cohen. "Most Want Health Reform But Fear Its Side Effects." *The Washington Post*. 24 June 09. www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/06/23/AR2009062303510.html?hpid=topnews.

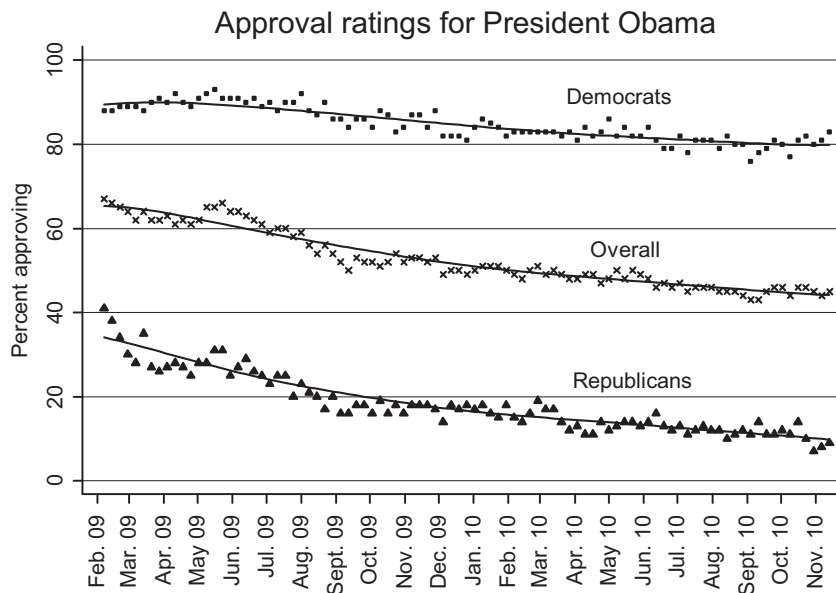


Fig. 1. Overall approval ratings for President Obama and by party affiliation. These approval data come from Gallup weekly tracking polls available online at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.

1.2. Obama's approval and generic congressional balloting

The political consequences of the unpopularity of these domestic policies, as well as the perpetually high unemployment rate, can be seen in Obama's approval rating. Fig. 1 shows the steady decline in approval for President Obama between his inauguration in early 2009 and the midterm elections in 2010.⁵ The middle line is the lowest smoother for his aggregate approval rating. The top and bottom lines are approval ratings for Obama among Democrats and Republicans, respectively. Approval steadily declined during Obama's first two years in office. At the time of his inauguration, his overall approval was about 65%, but by October 2010 it had diminished to around 45%. Democrats began Obama's term approving of the president at a rate of about 90% and declined to 80% by the midterm elections. For Republicans, however, the figure began at 40% but quickly dropped and spent most of late 2010 hovering around 10%.

Another way to assess the impact of these macro-level trends is by looking at generic congressional balloting polls, which serve as a metric for how each party can expect to do in the election based on broad aggregate trends, such as the economy or presidential approval. Fig. 2 shows the generic ballot data between January 2009 and October 2010.⁶ Points marked by a × represent the percent surveyed

who said they would vote Republican, whereas squares represent votes for Democrats. The two lines are lowest smoothers for data in the scatterplots. This graph offers counterintuitive evidence about the trends of the two parties. The conventional view is that as approval for one party increases, so too should the other party's approval decrease. What we see here, however, is approval for the Democrats stayed nearly constant between 41% and 43%. Republicans, on the other hand, began with an approval below 40% and approached 50% by Election Day. This suggests that Republican gains were not made by converting voters who had previously intended to vote Democratic, but rather came as a result of persuading previously undecided voters to vote Republican. Democratic voters for Congress were likely among those approving of Obama's job performance that continued to vote for the Democrats. Republicans, in contrast, used 2010 to show their disapproval of the administration's policies. There was also much more enthusiasm for GOP candidates in the months leading up to the election, most likely a function of the increasing role played by the Tea Party (Jacobson, 2011).

1.3. The Tea Party

The Tea Party movement began in 2009, shortly after President Obama's inauguration. Their message began as one of fiscal conservatism: a populist response to the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and the stimulus package. The narrative that some Tea Party members pushed was that they were a group of non-political individuals whose dissatisfaction with Washington politics had reached a tipping point. In the 2010 primaries, Tea Party organizations endorsed House and Senate candidates nationwide. In all, non-incumbent candidates that identified with the Tea

⁵ These approval data come from Gallup weekly tracking polls. Available online at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.

⁶ Included in this graph are polls from ABC News/Washington Post (8), CBS News (4), CNN (13), Gallup (43), Newsweek (4), Pew Research (9), Quinnipiac (7), Rasmussen (92), Reuters (5), and USA Today (4). These data come from Real Clear Politics: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/polls/other/generic_congressional_vote-901.html.

