

# The Mindless Election of 2010

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Now, three days following the 2010 election, I offer an updated and slightly expanded version of an earlier evaluation. Writing is an evolving adventure in the search for understanding, and the opportunity for consolidation and refinement over a bit of time is almost always useful.

In large nationwide exit polls conducted during the 2010 election, 74% of the American electorate identified as one of their greatest goals for the national political process to be that Congress work cooperatively and efficiently to get the business of the public done. Political bickering and spinning and obstruction and grandstanding are seen as leading to gridlock, failure to compromise and stalemate with the result that legislation is both sparse and weak. Americans declare that they want the parties to work together and serve the needs of the public in a more civil manner. So, one of the major overarching announced desires of the American people as this electorate voted in the 2010 election was for true bipartisanship to be a reality in the national political process.

Now let's look at how Americans voted in 2010. They voted to support more conservative Republicans and Tea Party candidates who ran on absolutist conservative positions to reduce debt and the size of government – no compromises allowed! This result is in line with the trend within the Republican Party since Reagan to purge itself of its moderates. On the Democratic side, the 2010 election saw the majority of its losses among its moderate and more conservative leaning members in Congress. So, after the 2010 election, the Democratic Party is left with its liberal membership base and has become more progressive in its ideology while the Republican Party has moved further right in its absolutist conservative ideology. As our two major parties move away from one another and as their ideologies become more hardened and with less overlap, it becomes more and more difficult to find middle ground where cooperation and compromise can be realized. Achieving greater bipartisanship in this context is pure political fantasy.

The result: What we see in the 2010 election is that the voting behavior of frustrated Americans supports greater differences between the parties, leads to the likelihood of even greater Congressional gridlock for the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, and is in direct conflict with Americans' larger announced goal of seeing greater bipartisan cooperation and compromise so the people's business can get

addressed efficiently. In short, Americans voted in 2010 against the one political objective that they identified as being most desired.

Why???

The frustration of the American public is real and justified. Even anger is probably appropriate in the current circumstances when the effects of all the factors that have coalesced to produce it are appreciated. Americans have suffered in a prolonged and deep recession in which the perpetrators have been bailed out and walked off Scot-free with their hundreds of billions of dollars while average taxpayers have been left holding the debt bag and facing pervasive and persistent unemployment, greatly reduced wealth, and massive numbers of home foreclosures. And all of this has occurred in a context over the last twenty-five years where, even with both spouses working, the middle class has seen its standard of living stagnate as a result of corporations out-sourcing first manufacturing jobs and then many professional activities [especially accounting, engineering, and legal work]. So, even many in the educated professional class are now feeling downward economic pressure and uncertainty about the viability of their economic future. For many Americans what has been happening in the country over the last twenty-five years is not a pretty picture, and the recent events surrounding the Great Recession have blown the lid off the negative emotional power keg that has been building.

While frustration and anger within the American populace are understandable, the exploitation of this frustration and anger by either liberal or conservative populists for purely political ends is despicable. These populists transform uninformed frustration into unjustified fear, which too easily overwhelms reason. This populism has come mostly from the conservative side since the 2008 election and has been led by the amorphous Tea Party Movement with the active complicity of the Republican Party. The Democratic Party has failed miserably to counter this populist led agenda with the result that a sufficient portion of the American electorate was invited by these populists to support a mindless response in the 2010 election. Unfortunately this kind of invitation is offered and too easily accepted all the time in America by significant numbers of voters because they fail to keep the lessons of even recent historical events in mind and because they are very short on critical thinking abilities. In the 2010 election, instead of assisting the public to identify and keep the real sources of our current economic malaise in view, the populists [best exemplified by Palin, Beck, Coulter, Army, Pence, Paul, DeMint, and Bachmann] have successfully promoted gross simplifications and misrepresentations of the real causes of our problems and projected all responsibility on the “excesses” of “the bums in power.”

A voting response by the public to justifiable frustration can be enlightened or mindless. And unfortunately in the 2010 election the conservative populists have been successful in promoting the mindless response, which is always easier. The conflict between the public's desire for bipartisanship vs. the politically divisive result of their voting behavior in the 2010 election demonstrates how populist fear mongering can lead to a mindless voting response by enough Americans that the public's overall goal of achieving greater civility and efficiency in its national governmental affairs is undermined. We can only hope that some day the critical thinking ability of our "educated" public will reach the point where the rabble rousing of the populists – whether liberal or conservative in nature – is seen for what it is and rejected. When Americans reach this point of sophistication, the opportunity will exist for our public to vote constructively to address the real causes of our problems and challenges. Until that time, we are subject to the whims of the populist political winds of spin, as evidenced in the pendulum extremes of the 2008 and 2010 elections.