

Backgrounder

The 2014 Mid-term Elections in the United States

Aakriti Sethi

Aakriti Sethi is Research Intern at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

December 16, 2014

Summary

There are many reasons for the decision of the people to vote for the Republican Party in these elections ranging from economy, governance, foreign policy decisions, the mid-term factor and mostly President Obama's unpopularity.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or the Government of India.

On November 4, 2014, elections to the Senate or the Lower House of the United States (US) Congress were held in which the Republican Party swept the polls. These elections also marked the 100th anniversary of the direct popular election of US Senators. 36 out of 50 state governors, 33 out of 100 seats in the Senate, all 435 members of the House of Representatives, and countless state and local offices were up for election.¹ In addition, three special elections were held to fill vacancies (Hawaii, South Carolina and Oklahoma) that occurred in the 113th Congress. Those elected to the US Senate in the 33 regular elections will begin their six-year terms on January 3, 2015.² The 33 states that went for elections were: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming.³

For the Republicans, this massive win came after a long time since the 1994 Senate election. Control of the upper legislative chamber has flipped in just one out of five cycles since 1914, and the Republicans have not won back the chamber since 1994, making these election results a milestone in the history of US politics.⁴ The US Senate race ratings or the chances for a specific party/candidate to win can be understood under four categories. The first is Solid; these races are not considered competitive and are not likely to become closely contested. The second is Likely; these seats are not considered competitive at a specific point but have the potential to become engaged. The third is Lean; these are considered competitive races but one party has an advantage. And finally, the Toss Up; these are the most competitive races; either party has a good chance of winning.⁵ Many Democratic candidates failed to secure their seat in most of the states and paved the way for their Republican contender to take over.

¹ "US mid-term elections: What is at stake?", *BBC News*, October 1, 2014, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29412354>

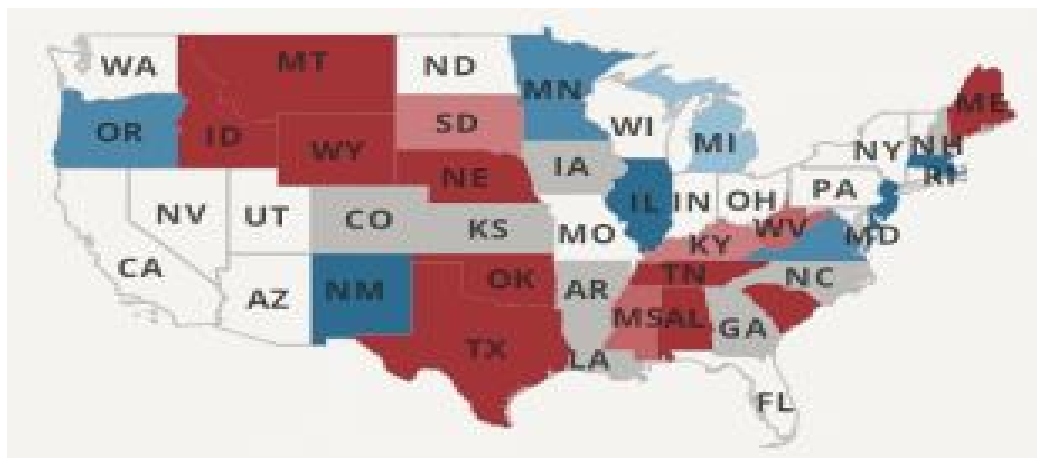
² "United States Senate Elections, 2014", *Ballotpedia*, 2014, at http://ballotpedia.org/United_States_Senate_elections,_2014

³ John Sides, Kennedy Elliot, Matt Nelson and Peter Pezon, "Election Lab 2014", *The Washington Post*, November 4 2014, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dre/politics/election-lab-2014>

⁴ Eric Ostermeier, "Why Are We Obsessed with the 2014 US Senate Elections?", *Smart Politics*, University of Minnesota, October 20, 2014, at http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2014/10/why_are_we_obsessed_with_the_2.php