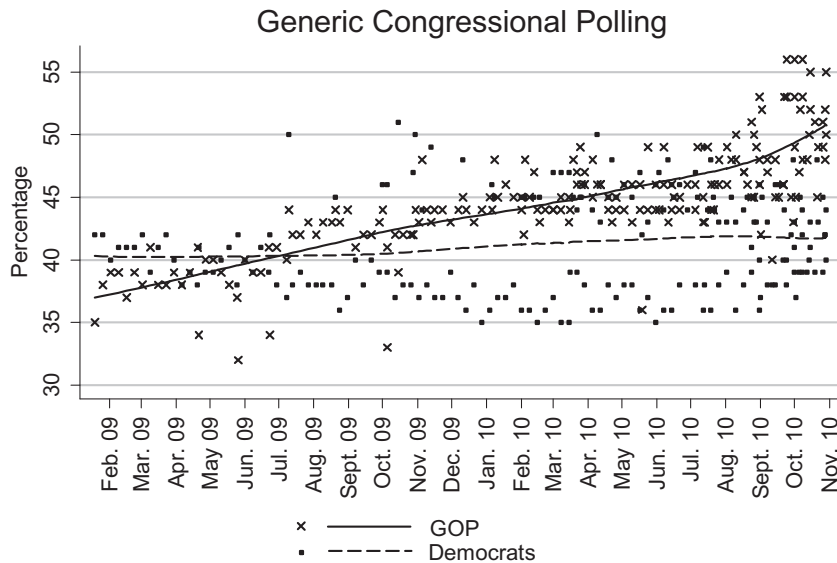


Fig. 2. Generic congressional polling for Democrats and Republicans in the months leading up to the 2010 midterm elections. Included in this graph are polls from ABC News/Washington Post (8), CBS News (4), CNN (13), Gallup (43), Newsweek (4), Pew Research (9), Quinnipiac (7), Rasmussen (92), Reuters (5), and USA Today (4). These data are from Real Clear Politics: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/generic_congressional_vote-901.html.

Party were nominated in 127 House districts.⁷ Three of these House candidates defeated incumbents in the primaries. In addition, there were nine Tea Party candidates for Senate, seven of which won their primary election despite lacking the support of state Republican leaders, and two of which (Joe Miller-AK and Mike Lee-UT) defeated incumbent senators in the primary.

Comparing the traits of districts featuring a Tea Party candidate to all other districts with a non-incumbent, Republican challenger provides some indications as to the underlying nature of the movement. The average district partisanship in which each group ran was almost identical.⁸ Tea Party candidates ran a higher proportion of races against incumbents than other Republican challengers, 88.3%–82.2%. This seems to provide evidence that the Tea Party was made up of political outsiders, since non-quality challengers are more likely to run against an incumbent than in open seat races (Banks and Kiewiet, 1989). The assertion of political amateurism does not hold up to statistical testing, however. Overall, there were 30 Tea Party candidates with elective experience (23.6%) and 47 non-Tea Party Republican challengers (32.2%).⁹ Still, it would be an overstatement to suggest that Tea Partiers were completely disingenuous (with regard to their claim of being political novices) because these results are influenced by the exclusion of candidates that lost in the primary.¹⁰

⁷ From the New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/10/15/us/politics/tea-party-graphic.html>.

⁸ The average district vote for Obama in 2008 was 58.35% for the former group and 60.46% for the latter. The mean Democratic vote percentages for Congress in 2008 were 65.51% and 65.31% respectively.

⁹ A difference of proportions *t*-test of these values fails to reject the null hypothesis ($p = .1165$).

¹⁰ A more comprehensive assessment would require data on all Tea Party primary election candidates, not just those running in the general election.

2. Strategic retirements and open seats

Table 1 presents the political landscape of the House before the 2010 elections as well as the two previous congressional elections. Entering 2010, the Democrats had a 77-seat margin in the House. Of the 42 open seats, there was nearly an equal number that had previously been held by Republicans as Democrats. In fact, although research indicates that incumbents are strategic in their decision to retire (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981), there were actually more Republican than Democratic open seats. This is surprising given that factors predicting success suggested a strong Republican advantage in 2010. In 2008 and 2006, however, Democrats had 21 and 7 fewer open seats than Republicans, respectively. When the departing incumbents in open seats are examined more closely, we find the trends in 2010 more closely match expectations. Eleven of the twenty-two Republican open seats were vacated by representatives seeking higher office. Only six of the twenty Democratic open seats became vacant because of progressive ambition by the incumbent. Thus, there were three more Democrats than Republicans who voluntarily retired from politics.

This evidence more strongly fits with expectations, yet a difference of three retirements still seems small given the strong national tides against the Democratic Party. Marginality and tenure provide a possible explanation for why Democrats did not retire at higher rates. In 2006 and 2008, Democrats made substantial seat gains in marginal House districts. Many of these incumbents represented constituents that voted in favor of John McCain in 2008 and could be considered more conservative. Although these incumbents appear the most likely to retire given their precarious electoral prospects, their tenure in Congress was also the shortest. They likely had not developed the political savvy or personal vote of other

Table 1
Seat distribution and candidate recruitment by party in recent House elections.

