



What to Look for After November 4

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Just weeks before the November 4, 2014, midterm elections, national media coverage tells us, breathlessly, that it is coming down to the wire with the GOP Senate horses winning the race. We are being asked to focus only on six to eight contests for U.S. Senate seats that were always fated to be determined in mostly conservative-leaning states where Republicans are likely to win.

Which party ends up with a majority of 100 Senate seats does matter, of course, especially for the theatrics of President Barack Obama's last two years in office. Republican control of the Senate would enable Mitch McConnell of Kentucky to set much of the agenda. President Obama's judicial and executive branch nominees would come up for confirmation votes only slowly, if at all; Senate committees would follow the lead of House GOP committees in holding endless "investigations" of alleged wrongdoing by Obama administration officials and by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; and budget shenanigans would certainly be unleashed.

But beyond the issue of marginal Senate control, here are several things to ponder about the larger impacts of the November 4 outcomes.

Will the Senate battle really end in November? What happens if "Independents" win Senate seats in Kansas or South Dakota, even as Senate contenders in Louisiana and Georgia fall short of outright majority victories triggering new run-off elections in those states? Under this scenario, party control of the Senate could remain up in the air for months, especially if middle of the road Independent Senate incumbent Angus King of Maine plus the one or two remaining moderate partisans in the Senate (such as Susan Collins of Maine and Joe Manchin of West Virginia) decide to hang back from committing to one party or the other until after the run-off contests are resolved and after newly elected Independents make their choices. Under this scenario, the GOP will probably still end up running the Senate in the end, but maybe with less room to push extreme measures. Because so many Senate rules favor solo prima-donnas, this is one institution in U.S. government where a middle of the road Independent caucus could dictate outcomes.

State outcomes may matter more. Big, secret money may have an easier time capturing state legislative offices and elected judgeships than it does swaying national or big state-wide contests. Will U.S. state legislatures become even more right-leaning after 2014? Conversely, what will happen in governor races? Democrats could very possibly lose their Senate majority but win some very important governor contests.

Perhaps the most important single governorship contest in 2014 is happening in Wisconsin, where Scott Walker, a Republican backed by the Koch brothers is seeking reelection after faithfully instituting an extreme agenda of union bashing, upward tilted tax cuts, and blocking the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. If Walker wins reelection, he will become a national advocate for that agenda; if he loses, that agenda will be set back. In addition, Democratic candidates have strong prospects to win governor elections in Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kansas, and Maine – and in some of these states, Democratic victories would cement or allow the expansion of Medicaid coverage for many tens of thousands of low-income Americans.

If the GOP does take the Senate, by how much? A simple majority of even one vote gives Republicans basic agenda-setting powers. But it still matters whether Senate Republicans hold more than 52 seats in 2015 and 2016. That is because the next round of Senate contests will occur in a presidential election year, when pro-Democratic voters are much more likely to participate, and when many more seats in liberal or moderate states will be at stake. On a crucial issue such as how much damage Congressional Republicans will attempt to do to the Affordable Care Act of 2010, the size of the GOP Senate margin would matter. That landmark health reform law is here to stay; Republicans in control of Congress would hold a symbolic total repeal vote, let President Obama veto it if it squeaks through, and then move on to the real business of trying to gut crucial regulations and subsidies in the law. The key question is how far will they try to go in eliminating cushions for insurance companies, trimming tax credits for consumers who purchase plans on the exchanges, and slashing funds for Medicaid and community health centers that help low-income Americans? With larger majorities, the GOP will be tempted to go for the jugular of eviscerating the core subsidies that pay for expanded health

insurance coverage. That might not succeed as a matter of policy – given President Obama’s veto pen – but it would succeed in raising the stakes about health reform going into 2016. Ironically, raising the stakes could backfire on Republicans, because tens of millions of Americans could come to realize that subsidized insurance coverage they now enjoy is at risk if Republicans make further gains.

Will GOP civil wars intensify leading into 2016? If the Republicans win the Senate on November 4, a tidal wave of press coverage will talk about how the “adults are back in charge” and the “Tea Party wing was vanquished in 2014.” Poppycock. Many GOP candidates who may win on November 4 are extraordinarily extreme on many issues, far from where most Americans stand on matters such as funding for health and education, support for environmental regulations, and support for compromise approaches to immigration reform and taxes and spending. Furthermore, many business interests hoping for GOP majorities – to help them push through particular provisions they have lobbied for – also hope that Republicans will drop many populist stands that businesses do not like; business interests want some sort of immigration reform and they want subsidies for businesses left in place. But the fact of the matter is that the Republican Party has moved in very extreme policy directions since 2009, and if Republicans have solid majorities in both chambers in 2015, their extreme populist and ideological wings will be empowered, not chastened. The intra-Republican civil wars will deepen just as the party heads into 2016 elections where it must appeal to moderates and to Latino voters, in competition, very likely with Democratic candidates who have strong business ties. Party leaders will want to soft-peddle extreme stands on everything from opposition to gay marriage, to moves to cut subsidies under health reform that insurance companies favor, to harsh stands on deporting undocumented immigrants. But they won’t be able to control their own extremists – such as Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, who promises to push hot-button far right positions across the board during GOP presidential debates and nominating contests unfolding in 2015 and early 2016.

The bigger the GOP victories on November 4, the wilder the ride will be in U.S. politics over the next two years.