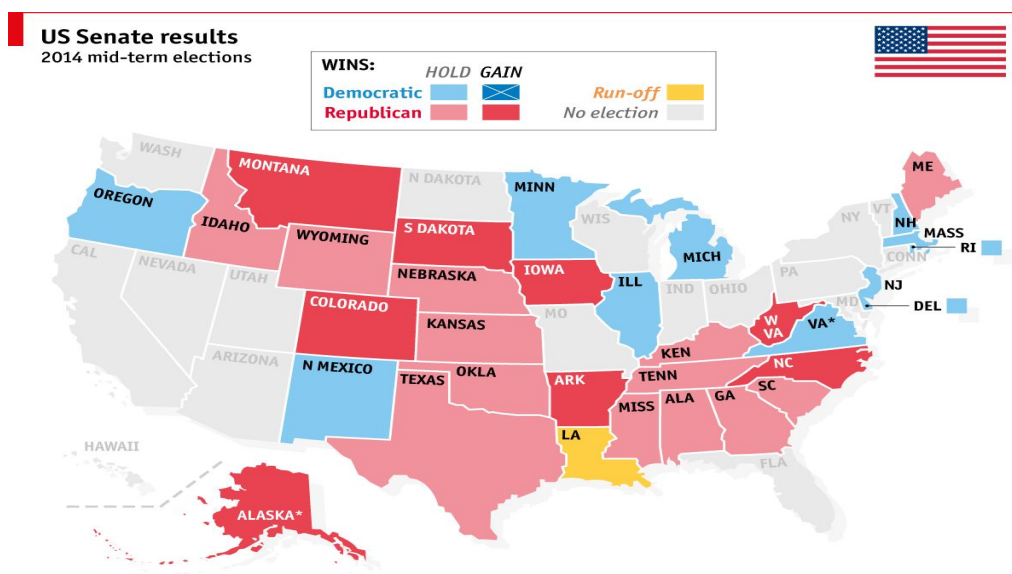
⁵ "2014 Senate Race Ratings for November 3, 2014", *The Cook Political Report*, November 3, 2014, at <http://cookpolitical.com/senate/charts/race-ratings/8058>

2014 Senate Race Ratings Map



Source: Senate Race Ratings Map, Cook Political Report, at <http://cookpolitical.com/senate/maps>

2014 Senate Elections Final Results



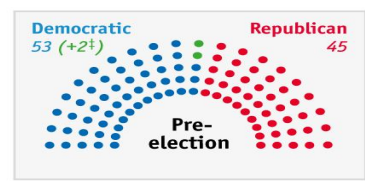
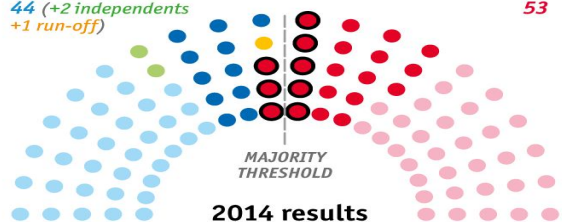
Senate seats
33 elections of 100 total seats

DEMOCRATIC*
44 (+2 independents
+1 run-off)

REPUBLICAN*
53

UNCONTESTED† **WINS**

● Democratic	● Democratic	● Republican	○ GAIN
● Republican	○ Run-off	○ Run-off	○ Run-off
● Independent	○ Run-off		



Sources: AP; The Economist
Economist.com/graphicdetail

* Likely result † Includes 3x "Special elections"
(1x easy Democrat win, 2x easy Republican wins) ‡ Independents

Source: "The Republicans win the Senate", The Economist, November 05, 2014, at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2014/11/mid-terms>

THE WINNERS AND LOSERS

After their win in the recent Senate elections, Republicans now hold 53 seats, Democrats 44, and independent candidates two. This gives Republicans unprecedented power for making major decisions in the coming times.⁶ President Barack Obama throughout his tenure has had difficulty in working with the US Congress, but with this recent flip in the elections, his problems have simply intensified. The major winners in this election were: Mitch McConnell (Kentucky), Chris Christie (New Jersey), John Kasich (Ohio), Ed Gillespie (Virginia), Shelly Moore Capito (West Virginia), Al Franken (Minnesota), Cory Gardner (Colorado), Tom Cotton (Arkansas), Joni Ernst (Iowa) and Gary Peters (Michigan). The big losers of the elections were Charlie Crist (Florida), Scott Brown (New Hampshire), Martha Coakley (Massachusetts), Martin O'Malley (Maryland) and Mark Udall (Colorado).⁷

Republicans won control of the Senate partly with the help of newcomers who ousted Democratic incumbents and whipped rivals for seats vacated by retiring liberal lions, whose political service spanned decades that included some of the biggest moments in modern US political history.⁸ The broader outcome of this election was that the Republican Party has taken control of the Senate by picking up at least six seats from the Democrats, ultimately weakening the hold of the Democrats in the US Government. Joni Ernst claimed the sixth seat needed to flip control. Republicans will control the Senate in the 114th US Congress. The Democratic Party that controlled the Senate in the 113th Congress had a partisan breakdown of 53-45-2, with the two independents caucusing with the Democrats.⁹ For the Republicans to take the majority in the Senate, they needed to take at least six of the 36 seats held by the Democrats and were up for elections, and retain control of the 15 seats already held by the Republicans.¹⁰ The control over the House of Representatives and the Senate by the Republicans is a clear indication of further complications for Obama in the remaining two years of his presidency. Republicans also flexed their muscle in the race for the governor's seat in Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts – states that dependably have gone for Democrats. Among the winning Republicans were a handful of incumbents – New Jersey's Chris Christie, Ohio's John Kasich, Michigan's Rick Snyder and Wisconsin's Scott Walker – who are potential presidential contenders for the 2016