	2006	2008	2010
Total			
Seats won in prior election	434 ^b	435	435
Open seats previously held	34	35	42
Incumbents retirements	13	24	21
Incumbent seeking higher office	18	7	17
Incumbent primary defeats	3	3	4
Candidates running	810	816	841
Incumbents	401	400	393
Challengers	409	416	448
Quality challengers	99	103	123
Versus an incumbent	60	58	81
In an open seat district	39	45	41
Democrats			
Seats won in prior election	202	233	257
Open seats previously held	12	7 ^a	20
Incumbents retirements	3	3	12
Incumbent seeking higher office	8	3	6
Incumbent primary defeats	1	0	2
Candidates running	421	420	411
Incumbents	191	229	236
Challengers	230	191	175
Quality challengers	54	48	45
Versus an incumbent	36	25	28
In an open seat district	18	23	17
Republicans			
Seats won in prior election	232	202	178
Open seats previously held	22	28	22
Incumbents retirements	10	21	9
Incumbent seeking higher office	10	4	11
Incumbent primary defeats	2	3	2
Candidates running	389	396	430
Incumbents	210	171	157
Challengers	179	225	273
Quality challengers	45	55	77
Versus an incumbent	24	33	53
In an open seat district	21	22	24

^a Stephanie Tubbs-Jones died before the general election but after winning renomination.

^b The remaining seat was held by Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont.

more seasoned incumbents and may have expected to be able to use the advantages of incumbency to maintain their positions in Congress (Cover, 1977; Ansolabehere et al., 2000).

There were two incumbents in both parties who were defeated in the 2010 primaries, the highest such number since 2002. One Republican defeated was Bob Inglis, a five-term incumbent from South Carolina's strongly Republican 4th district, who lost to Trey Gowdy, a district attorney with Tea Party backing. Gowdy, as well as the three other primary challengers, criticized Inglis's vote in support of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (the financial bailout) and his opposition to the 2007 troop surge in Iraq.¹¹ The second Republican was Parker Griffith of Alabama's 5th district. Griffith was first elected in 2008 as a Democratic candidate and switched parties in 2009. The switch was the central issue in the 2010 Republican

primary, in which Griffith lost to Madison County Commissioner Mo Brooks.¹²

The two Democrats that were defeated in the primaries were Alan Mollohan (WV-1) and Carolyn Kilpatrick (MI-13). Mollohan's defeat was similar to that of Inglis; he represented a district that previously supported McCain and was criticized for being too liberal. He lost to State Senator Mike Oliverio, who focused his campaign on Mollohan's votes for the stimulus package and healthcare reform.¹³ Kilpatrick's defeat, in contrast, does not fit the pattern of an incumbent out of touch with her district ideologically. Having served in Congress since 1997, Kilpatrick had established a record of ideological liberalism that meshed well with constituents who supported Obama in 2008, 85%–15%. Kilpatrick was defeated in the primaries by State Senator Hansen Clarke, who highlighted several minor scandals and accusations of corruption in her campaign.¹⁴

With the exception of Kilpatrick, each instance of primary defeat came as a result of a challenger running to the right of the incumbent, while criticizing the incumbent for being too supportive of Obama. This anecdotal evidence suggests that being associated with the president became a political liability for incumbents across both parties. These four cases of incumbent defeats can also be viewed as a harbinger of events to come in the November general election.

3. Quality challenger emergence

Perhaps the most important factor determining the outcome of a particular election is the quality of the challengers that emerge. The number of quality challengers that a party recruits is largely a function of electoral expectations (Jacobson, 2009). In the modern era, elected officials generally must give up their current seat if they commit to a congressional campaign.¹⁵ For this reason, these candidates are strategic in their decisions to run for a House seat. Most will only run when electoral circumstances—whether national tides or local idiosyncrasies—provide a reasonable opportunity for victory on Election Day (Maestas et al., 2006). Previous research suggests that strategic candidate emergence may provide the best explanation for how factors such as the economy or presidential approval affect electoral outcomes. In a year in which their party expects to make gains in Congress, quality candidates enter races at a higher rate, thus bringing about the electoral success that was expected (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981).

¹² "Parker Griffith Race in North Alabama Closely Watched." *The Associated Press*. 1 June 2010. Online at: <http://politics.usnews.com/news/articles/2010/06/01/griffith-race-in-north-ala-closely-watched.html>.

¹³ Oliverio Beats Incumbent Mollohan in US Rep. Race; McKinley Gets Republican Nod." *WTOV 9-Stuebenville/Wheeling, WV*. 12 May 2010. Online at: <http://www.wtov9.com/news/23524247/detail.html>.

¹⁴ Taylor, Jessica and David Catanese. "Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick falls, Rep. Jerry Moran rises." *Politico*. 4 August 2010. Online at: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0810/40627.html>.

¹⁵ For a discussion of candidate emergence in earlier eras, see Carson and Roberts (2005) and Carson et al. (2007).

¹¹ Spencer, Jason. "Inglis take shots from rivals, gets last word in 4th District debate." *Spartanburg's GoUpstate.com*. 23 May 2010. Online at: <http://www.goupstate.com/article/20100523/NEWS/100529899>.

