



What will a Republican Senate do to Obama?

By Sophie Pilgrim
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It's looking ever more likely that the Republicans will seize control of the US Senate in Tuesday's midterm elections, leaving Barack Obama's Democrats outnumbered. Can the president endure, or even prosper, alongside a GOP-run Congress?

Just days before the US midterm elections, opinion polls are unanimous in their anticipation of a Republican takeover of the upper house.

Several Republican senators are expected to win seats from their Democratic opponents in the Senate, giving them a slight majority. The shift would hand the Republicans full control of Congress, the other half of which -- the House of Representatives -- they already monopolise and will, by all counts, continue to do so.

But with two more years of Obama in office -- who, as president, has veto power -- it will be difficult for Republicans to pass any major reforms. Their majority presence might even prove beneficial to the president in his efforts to leave office with a solid legacy.

John McLaughlin, a New York-based electoral researcher, believes that despite their numbers, Obama might find Republican lawmakers more manageable in the coming years because of the looming general election, in which Republicans are hoping to win back the White House.

"The good part is that the president doesn't have to root for re-election in 2016," he told reporters at a briefing in New York on Wednesday. "So he may find that there's more virtue in compromising with the Republicans -- who may be more accommodating than he would expect -- than giving them the hard time that they've given him."

McLaughlin told FRANCE 24 that he believes elected Republicans will "encourage the president" by focusing on less contentious issues, such as energy independence (in the form of the Keystone XL pipeline and the expansion of hydraulic fracturing), closing tax loopholes and passing free-trade agreements. "I think we'll see a strategic shift from the president," he said.

There is also hope for concerns shared by Democrats and libertarian-leaning Republicans, McLaughlin believes. "Criminal justice reform, for example. Issues of privacy... There's some common ground," he said.

On foreign policy, McLaughlin believes that a Republican Congress will offer an “unusual opportunity” for Obama in his so-far ungainly battle against the so-called Islamic State terror group in the Middle East, despite war fatigue among the public. “The Republicans, along with the independent vote, will give the president more unity to strengthen the United States,” McLaughlin says. “So he’ll have a great majority of support.”

Obama has ‘little to lose’

Progress on those issues would reflect positively on both Obama (he doesn’t want to veto everything and come across as intractable), and the Republicans (who would appear successful in getting reforms through Congress). But in his last two years in office, it’s likely that Obama will want to push through his own signature causes: issues which the Republicans strongly oppose.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, believes that Obama has little to lose in doing his own thing.

“At this point he’s beginning to look towards his legacy,” Tanner told FRANCE 24. “I don’t think he trusts Congress. So his position is ‘take as much as you can get and worry about the consequences later’.”

Shortly after Tuesday’s election, Obama is expected to use his executive authority to give legal status to millions of undocumented workers, fulfilling a long-time pledge to Hispanic supporters and migrants’ rights campaigners. Tanner believes that by doing so, he will destroy any chance of congressional coherence.

“He’ll get what he wants in the short term, which is a much broader legalisation of undocumented workers. But in the long term I do think it will really poison the atmosphere in Congress,” he said. “It’s hard to believe you could get a much worse relationship than the current one, but I do think this lack of trust between Congress and the president would be so big that it would make compromise on almost any issue impossible.”

Another of Obama’s signature causes -- the [Affordable Care Act](#), better known as “Obamacare” - - could also prove perilous. The Republicans have promised to begin dismantling the landmark reform, which ensures universal health care across the US.

The Republicans will be unable to repeal the act entirely. Tanner says that “something called the Affordable Care Act” will continue to exist “forever,” but that Republicans will ensure significant changes are made to the law. “The mandate for employers, even the mandate for individuals, could be either repealed or watered down,” he said. “In the end you’re going to end up with simply a collection of subsidies for low-income people.”

The move would constitute a direct attack on Obama, who has slammed critics of the reform as “standing in the way of American progress”.

Embarrassing tactics

But it's unlikely that those critics -- mainly Republicans -- will risk upsetting their voters over upsetting the president. The Affordable Care Act's disapproval ratings match those of the president, which is why so many Republican candidates have been keen to shoot it down in their campaigns. Failing to follow through on their promises would jeopardise their chances of success in the 2016 general election.

With a newfound congressional majority, the Republicans are also likely to use tactics to embarrass the president. "That's pretty standard American politics -- to force the other side to vote on bills or veto bills that is going to embarrass them or put them in a bad place with the political constituency," Tanner explains. "That's something that both parties have done for years and Republicans will be in a place to do it."

But by doing so, they risk disappointing the electorate ahead of 2016. "A lot of Americans are fed up with typical Washington politics," says McLaughlin, whose polling agency found that 41 percent of Americans think both Republican and Democratic lawmakers are to blame for what he described as the "broken political system".

McLaughlin, a Republican himself, believes that the expected electoral shift towards the GOP represents disapproval for Obama more than support for the Republicans.

"It seems it's just voter anger and voter anxiety that's forcing change," he said. "It's not that Republicans put up a great agenda, it's more that 'the other side's not working'. This is not a Republican wave, it's a wave of disapproval."

'Lost opportunity' for Republicans

McLaughlin believes that Republican candidates should have focused on issues they may have been able to work with Obama on, such as Keystone XL and tax reform, rather than waging negative campaigns against the president.

"A lot of these legislators are doing more criticism of their opponents than actually emphasising their own record," he said. "They failed to seize the opportunity to sell a Republican-controlled Senate as a good choice concerning policies."

Some of those running on a Republican ticket have gone even further, basing their campaign pledges on the demise of the president. Tea Party candidates have threatened to attempt to impeach Obama, a move which would shame the GOP and cripple the chances of its presidential candidate in 2016.

Obama meanwhile, is in a position to blame any congressional impotence on the Republicans. But he may find himself drowned out. Despite a quarter of his tenure remaining, the president's position of authority is waning. Tanner describes him as "a lame duck".

"People now are looking to 2016, people want to know what Hillary Clinton thinks, or who the Republican candidate's going to be," he says. "The last two year's of a president's term, frankly... people tune out."