⁶ "The Republicans Win the Senate", *The Economist*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2014/11/us-2014-mid-term-election-results>

⁷ Chris Cillizza, "Winners and Losers of the 2014 Election", *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/04/winners-and-losers-of-the-2014-election-early-edition/>

⁸ Dana Liebelson, "America, Meet Your New Bosses", *Huffington Post*, November 5, 2014, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/05/republican-senate-winners-2014_n_6084872.html

⁹ no. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

presidential election. Among Democrats, New Hampshire's Maggie Hassan held on to the governor's seat and Pennsylvania businessman Tom Wolf beat incumbent Tom Corbett.¹¹

REASONS FOR THE FLIP IN THE CONTROL OF THE US CONGRESS

There are many reasons for the decision of the people to vote for the Republican Party in these elections ranging from economy, governance, foreign policy decisions, the mid-term factor and mostly President Obama's unpopularity. While 41 per cent were enthusiastic or satisfied with his administration's performance, 59 per cent felt dissatisfied or angry with Obama.¹² This was similar to his job rating: 44 per cent approval and 54 per cent disapproval. Nationally, a third of all voters said opposition to the president was a reason for their vote in the House races, while only 20 per cent expressed support for Obama in their choice of candidate.¹³ The turnout factor also became one of the major reasons for the Democrats to lose this election. In mid-term elections, turnout is generally far lower than in presidential years. In 2010 and 2014, some of those groups of voters that had helped Obama and the Democrats win in 2008 and 2012 turned out in disproportionately smaller numbers than those voters who had supported Republicans in 2008 and 2012.¹⁴

One of the major voting groups which showed up at an alarmingly low number was young voters. There was a feeling, especially among young people, that their vote will not change anything and therefore there was no point in voting.¹⁵ The tax issue was also one of the major reasons for Republicans to win seats in these elections. All the Republican tax cutting governors won the election. In many states with Democrat tax raisers, such as Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois, etc., the Republicans won the election.¹⁶ The debate over immigration issue also became a reason for the result in the loss of seats by the Democrats. Immigration issue was a losing issue in the 2014 elections, with Republicans who announced their opposition to President Obama's legalisation plans for illegal driver's

¹¹ "Elections Gives Republicans Control of US Congress", *Voice of America*, November 05, 2014, at <http://www.voanews.com/content/republicans-win-control-of-us-senate-in-midterm-elections/2508989.html>

¹² Stephen Moore, "The Biggest Winners and the Losers in the 2014 Elections", *The Daily Signal*, November 8, 2014, at <http://dailysignal.com/2014/11/08/magnitude-gop-tidal-wave/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John B. Judis, "Here's Why the Democrats Got Crushed-- and Why 2016 Won't be a Cakewalk", *New Republic*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/120138/2014-election-results-heres-why-democrats-lost-senate-gop>

¹⁵ "Republicans win control of US Senate", *Al Jazeera*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2014/11/republicans-set-gains-us-midterm-polls-2014114123217459187.html>

¹⁶ Moore, no. 12.

licenses earning victories across the country.¹⁷ The neglect of the middle class by the Democrats is also seen by political pundits as one of the reasons for their downfall. Some Democrats felt that the party didn't offer enough relief to the middle class voters worried about their job and stagnant wages, a broad group Obama had targeted relentlessly in his 2012 campaign.¹⁸ The President's party rarely does well in the US mid-term elections, and that has been particularly true in a president's second-term. The country has still not recovered from the great recession. Employment may be up but not wages and that may have hurt the Democrats.¹⁹

OBAMA'S REMAINING TENURE

The general outcome of this election is highly disappointing for President Obama. With the Republicans taking control of the US Congress, it will be a complex political tug-of-war in the remaining two years for a democratic president to get matters pushed forward in the American political system. President Obama compared the challenges faced by the Democratic candidates to what the Republicans confronted in the middle of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's second-term, when the Republicans suffered major losses in the 1958 elections.²⁰ A Republican-controlled Senate could refuse to confirm Obama's appointments to judgeships, ambassadorships, cabinet positions, and lower level administration jobs. That would make it very hard for Obama to shape the federal judiciary.²¹ With Mitch McConnell becoming the Senate Majority Leader, he will set the chamber's agenda, deciding which bills come to the floor and managing the floor debate to advance the Republican Party's agenda. Republicans will also take on the committee chairmanships, giving them significant authority to launch investigations and shape policy debates in the US Capitol.²²

Some of the immediate legislative priorities Republicans would like to act on include the Keystone XL Pipeline – which the Obama Administration has delayed multiple times over the past three years – chipping away the Affordable Care Act and the tax reform. The goal would be to force Obama to make decisions on popular bills, putting him in a

¹⁷ Stephen Dinan, "Oregon voters reject licenses for illegals; immigration a losing issue for Dems in 2014 elections", *The Washington Times*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/nov/5/immigration-losing-issue-democrats-2014-midterm-el/>

¹⁸ Benjy Sarlin and Alex Seitz-Wald, "Why the Democrats lost, according to everyone", *MSNBC*, November 7, 2014, at <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/why-the-democrats-lost-midterms-according-everyone>

¹⁹ Judis, no. 14.