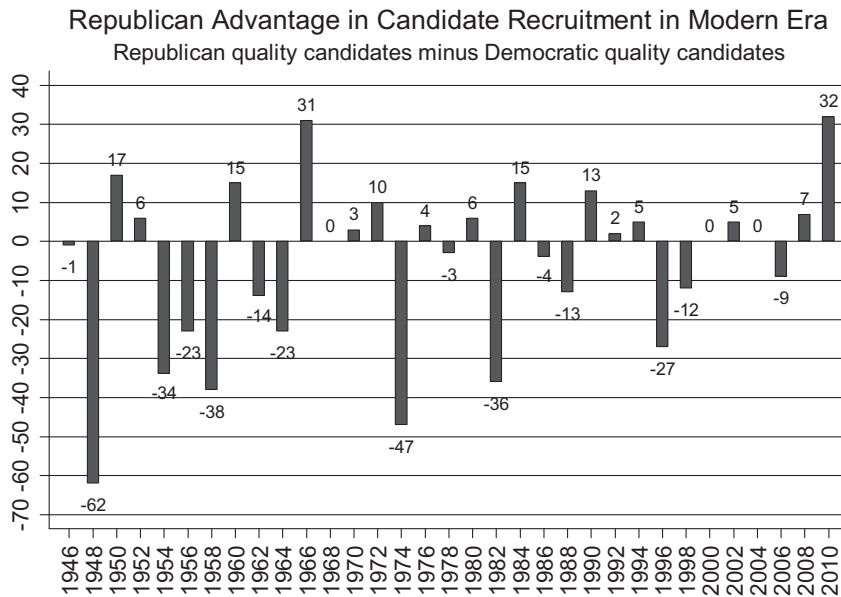


Fig. 3. This figure reflects the difference in the number of experienced or 'quality' candidates recruited for each party since the 1946 elections. Data generously shared by Gary Jacobson.

It should not come as a surprise that Republicans in 2010 had more success at candidate recruitment than Democrats. In terms of overall recruitment, as shown in Table 1, the Republican Party was able to field candidates in all but five House elections in 2010, unprecedented in the modern era. As a comparison, Democrats in 2008 and 2006 left 15 and 14 seats uncontested, respectively. The recruitment gap in 2010 between the parties is more striking when one takes into account the candidates' backgrounds. Republicans entered the November election with 77 challengers who had previous experience, compared to just 46 for the Democrats. Additionally, the GOP recruited almost twice the number of quality challengers to face incumbents than did the Democrats. Whereas 22% of Democratic incumbents campaigned against an experienced Republican, only 18% of Republican incumbents faced an experienced opponent. Republicans had an experience advantage in open seat races as well. Of the 20 open seats that were previously held by a Democrat, 10 featured a quality Republican candidate. Yet among the 22 Republican open seats, the Democrats were only able to put five quality candidates on the ballot.

The recruiting gap between the two parties becomes even more substantial when put into historical context. Fig. 3 shows the difference in the number of quality candidates recruited for each party since 1946. Data points above zero represent a Republican advantage and those below reflect a Democratic advantage. Having 32 more quality candidates on the ballot compared with the Democrats in 2010 represents the largest Republican advantage in the series. The Republican advantage in 2010 was also the sixth largest gap in favor of either party since World War II. Although 2006 was the strongest year for Democrats in terms of recruitment since 1998, the differential in 2006 is dwarfed by that of 2010.

It would be difficult to understate the importance of these data on candidate recruitment in 2010. Although presidential approval and economic conditions suggested a Republican victory in the midterms, the impact of these factors is largely conditioned on the type of candidates the GOP puts on the ballot (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Republicans appear to have won the initial political battle of fielding a superior field of candidates to vie for House seats. The remainder of the paper examines how Republicans translated these advantages into electoral success.

4. The 2010 midterm elections

The results of the 2006, 2008, and 2010 elections are presented in Table 2. Democrats entered the 2010 election holding the majority of seats in the House, 255 to 178. In all, there were 69 seats that changed partisan control in 2010, with the GOP capturing 242 seats to the Democrats' 193. Republicans made their biggest gains by defeating Democratic incumbent candidates. Whereas Democrats ousted only two Republican incumbents, Republicans defeated 52 Democratic members of Congress. In open seats, the GOP maintained control of 21 of the 22 seats they had previously held and took control of 14 of 20 seats that had been Democratic.¹⁶

We also find that there were 61 districts with different partisan preferences between the 2008 presidential race and the 2010 congressional election. Of these split districts, 49 of them voted in favor of Obama in 2008 but elected a Republican member of Congress in 2010. Of these 49

¹⁶ Republicans also gained five seats in the Senate. They lost control of no seats and defeated two Democratic incumbents, Blanche Lincoln and Russ Feingold.

Table 2
Recent congressional election results.

	Republicans	Democrats	Independents
2010			
Seats just before the election	178	255 ^a	
Reelected incumbents	155	184	
Defeated incumbents	2	52	
Open seats held	21	6	
Open seats lost	1	14	
New seat distribution	242	193	
2008			
Seats just before the election	199	235 ^b	
Reelected incumbents	157	224	
Defeated incumbents	14	5	
Open seats held	16	7	
Open seats lost	12	0	
New seat distribution	178	257	
2006			
Seats just before the election	232	202	1
Reelected incumbents	188	191	
Defeated incumbents	22	0	
Open seats held	14	12	
Open seats lost	8	0	
New seat distribution	202	233	

^a There were vacancies in two seats: New York-29 and Indiana-3 (resignations of Eric Massa and Mark Souder).

