

Did Republicans Lose the Election?

BY PAUL STARR

Last November, Democrats seemed to be justified in believing that their party had won a victory of genuine significance. The ideological differences between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were clear-cut, and Obama was re-elected. Despite the advantage that Republicans initially enjoyed in Senate races, Democrats increased their majority to 55, and that new majority is more liberal than the old one. In races for the House, more voters cast ballots for Democratic than for Republican candidates, though Republicans kept their majority thanks in large part to gerrymandered districts.

But if you step back now, look at government as a whole, and think about the likely course of politics in the next several years, things look different. In what was a bad year for Republicans, they emerged with enough power to stymie major Democratic legislative initiatives and to advance key items on their own agenda through the arms of government that they continue to control.

In other words, the United States now actually has a peculiar form of coalition government. In parliamentary systems, the parties in a coalition are typically neighbors on the ideological spectrum that enter into a partnership. We do coalition government differently, manacled together two ideologically incompatible parties and thereby condemning the nation to paralysis on most great questions and to politically manufactured crises to settle those that can't be avoided.

I am writing just after the nation exhaled a collective sigh of relief on New Year's Day, when the House finally passed legislation to avert the "fiscal cliff"—at least, the first such cliff of 2013. For both sides, it was a compromise, as it had to be. The president succeeded in raising taxes on the top 1 percent back to the level they were in the Clinton years; Republicans succeeded in making the rest of the Bush tax cuts permanent. Long-term unemployment benefits were extended, but the payroll tax holiday came to an end, which will result in an immediate cut in paychecks and slower growth for the next year. Nearly everyone declared it a great triumph, and I suppose it was, though another one like it would bring back the recession.

More opportunities to damage the economy are coming up. Perhaps the most important feature of the fiscal-cliff settlement—and it was a feature, not a bug, for the Republicans—was that it put off the budget sequester for only two months and failed to raise the debt ceiling. So, to start off Obama's second term, Republicans can keep the president on a fiscal treadmill, diverting him from larger aims. In 2010, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said the Republicans' single biggest priority was to make Obama a one-term president; now their objective is to prevent Obama from doing much with the second term they tried to deny him.

The fiscal-cliff legislation severely limits domestic policy for the rest of Obama's presidency.

With income-tax increases off the table, most of the focus in the coming rounds will be on spending cuts, particularly in Social Security and Medicare. However those issues are resolved, spending on discretionary programs as a percentage of gross domestic product will be virtually certain

America now has a coalition government in which two incompatible parties are manacled together

to fall back to levels last seen in the 1950s. If any Eisenhower Republicans are left, they should be smiling.

Meanwhile, Republicans have considerable power to set the nation's direction through other arms of government. Chief Justice John Roberts's decision to vote with the liberals last June to uphold the Affordable Care Act should not obscure the reality that the Court remains in conservative hands. Even the "Obamacare" ruling represented a doctrinal victory for conservatives in two crucial areas—the limitation of the

interstate commerce clause and congressional spending powers—and this year Roberts appears poised to lead his fellow conservative justices in decisions declaring affirmative action and critical provisions of the Voting Rights Act to be unconstitutional.

The other critical base of conservative power lies in the states, where Republicans have one-party control of 24 states, compared with only 12 for the Democrats. The GOP made the most of its victories in 2010, seizing the chance to gerrymander state legislative as well as congressional districts and positioning itself to dominate those legislatures as well as the U.S. House for the rest of the decade.

Intransigence isn't necessarily a hopeless strategy. Although the long-term demographic trends favor Democrats, Republicans' immediate prospects are not bad at all. In 2014, seven Democratic senators are up for re-election in states won by Romney, while only one Republican senator is up for re-election in a state won by Obama. And since off-year elections usually see a fall-off in minority and young voters, Democrats will be hard-pressed to repeat last year's Senate victories.

These are the dimensions of the challenge facing Obama and his party. As I discuss elsewhere in this issue, the president does have a few opportunities for breakthroughs in policy, but he will need all the powers of his office and all the arts of politics to achieve them. The outcome of the 2012 election depends on it. ■