²⁰ "Obama: Election poses Democrats' toughest challenge in decades", *Al Jazeera America*, November 04, 2014, at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/11/4/midterm-electionvoting.html>

²¹ no. 1.

²² Ibid.

corner where he will have to either veto legislation or begrudgingly accept it.²³ The Republicans will push back hard against what they see as Obama's lawless moves to remake the immigration policy in a way that gives unreasonable advantages to people who are staying in the US illegally. At stake, they say, are the potential bankrupting of the American education system, the availability of jobs for US citizens, the worsening of an already strained criminal justice system, and a host of other controversial shifts in what American life looks like.²⁴

On the foreign policy level, the Republicans would like to revamp many aspects of America's decision making. The Republicans are likely to be more supportive on some issues considered important by European allies, including standing up to Russia and boosting trans-Atlantic trade. There are also chances of them blocking Obama's efforts to work with European leaders on climate change.²⁵ The Obama Administration has signalled that it might attempt to manoeuvre around Congress and avoid allowing a vote on any final agreement with Iran, the deadline for which was set for November 24, but now the deadline has been extended till March 01, 2015 with the final agreement to be formulated by July 1, 2015.²⁶

The Republican Party had one strategy it followed in nearly every Senate race: run against the president. It has paid off as the Democratic candidates couldn't get out of the president's shadow, and every attempt by them to localise the race finally failed. The 2014 election, thus, was less an endorsement of the Republican ideas and more a rejection of a president in the sixth year of his presidency.²⁷

This mid-term elections can also act as a parameter to assess the general public opinion towards the current US politics, which is clearly not favouring Obama or the Democrats. With the next presidential election due in 2016, it would be interesting to see which party would be able to reserve the White House for the next four years. After five of the six presidential elections in which the Republicans lost the popular vote, it was said that

²³ Brett Logiurato, "Here's What Happens if Republicans Take the Senate", *Business Insider India*, November 04, 2014, at <http://www.businessinsider.in/Heres-What-Happens-If-Republicans-Take-The-Senate/articleshow/45029597.cms>

²⁴ David Martosko, "What's at stake if Republicans win control of the Senate? Only immigration, Obamacare, the Keystone Pipeline, the Supreme Court, and every Regulation the GOP wants to stop", *Daily Mail*, November 04, 2014, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2819561/What-s-stake-Republicans-win-control-Senate-immigration-Obamacare-Keystone-pipeline-Supreme-Court-regulation-GOP-wants-stop.html>

²⁵ no. 11.

²⁶ Logiurato, no. 23.

²⁷ John Dickerson, "The Republican Party ran against Obama, and the president lost big-time", *Slate*, November 5, 2014, at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/11/republican_party_wins_the_midterms_democrats_couldn_t_escape_president_obama.html

“this year’s mid-term elections point toward a plausible Republican path to winning the White House.”²⁸ The Republican path to a Senate majority ran through several Democratic seats in the so-called red states where Republicans have been strong in recent elections, including the 2012 presidential race. Republicans easily won key Senate races in Arkansas, West Virginia, Montana and South Dakota.²⁹ They also won Democratic senate seats in key swing states like Colorado, Iowa and North Carolina – states that were essential building blocks for Obama’s 2012 re-election and which will play a key role in the 2016 presidential race as well.³⁰

President Obama will have to go through some serious domestic power struggle in the final years of his tenure, which could create further friction within the US Government. With Republicans like Sarah Palin recently demanding the impeachment of President Obama and the Speaker of US House of Representatives John Boehner wanting to sue Obama for overstepping his authority, the division between the President and the Congress might get worse in coming months. Though the Republicans are currently taking the lead in terms of popular support, but with many senior influential Democrats eyeing the 2016 presidential election, it is too soon to predict the future.

²⁸ Nate Cohn, “G.O.P. is Making Progress Toward Presidency But is Still Playing Catch-Up”, *The New York Times*, November, 10, 2014, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/us/politics/gops-path-to-presidency-tight-but-real.html>

²⁹ Jim Malone, “A Republican Rout-Now What?”, *Voice of America*, November 5, 2014, at <http://www.voanews.com/content/column-republican-rout-now-what/2509260.html>

³⁰ Ibid.