




American politics

Democracy in America

Disliking Republicans, voting for them anyway

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KEVIN DRUM relates the seemingly odd temper (<http://motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2010/09/mind-america>) of the American voter:

Americans trust Democrats more to handle the country's problems, they think Democrats represent their values better, they think Democrats are more concerned with the needs of people like them, and they think Democrats deserve to be reelected at a higher rate than Republicans. They also think...that George Bush is substantially more to blame for our economic woes than Barack Obama.

And the result of all this? They say they plan to vote for Republicans by landslide numbers. It's the economy, stupid.

Does this make any sense? Andrew Gelman, a Columbia University political scientist, [thinks so](http://www.themonkeycage.org/2010/09/voters_hate_republicans_but_ar.html) (http://www.themonkeycage.org/2010/09/voters_hate_republicans_but_ar.html) :

Those 10% or so of voters who plan to vote Republican—even while thinking that the Democrats will do a better job—are not necessarily being so unreasonable. The Democrats control the presidency and both houses of Congress, and so it's a completely reasonable stance to prefer them to the Republicans yet still think they've gone too far and need a check on their power.

I agree. Indeed, I might count myself among this 10%. (I say, "I might", because I do not really know myself. Who does?) The "kick the bums out" mechanism leaves a great deal to be desired, though. It is not obviously better to exchange our current bums for new bums as a response to the behaviour of past bums. In this case, however, it is likely that a bum-swap will deliver divided government, a prospect that warms my anti-partisan heart.

Divided government has many under-appreciated virtues. As the Cato Institute's [William Niskanen](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0610.niskanen.html) has pointed out (<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0610.niskanen.html>) , divided government is the best recipe for fiscal restraint—something America will urgently require, come the recovery. Divided governments are also less likely to charge into war. "In 200 years of US history, every one of our conflicts involving more than a week of ground combat has been initiated by a unified government," Mr Niskanen observes.

Though the electorate is mostly unaware of these benefits, the historical record suggests a fairly stable and long-standing preference for relative gridlock. Perhaps this explains the otherwise puzzling polling data. In any case, an era of peaceful belt-tightening sounds pretty good, no?

