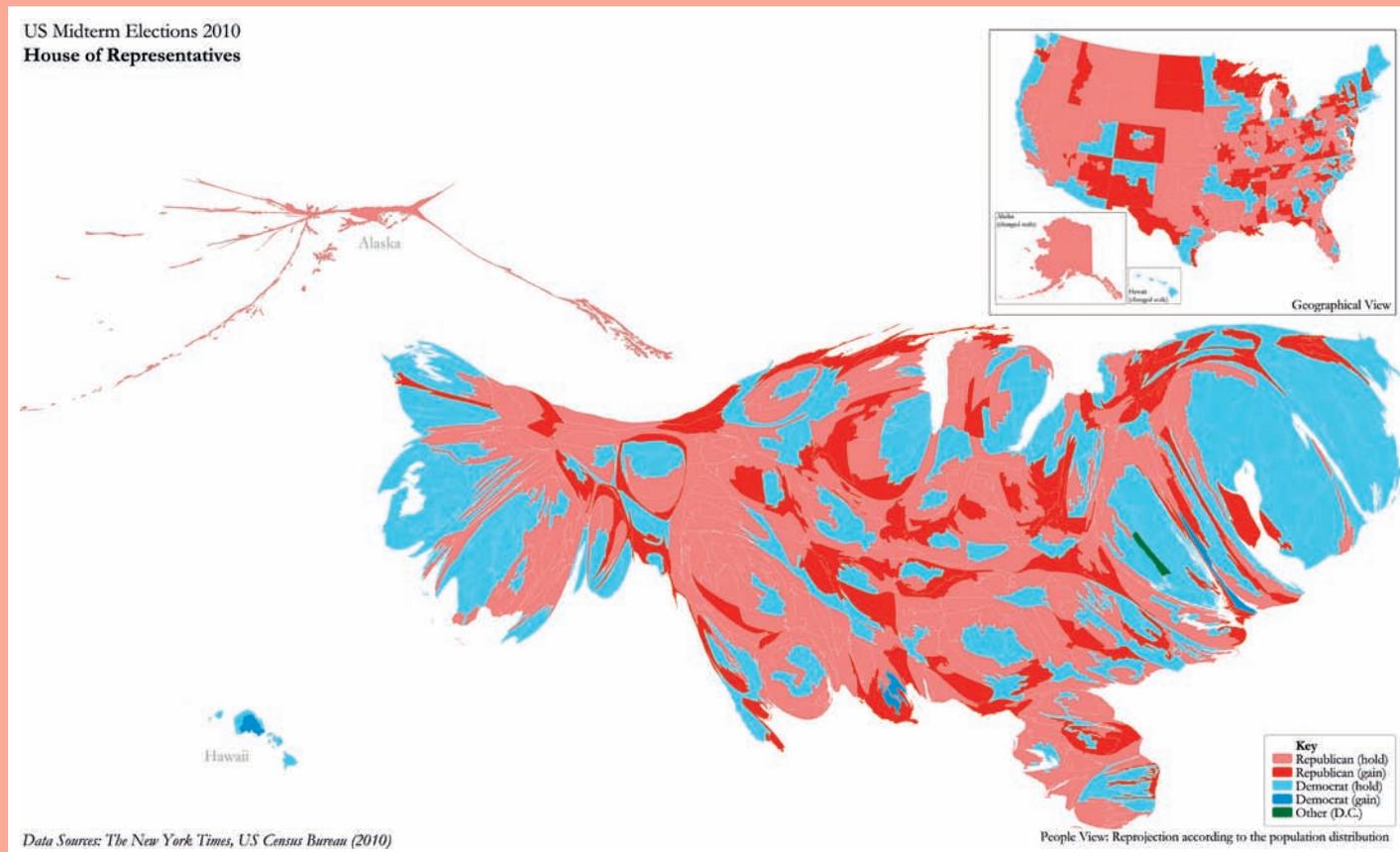


# US Midterm Elections 2010



What a difference two years makes. In 2008, the Democrats were riding high. Barack Obama entered the White House offering a recession-hit and war-weary nation hope and can-do rhetoric, captured in his campaign mantra 'Yes We Can!'. The Democrats also extended their control over both houses of Congress. The scene seemed set for a prolonged period of Democrat political dominance.

But these expectations were dashed by the 2010 midterms. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats lost 63 seats and their majority. While they retained overall control of the Senate, they lost six seats, cutting their majority to just six Senators. By any standards, this was a serious reversal. The turnaround in the House is one of the largest in modern times, bigger, even, than Bill Clinton's 54-seat drubbing in 1994.

Where, Obama's team might ask, did it all go so wrong? The geography of the 2010 House election (shown in the map, which adjusts for varying populations) gives some clues. Republicans made substantial gains in the Midwest, the north-eastern rustbelt and in the South, largely reversing the

Democrats' gains in the preceding two House contests.

Several factors underlie the result. The US economy is weak, the deficit mountainous, the sub-prime mortgage crisis threatens people's homes, jobs are vulnerable. As the map reveals, many of the Democrats' losses are where America's economic difficulties cut deepest. Prior to the midterms, the Democrats held 127 of the 200 House seats with median incomes below \$50,300: they lost 40 of these seats, two-thirds of their overall losses. To a large extent, therefore, the explanation is still 'the economy, stupid'.

Public anxiety over America's trajectory was channelled by the Tea Party movement into visceral opposition to 'big government'. In many House districts, Tea Party activists gained the Republican nomination. However, while the Tea Party has been highly vocal and visible, its electoral impact has been more mixed. Tea Party-endorsed Republicans were more common in Democrat- than in Republican-held seats. But Republicans defeated Democrat incumbents in only 33 out of the 129 seats with Tea Party candidates (only marginally better

than Republican successes where the Tea Party was not present). And in some races (most notably in Delaware), the Tea Party-endorsed candidate proved a substantial liability with the wider electorate.

Finally, but importantly, the US political system is famously designed to produce 'checks and balances' on government. There is a long tradition of midterm reversals for the incumbent president's party. After the 1994 midterms, for instance, Bill Clinton faced a Republican Congress.

But checks and balances work both ways and presidents who face deep midterm defeats can recover strongly. Obama's 63-seat House shellacking is at least comparable to Clinton's and Truman's 54-seat defeats in 1994 and 1946, respectively, and better than Roosevelt's 72-seat reversal in 1938. All three went on to be re-elected. Much depends on how the political battle between president and Congress plays out. The 2010 midterms may prove to be the point at which Obama became a one-term president, or (as with his predecessors), it may be just a temporary setback. All will be revealed in 2012.