^b Stephanie Tubbs-Jones (OH-11) passed away in August 2010.

districts, 28 of them elected a Democratic member of Congress in 2008. As would be expected, these districts were among the most competitive in the 2008 election. Their mean presidential vote for Obama was 51.84% ($\sigma^2 = 4.86$). The evidence suggests that, at least in these districts, voters may have been influenced by Obama's coattails in 2008, but their motivation in 2010 appears to be one of inter-branch balancing (Jacobson, 2011).

5. Incumbents in an anti-incumbent year

Of all the House incumbents that sought reelection in 2010, 85% of them won their race. Omitting the cases of unopposed incumbents who received 100% of the vote, the vote proportion for incumbents is roughly normally distributed around the mean of 62.9%.¹⁷ As noted above, two Republican incumbents and 52 Democratic incumbents were defeated. Fig. 4 places these incumbent defeats in historical context by illustrating that 54 defeated incumbents is the largest such value since 1948. Additionally, the 52 Democrats who were defeated is the largest number since at least 1946. This graph makes the Democratic waves of 2006 and 2008 look like nothing more than blips on the radar. Republicans were able to win back more seats in 2010 than they lost in the previous six elections combined.

Although 85% of incumbents were reelected in 2010, the reelection rate is more telling when broken down by party. With only four primary and general election Republican

defeats, the party's reelection rate was 98%.¹⁸ In contrast, 54 Democratic incumbents lost, a reelection rate of 77%. In 2006 there were only 22 defeated Republican incumbents, representing a reelection rate of 89.5%. In 2008, all but 14 Republican incumbents were reelected (91.8%). These proportions speak to the anti-Democratic incumbent tide in 2010. Most of these Democratic incumbents (30) lost to a quality challenger in 2010. In 2006 and 2008, only 8 and 2 Republican incumbents, respectively, lost to an experienced challenger. These differences emphasize the importance that recruitment had on Republican success in 2010. One possible explanation for this trend against Democratic incumbents could be that voters were holding members accountable for controversial roll-call votes. Almost every defeated incumbent (48) voted in favor of the stimulus package, and a majority (35) voted for healthcare reform. Of the 34 Democrats who voted no on healthcare reform, 13 were reelected, 7 lost in the general election, 2 sought higher office, and 2 retired.

6. Electoral success of the Tea Party

One of the most discussed stories in 2010 was the success of Tea Party candidates. In the House, 32.3% of Tea Party challengers won their election, compared to 28.6% of non-Tea Party Republican challengers. Of the seats that switched party control in favor of the GOP, Tea Party members won 35 of the 67. Twenty-nine of the 52 Democratic incumbent members of the House that lost their reelection bid were defeated by a Tea Party candidate. In the Senate, there were nine Tea Party candidates, five of which won their election. However, only two of these victories represented a partisan switch of the seat from Democrat to Republican. The Republican desire to regain control of the Senate was thwarted by electoral losses by Tea Party candidates Sharron Angle in Nevada, Christine O'Donnell in Delaware, and Ken Buck in Colorado.

This evidence suggests something of a paradox regarding the impact of the Tea Party on Republican success in 2010. The ability of Tea Party candidates to build both enthusiasm and momentum for the Republicans likely contributed to the GOP's ability to win such a large seat margin in the House. Yet, the impact may have been just the opposite in the Senate where Tea Party candidates seemed to hold back their party (especially in states like Delaware and Nevada). Much of this paradox of the disparate impact between chambers is explained by the ideology of the Tea Party, which is more conservative than the GOP as a whole. Tea Party candidates campaigned successfully in ideologically homogenous House districts, but were less effective in states, which are generally more ideologically heterogeneous.¹⁹

¹⁸ The two Republican incumbents defeated in the general election were Joseph Cao (LA-2) and Charles Djou (HI-1). Each represented heavily Democratic districts and was elected under unusual circumstances.

¹⁹ An example of a Senate race in which the Tea Party candidate hurt the Republicans is Delaware. Representative Mike Castle, who was defeated by O'Donnell in the Republican primary election, had served in the House for nine terms and as governor for eight years prior. If he had managed to win the primary, his strong name recognition and campaigning abilities may have made the Senate race in Delaware much more competitive.

¹⁷ There does seem to be a slight negative skew to the data, but the median, 63.9% is almost identical to the mean. The standard deviation of the data is 11.29.

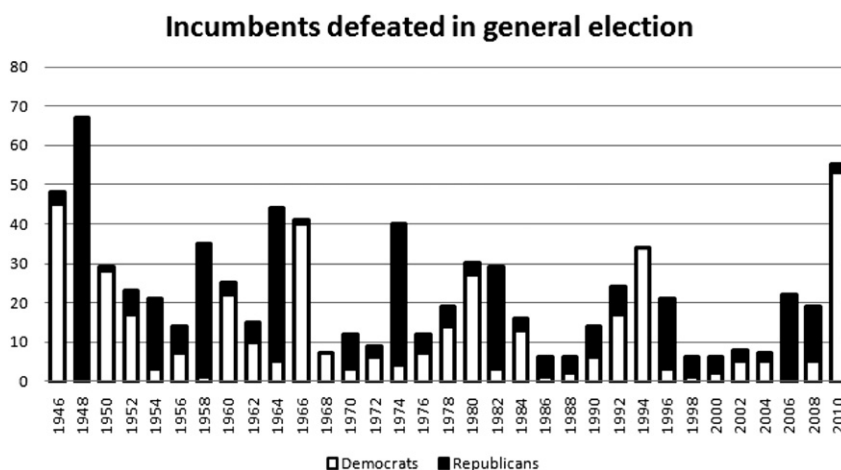


Fig. 4. This figure reflects the number of Democratic and Republican incumbents defeated in each congressional election from 1946 to 2010. Data generously shared by Gary Jacobson.

