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Unpopular Policies Lead to Midterm Losses: Lessons of '66 and '94 Loom Over Democrats: Part I
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Midterm elections can present a considerable risk for a new President. Often viewed as a referendum on a President's policies, the last 45 years featured such huge party losses as 54 House seats under Clinton, 48 seats under Ford, and 47 seats under Johnson. While Ford's fate was not entirely his own, the fates of Johnson and Clinton present foreboding scenarios for Democrats in 2010.

Johnson and Clinton: Unpopular Policies Lead to Midterm Losses

In 1964, the Democrats were sitting atop the political world. They held 68 Senate seats and gained 36 House seats for an overwhelming margin of 295 to 140 – not to mention winning the White House. Just two years later, however, they lost 48 seats. Why? A series of policies that were unpopular including a “credibility gap” on the Vietnam War and what one Democrat Governor said was “Frustration over Vietnam; too much federal spending and... taxation; no great public support for your Great Society programs; and ... public disenchantment with the civil rights programs.” Despite the economy growing 6% because of the Kennedy/Johnson tax cuts, the divide between Johnson's policies and public opinion produced a 49% approval rating for Johnson and resulted in historic losses for the President and his party in 1966.

In 1994, the Democrats lost a stunning 54 seats and control of the House for the first time in over 40 years. Bill Clinton was elected because Bush 41 broke his “no new tax” pledge, the economy was weak, the deficit was high and Ross Perot siphoned votes – all of which gave the young Clinton, promising middle class tax cuts, a plurality victory. Clinton then overestimated his victory, got off to a rocky start and raised taxes instead of cutting them. The divide between Clinton and voters over policy played out in his first midterm election when Republicans picked up 54 seats amidst an approval rating of 46% for Clinton – despite a recovering economy.

Obama's Growing Divide

Barack Obama won the Presidency in large part because of a weak economy. Although he gave the voters only a vague sense of what *Change* would really mean, the damage Republicans did to themselves between 2005 and 2008, along with the economy, was enough for Obama to win – along with Media help and the dynamic of an historic first chance to elect a black President. It is important to note that Obama won only 52.9% of the vote – a victory but not an overwhelming victory.

Today, Obama's approval rating is in the mid to high 40s – an historic drop for a first year President. Democrats rightly point out that the economy Obama inherited hurts his ratings. It is his policies, however, that are increasingly more at odds with Americans and are truly the cause for his plummeting ratings.



Keep in mind that Obama approval rating in April was in the 60% range despite the bad economy. Yes the continuing bad economy has a corrosive effect on Obama's popularity; his divisive policies, however, have had a worse effect.

The so-called "stimulus" spending and resultant higher deficits are unpopular and hardly working. The Health Care bill is strongly opposed; the cap and trade/global warming policies are unpopular as are the coming tax hikes. Those divisive policies have played a central role in quickly driving down Obama's ratings.

2010 – No Room for a Turnaround

Given lagging job growth and high deficits, and policies that many know will hurt, not help, the economy, the economic situation will not be the Democrats friend in 2010. The unpopular Health Care bill will dominate the 1st quarter of 2010 as the reconciliation process takes center stage – along with cap and trade, a record federal deficit, along with tax hikes, and an immigration battle that may scare and anger many voters.

Obama's mounting policy divide with Americans, combined with a weak economy should leave Obama's approval ratings in the low 40s by the summer and through the fall.

All of that is bad news for Democrats House candidates next fall. Over the last 40 years, the average loss, in House seats, for the Presidents party when his approval rating is below 50% was 41 seats. Recalling that even in a *recovering* economy that Clinton lost 54 seats and Johnson 47, unless Obama can bridge the growing policy divide he has with Americans or the economy roars back, unlikely scenarios both, Obama may well suffer the same fate as Johnson and Clinton with losses that exceed 40 seats – enough for the Republicans to retake the House.