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## Political gridlock lurks as Tea Party prepares for taste of power

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WASHINGTON—Tea Party fists pumping skyward in victory, half-owners of a house divided.

However the numbers break Tuesday night, that is the scenario the vast majority of Washington's political forecasters anticipate as American voter discontent translates into a midterm savaging of President Barack Obama's Democrats.

But what unfolds next, after the Party of "No" becomes the Party of "Now?" Quite possibly, very, very little.

"There is no question — particularly if this emerges as a very big victory — the Republicans will be beating their chests and repeating all the rhetoric left over from the campaign," said Stephen Hess, senior fellow emeritus at the [Brookings Institution](#).

"And then reality sets in. A much stronger opposition comes to Washington, with significantly more control of Congress. But that reality will include responsibility for what their voters really want and expect.

"And yet ours is not a parliamentary system. The executive is not a hapless giant. President Obama will still have the veto over Congress. These are the ingredients for gridlock. And the real question is whether there is any way to wiggle out of it, for the two sides to cooperate and actually get anything done."

With so many Congressional races still too close to call, analysts remain divided over the extent of Republican victory. Charlie Cook of the non-partisan [Cook Political Report](#), projects a Democratic loss of control of the House of Representatives is "set in stone," with Republican gains of 48 to 60 seats — easily more than the 39 seats required to establish a conservative majority.

Yet the Senate, the stronger half of Washington's political sausage factory, could well remain under Democratic control. But only barely, with the majority of forecasts projecting the Democrats could retain a wafer-thin majority in the 100-seat chamber.

In the face of such daunting odds, not all Democrats are ready to declare "uncle." Jason Rae of Wisconsin, the 23-year-old chair of the Democratic National Committee's Youth Council, insists pollsters have consistently misread the mood among young American voters and are in for a surprise Tuesday.

"Young Americans don't have land lines, and pollsters don't call us on our cellphones. But I was there at the University of Wisconsin last month when 26,000 people came out to hear President Obama speak and I am convinced the polls are wrong," Rae told the *Star*.

"There were lineups three miles (5 kilometres) long. And since then I've seen more and more young people getting involved because the stakes are so high. They don't want to see Washington change course. And they're going to vote."

Some Democrats in search of silver linings console themselves with the prospects of a much higher profile for Republican infighting.

"The real issue going forward is, who is in control of the Republican party?" said Rae. "Is this a Tea Party takeover or will the more moderate Republicans prevail? I see friction ahead as they decide how, or even whether, the Republicans intend to participate in the governing process of this country."

Under U.S. law, the new Congress won't take power until January, with a so-called "lame-duck" session of lawmakers in the interim. Obama,

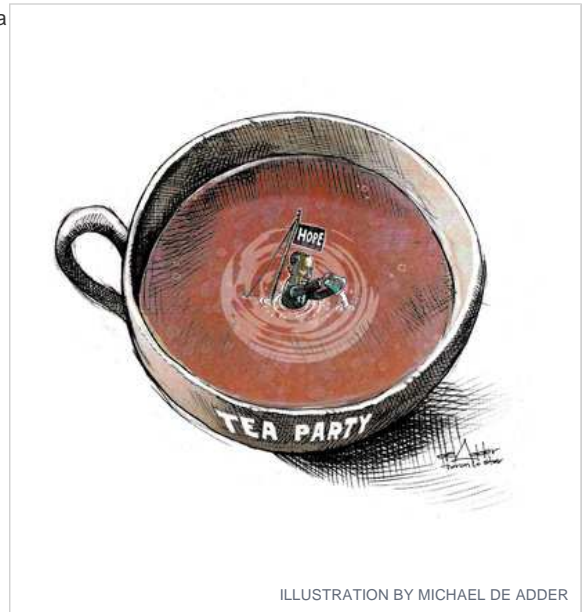


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coincidentally, has a convenience escape from the dust-settling aftermath of mid-term elections as he readies for a major overseas trip built around the upcoming G20 summit in Korea.

Yet the pressure for a White House response to the electoral wing-clipping will travel with him, said Hess, who cited the famous example of 1994 mid-terms, when then-president Bill Clinton turned the sow's ear of defeat into a silk purse of bipartisan compromise.

"Is Barack Obama made of the same stuff as Bill Clinton? Will he be anywhere near as interested in seeking what Clinton used to call 'the third way'? Until now Obama has given signals in both directions in terms of willingness to compromise versus sticking to his ideological guns," said Hess.

Either way, Washington watchers expect the "big stuff" is off the table. Few, if any, envision the post-midterm dynamics will provide political room for major breakthroughs on immigration reform and climate/energy issues.

"Obama worked the big issues when he had a big majority. Some people think it was a mistake but that's what he did. And now, in the standoff to come, the big projects are behind us, just as the Republican argument to repeal those big projects is also off the table," said Hess.

"That said, there are some areas where one could imagine creative collaboration and bipartisanship. Any effort toward deficit reduction, for example, has the potential to go somewhere."

Patrick Basham, an adjunct scholar with the [Cato Institute](#), cautions that Americans should prepare themselves for a two-year policy abyss, with Washington unable or unwilling to come to terms with itself and achieve anything substantial.

"The would-be success on Tuesday is based on the Republicans being the Party of No — and most politicians don't change their strategy until they lose," said Basham.

"So, in short, what happens after Tuesday is . . . absolutely nothing. Everything now becomes about the next presidential election in 2012. Obama will of course be looking for compromise, but Republicans will be very reluctant to give him anything he will be able to sell as a success during his drive for re-election."

Basham stresses also that the speed with which restless U.S. voters shifted against the Democrats can just as quickly shift against Republicans. Electoral volatility, in the context of prolonged economic malaise and high unemployment, can shoot all over the place like unmanned water cannons.

"If you consider how quickly it became 'Obama's economy,' it could just as quickly become 'the Republican economy,' depending on the extent to which the new Congress is seen as proactive or reactive to the needs of the people," he said.

"The lesson here is that even if Obama's position doesn't look good at the moment, he could still look very strong 18 months from now. I wouldn't rule out a Democratic renaissance by 2012. It's important to appreciate that in the U.S., mid-term elections are not bellwethers for the next presidential election."

Basham said those hoping to grasp the American electoral process from a distance might best view the mid-terms as a mere scene-setter for a massive battle still to come.

"Policy-wise, things will be in limbo after the mid-terms. But politically, there is going to be an incredibly intense and dynamic battle. But it will be rhetoric, strategy, tactics and positioning.

"A lot of things will be tried on the Hill, but very little will come out of the other end. A lot of stuff will be left on the floor, only to be scooped up and tossed in the garbage," said Basham.

"That may not sound very hopeful, but that's where we are. It may be a costly election, but the American people don't get much for their money on this one."