Another impact of the Tea Party was on voter enthusiasm and turnout. Turnout numbers indicate that the national turnout rate among the pool of eligible voters was about 41%.²⁰ Although this is substantially lower than the rate in 2008 (61.6%), it is almost identical to the 2006 midterm elections (40.4%) and slightly higher than in 2002 (39.5%). This modest increase in turnout may have been driven by enthusiasm generated by the Tea Party. In states that held Senate elections, the average turnout rate was 42.8%. When this figure is divided between states with a Tea Party candidate on the Senate ballot and those without, we find that the former had a turnout of 44.5%, and the latter, 42.2% (the difference is not statistically significant). This does not seem to provide strong evidence that the Tea Party itself was elevating turnout in certain states. Perhaps the more interesting question, however, is whether the having the Tea Party label implicitly attached to a candidate's name actually affected the electoral fortunes of that candidate. In the following section, we will provide a more rigorous test for the "Tea Party effect."

7. Analysis of the factors contributing to 2010 vote results

To systematically analyze the 2010 elections and compare 2010 to previous elections, we estimate a series of models of district vote outcome. We also provide separate estimations of the model using only the data from 1994 and 2006. These elections were selected since they provide a comparable reference point to 2010. Both were midterm elections featuring an unpopular incumbent president, which resulted in a turnover in majority party control of the House.

The dependent variable in each of these models is the Democratic share of the two-party House vote for each district. Yea votes on the stimulus and healthcare votes, and presence of a Tea Party candidate are all included as dummy variables. District partisanship is measured by the Obama district vote in 2008, and incumbency advantage is captured by the previous Democratic congressional vote in the district. We include the natural log of candidate spending to account for diminishing marginal returns. The freshman variable takes a value of 1 for Democratic freshmen incumbents, -1 for Republican freshmen, and 0 otherwise. Following Cox and Katz (1996), the quality advantage variable takes a value of 1 when a Democratic incumbent faces a non-quality challenger or when an open race has a quality Democrat but not a quality Republican. Republican incumbents facing non-quality challengers and open seats with only a Republican quality challenger receive a -1 . Incumbents facing quality challengers or open seat races with two quality or two non-quality candidates are coded as zeros.

The results from these regressions are reported in Table 3. The first column of results shows that in 2010, candidates with an experience advantage over their competitors received a two-percentage point bump in their electoral margin. This was a relatively small effect when compared to the regressions from other elections.²¹ The effect of candidate quality in 1994 and 2006, as well as the pooled analysis²² (3.54, 4.10, and 3.21 respectively), was almost twice that of 2010. This

²¹ It is important to keep in mind that because the candidate quality variable is operationalized a $-1,0,1$, any strong effect for Republicans may be washed out by weak effects for Democrats.

²² The aggregated model that also includes fixed effects for year to account for election-cycle specific variables is included in Appendix A. Including the fixed effects only changes the interpretation of the freshman variable, which goes from having a significant negative effect in the non-fixed effects model to having a statistically insignificant effect in the fixed effects model.

²⁰ See Michael McDonald's U.S. Election Project website: http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html.

Table 3

OLS models of Democratic share of two-party vote in the district.

Dependent variable data	2010	2006	1994	1992–2010 ^a	2010 ^b	'10 Dem. incumb. ^b
Intercept	4.91 (.253)	16.8* (.270)	18.9* (.483)	20.5* (1.37)	1.34 (.261)	13.8 (.795)
Freshman	.747 (.529)	2.46* (.826)	-.669 (.650)	-.603* (.276)	1.28* (.565)	-.123 (.714)
Prev. Dem pres. vote in district	.504* (.0269)	.204* (.0337)	.326* (.0362)	.295* (.0129)	.514 (.0291)	.599* (.0386)
Prev. Dem cong. vote in district	.365* (.0271)	.396* (.0374)	.307* (.0355)	.323* (.0132)	.428* (.0330)	.385* (.0442)
Quality advantage	2.06* (.405)	4.10* (.549)	3.54* (.567)	3.21* (.207)	2.76* (.433)	.645 (.600)
Log Democratic spending	.558* (.107)	1.31* (.143)	2.50* (.289)	1.77* (.0749)	.567* (.107)	-.100 (.524)
Log Republican spending	-.879* (.125)	-.703* (.125)	-2.97* (.283)	-1.90* (.0735)	-.766* (.125)	-.603* (.127)
Stimulus roll-call ^c	-	-	-	-	-1.36 (1.18)	-5.64* (1.40)
Healthcare roll-call ^c	-	-	-	-	-2.54* (.916)	-3.41* (.860)
Tea Party	-	-	-	-	-.291 (.506)	-.528 (.471)
<i>N</i>	360	323	328	3021	351	197
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	.9473	.9250	.874	.8683	.9505	.9365
<i>F</i> -test	1075.81*	663.29*	391.74*	3318.82*	747.09*	322.07*

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$ – cell values are OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

These results are from models of vote outcomes in all contested congressional races. Elections with only one candidate are excluded.

