



Midterm Malaise

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As in every election, the civic health of American democracy – and by extension, Americans’ happiness with government – is at stake in November 2014. As Election Day approaches, pundits complain that the midterm elections have yet to come down to any central issue or theme. Advertising in a number of races focuses mostly on character attacks and the personal qualities of candidates, often ignoring or muddling issues.

From the perspective of Republican and Democratic strategists, this focus might not be ill-founded. For many voters, party and personal characteristics trump careful consideration of issue positions. And, the issue that most Americans say will chiefly influence their votes is the economy – as is the case in almost every election. But the candidates and parties are not giving voters much to choose from on that score, especially because Americans on the whole have little faith in Congress to accomplish much. Over three quarters of Americans disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job. And, while many pay little attention to politics, and only a minority can correctly describe the party affiliation of their representative in the U.S. House, people are sensing correctly that, as official statistics show, the number of public laws in each successive two-year Congressional term has trended sharply downward in recent decades.

Most Americans say they would prefer to vote for a new face instead of reelecting their current representative. If large numbers of Americans were to follow through on this sentiment, the composition of Congress might change significantly. However, this sort of public sentiment is nothing new, yet 1948 was the last time voters reelected less than 80% of the incumbents seeking to return for additional terms in the House of Representatives.

What is more, even though large numbers of Americans say they are upset with Congress, their disgust is unlikely to drive them to the polls in high numbers. If history is any guide, turnout in this “midterm” election year, when the presidency is not at stake, will be significantly lower than it was in 2008 or 2012, and lower than it will be in 2016. Since 1948, the average turnout of eligible voters in midterm elections sits around 43%, roughly sixteen percent less than turnout in presidential election years. Turnout of eligible voters in midterm elections during this period has never reached fifty percent – which means that well over half of eligible voters do not register their preferences for Congressional and state offices at the polls. Typically, midterm voter turnout is even lower when two-term presidents reach the last midterm election of their eight years in the White House, as President Barack Obama is now about to do. When Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were in this position, turnout among the voting-eligible population was only 39%, while at the close of George W. Bush’s two-term presidency it was 41%.

Who are the voters that actually do make it to the polls in midterm elections? They tend to be more strongly partisan-minded than the average American – more committed conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats – and strong partisans are known to see the world differently than less convinced partisans or middle-of-the-roaders. Overall, strong partisans are less likely to oppose reelection of their own representative than are

independents. Strong partisans also currently have higher opinions of Congress than other Americans do. Both of these strong partisan orientations work in favor of re-electing incumbents.

November 2014 will, nevertheless, probably bring some changes to Congress. History tells us the president's party tends to lose seats in midterm elections, and current polls of likely voters support this trend. They suggest Republicans may gain seats in the Senate and keep control of the House. If this holds true, President Obama will have an even harder time influencing Congress in 2015 and 2016. But this is nothing new for presidents in his position. Presidents facing a divided government have a hard time with Congress, and their problems are magnified during the last two years in office. Strategic minded partisans of the opposite party prefer to await the next presidential election, in hopes that their party will claim the White House then.

Still, governing processes go on. Bills have continued to be introduced in years of divided as well as partisan-unified government, despite the downward trend in Congressional enactments in recent decades – and that includes bills introduced in the last two years of two-term presidencies. So that means that fights over legislation, at least, will continue in Congress, even if Republicans take full control. Fights between President Obama and Congressional Republicans have raged for years, so to most Americans it may well look like little changes with respect to public policy in November 2014.

Democracy goes on no matter what, as well, and unfortunately, many voters may take that as yet another good reason to stay home on Election Day. But, if large numbers of Americans are unhappy with Congress yet do not bother to vote, then they will share blame with those who do turn out for whatever happens next in Washington DC and state capitols – or does not happen.