^a The results from this model with fixed effects for election year can be found in [Appendix A](#).^b These models were estimated with several specifications. Including a control variable for party unity (from CQ) actually increases the magnitude of the roll-call variables. These results can be found in [Appendix A](#).^c The roll call votes for the stimulus and healthcare reform were coded as 1 if the incumbent voted Yea and a 0 if the incumbent voted Nay. Because all Republicans voted against both pieces the legislation, the betas can be interpreted as the intercept shift for a Democratic incumbent who voted Yea, compared to a Republican or Democratic incumbent who voted Nay.

implies that some other variable was capturing more of the explanatory power in 2010. The likely culprit is district partisanship (measured as previous presidential vote).

Comparing the regression results from 2010 to those from the previous elections, we find that district partisanship (measured as presidential vote) had the largest marginal effect in 2010. A one percentage point increase in vote for Obama in 2008 corresponded with a half-point increase in the district's 2010 congressional vote for the Democrats. This is substantially higher than the .20 percentage point effect found in 2006, the .33 point effect in 1994, and .30 point effect in the pooled analysis. Likewise, previous Democratic House vote in the district had a slightly smaller effect in 2010 than 2006 (.37 versus .40 percentage points), but the 2010 effect was larger than that of 1994 (.31). This provides some evidence that there was a larger anti-Democratic incumbent mood in 2010 than 2006, and it actually rivaled that of 1994.

The effect of candidate spending in 2010 was also extremely unusual. The marginal effect of a log-dollar spent by a Democrat in that year (.56) was less than half the effect from 2006 (1.31) and almost one-fourth the effect from 1994 (2.50). What is also unusual is that the diminished effect for Democratic spending is not complemented by an enlarged effect for Republicans. The coefficient for Republican spending was $-.88$, which falls between the effect in 2006 ($-.70$) and 1994 (-2.97). The spending effects for both parties do seem to be on the low end of the spectrum, further suggesting that candidates in 2010 were less able to influence their own electoral fortunes and were more at the whims of uncontrollable factors like district partisanship.

Substantively the most interesting models are the final two, which capture the effects of idiosyncratic elements of

the 2010 electoral cycle.²³ In both of these models the effect of the Tea Party dummy was not statistically different from zero. Because of this we cannot say whether a candidate was helped or hurt by the Tea Party label. What these empirical results do tell us is that the Tea Party effect, if it existed, was incredibly small and would not alone outweigh the impact of candidate quality.²⁴ These two models yield somewhat mixed results of the electoral effect of a yea vote for the stimulus and healthcare bills. Healthcare had a significant impact in both models—a yea vote decreased a Democrat's vote proportion by between 2.5 and 3.5%. The indications about an effect of stimulus roll call voting are slightly more ambiguous. In the model that includes all 2010 elections, this variable is not found to have a significant effect. However, it does not make practical sense to suggest that this effect would be important in open seat races or races with an incumbent Republican, since the GOP voted unanimously against the legislation. As such, the final column estimates the model of just races featuring a Democratic incumbent. This model provides strong evidence that these candidates

²³ The last model in the table, '10 Dem. incumbent, allows us to estimate the effect of the roll call votes on just incumbent Democrats. This is useful because it eliminates noise created from including open-seat races, in which neither candidate can be truly punished or rewarded for the incumbent's roll call. We also exclude Republicans for two reasons. First, Republicans voted unanimously against both pieces of legislation, so estimating an effect for the stimulus and healthcare would be impossible. Second, much of the popular and academic discussion about these votes was that Democrats would be punished for having voted for them. Rarely was it suggested that Republicans would be rewarded for voting against them.

²⁴ To be fair, we are only assessing the effect of a Tea Party endorsement of a candidate here, which might serve to mask some of the larger impact of the Tea Party movement more generally.

were punished for voting in favor of the stimulus package, receiving 5.5% less of the overall vote.

8. Implications of the 2010 midterms

As a result of the Republicans regaining control of the House, the legislation to come out of the lower chamber in the 112th Congress has been vastly different from that of the previous two Congresses. Republicans have sought to defund aspects of Obama's healthcare reform package and significant battles have been fought over the federal budget and government debt ceiling. What is most clear is that the 112th Congress is one of the most polarized in history. With moderate Democratic incumbents losing in the 2010 elections, the mean Democratic ideology has moved to the left. Republicans, however, have not become more moderate. Republican freshman have been more extreme in their ideological position than were Democratic freshman in either 2006 or 2008. The consequence of this has been an increase in polarization resulting in more partisan gridlock. As difficult as it was for Democrats to find consensus between the House and Senate before 2010, the outcome of the 2010 midterms has made it almost impossible for the 112th Congress to generate significant legislation.

The 2010 election will also significantly impact the 2012 elections and those throughout the rest of the decade. If the 2010 results are an indication, Democrats may have a difficult time retaining control of the Senate in 2012. The overwhelming majority (68%) of seats to switch party control featured Democratic incumbents that had been elected in the previous four years. In 2012, there will be 23 Democratic Senate seats up for reelection. Of these 23 Democrats, 11 are currently in their first term in office and may be extremely vulnerable unless economic and political conditions change dramatically. The 2010 election will most likely have a large impact on the next presidential election as well. Political commentators have suggested that the best thing for President Obama's electoral chances in 2012 was for the Democrats to be trounced in 2010. The rationale is that he now has more legitimacy in placing blame on House Republicans for the economic woes in the country. Just as Clinton's reelection in 1996 was in part influenced by his ability to place blame on Republicans who had taken control of Congress in 1994, so too may Obama use Republican gains to his own political benefit. One key difference from 1995 to 96, however, will be the fact that one political party is not solely in control of Congress.

The other major impact that the 2010 electoral cycle will have on future elections is via reapportionment and redistricting. States gaining congressional districts are mostly in the South (Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas) and West (Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Washington), and states losing seats come from the Northeast (Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania) and Midwest (Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio). As is clear, most states gaining seats are ones in which the Republicans have an electoral advantage, whereas those losing seats are more Democratic. Based on this fact alone, it would be a safe bet that the Republican Party should benefit more from reapportionment than the Democratic Party.

The 2010 midterms also gave Republicans another advantage for redistricting. The GOP gained six gubernatorial seats, resulting in the control of 29 governorships; Democrats hold 20.²⁵ Republicans also made substantial gains in state legislatures. They now control both chambers in 25 states. Democrats have unified control in just 16 states. Of the remaining 9 states, the partisan control in 8 is split between the parties (Nebraska has a nonpartisan legislature). With such strong Republican advantages in state political offices, it seems likely that district lines in many of these states following reapportionment will favor Republicans (Jacobson, 2011). Also worth noting is that California citizens approved a ballot measure that calls for a commission to handle redistricting in the state. One direct consequence is that Democratic incumbents, who control a majority of the state's House delegation, could become more vulnerable as the Democratic state legislature has lost control of the redistricting process.

Perhaps the strongest message that 2010 midterms sent to students of elections was that idiosyncratic factors can still have a strong influence on congressional elections. The October 2010 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics* featured a symposium in which elections scholars forecasted seat turnover in Congress (Campbell, 2010; Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi et al., 2010b; Lewis-Beck and Tien, 2010; Cuzán, 2010). All of these models, which utilize variables such as economic condition and generic congressional balloting, underestimated the number of seats to be won by the Republicans.²⁶ The explanation for this underestimation may be that, at least in aggregate analyses, quality candidate recruitment—which has long been recognized as a key piece of the equation—may be among the most important factors in explaining seat turnover. This year's elections redefined the bounds of party recruitment advantages by featuring the strongest Republican recruitment advantage in decades. Even though the effect of candidate quality was relatively low in our district-level analyses, this does not preclude the possibility that having a particularly strong candidate field overall helped Republicans effectively frame their message and turn strong national tides into more favorable electoral outcomes.

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²⁵ The remaining gubernatorial seat is held by independent Lincoln Chafee in Rhode Island. Although he ran as an independent in 2010, Chafee previously served in the Senate as a Republican.

²⁶ Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien's simulation model may be considered to have performed the best. Although they predicted that the Republicans would win 229 seats (on average), there were a fair number of simulations that projected Republican gains at least as large as what was actually observed.

Appendix A. Additional OLS models of Democratic share of two-party vote in the district

Dependent variable data	1992–2010	2010 inc.	'10 Dem. incumb.
Intercept	16.2* (1.25)	−1.29 (2.57)	13.7 (8.26)
Freshman	.0772 (.249)	1.29* (.537)	−.115 (.731)
Prev. Dem pres. vote in district	.316* (.0117)	.470* (.0290)	.599* (.0396)
Prev. Dem cong. vote in district	.370* (.0120)	.497* (.0348)	.385* (.0443)
Quality advantage	3.60* (.183)	1.43* (.497)	.640 (.607)
Log Democratic spending	1.39* (.0674)	.428* (.107)	−.0995 (.525)
Log Republican spending	−1.48* (.0669)	−.654* (.121)	−.603* (.128)
Stimulus roll-call	−	−2.11 (1.52)	−5.68* (1.57)
Healthcare roll-call	−	−1.94* (.910)	−3.42* (.921)
Tea Party	−	−.839 (.511)	−.527 (.472)
Party Unity ^a	−	.0306 (.0217)	.00220 (.0382)
1994	−4.92* (.414)	−	−
1996	1.07* (.419)	−	−
1998	−.201 (.437)	−	−
2000	1.50* (.444)	−	−
2002	−.515 (.450)	−	−
2004	2.04* (.440)	−	−
2006	4.52* (.425)	−	−
2008	2.07* (.415)	−	−
2010	−4.53* (.413)	−	−
N	3021	321	197
Adj. R ²	.8983	.9578	.9361
F-test	1780.00*	727.75*	288.32*

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$ – cell values are OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

^a Party unity data are collected from CQ's *Congressional Roll Call* books and coded as the percentage of time the incumbent member voted with the Democratic Party since the dependent variable is Democratic Party vote.

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