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Democrats Can't Blame the Economy

Imagine if President Obama had moved right after Scott Brown's election. The party would be in better shape today.

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By FRED BARNES

A funny thing happened on the way to the midterm election. The economy was in bad shape, with high unemployment, slow growth and a lingering housing crisis. Yet it wasn't the paramount issue in the campaign.

The run-up to today's election has been policy-driven: Democrats are likely to lose their strong majorities because of the policies of President Obama and his congressional allies on spending, the deficit, the national debt and health care.

Those policies aroused an anti-Democratic alliance of Republicans, independents and tea partiers that emerged in the spring of 2009, spurred by alarm over spending, bailouts and escalating debt. By fall 2009, opposition to Mr. Obama's health-care plan solidified what appears to be a majority coalition.

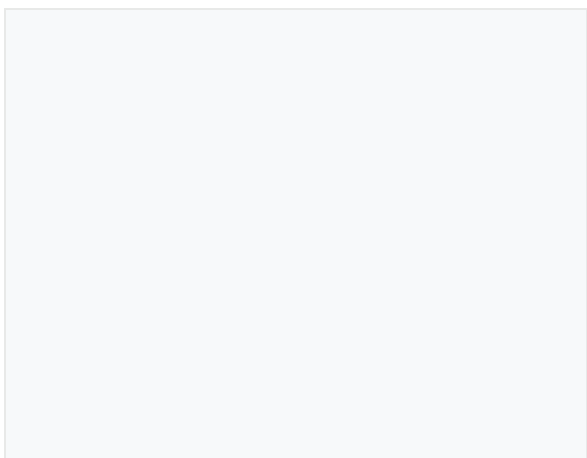


Deputy editor Daniel Henninger, editorial board member Matthew Kaminski, and WSJ.com columnist John Fund analyze tomorrow's referendum on Obama-Pelosi governance.

Yes, the economy is always a factor in elections. But a wretched economy doesn't automatically doom Washington's ruling party to disaster in a midterm election. Since World War II, the average midterm loss by the president's party is 24 House and four Senate seats. In 1982, despite a deep recession and joblessness above 10%, Republicans lost only 26 House seats and none in the Senate. The difference between 1982 and today is that President Reagan's policies—cutting spending and taxes, firing striking air-traffic controllers—were popular.

And, by the way, a prosperous economy doesn't guarantee midterm success. In 1994, Republicans capitalized on President Clinton's liberal policies to win a rout despite a generally strong economy. In 1974, the Watergate scandal led to a Democratic landslide. In 1946, when Republicans ran on the slogan "Had Enough?"—referring to the regulations and taxes of wartime and the New Deal—they won 54 House and 11 Senate seats.

Yes, a flourishing economy would help Democrats today, and voters invariably list the economy and jobs as their top concern in the election. But that's not all they've told pollsters



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economy and jobs as their top concern in the election. But that's not all they've told pollsters.

In a CBS/New York Times survey, only 8% blame Mr. Obama for the economy and more than two-thirds see the slump as temporary. "Most voters believe the best thing the government could do to help the economy is to cut government spending," says pollster Scott Rasmussen. "At the same time, most voters believe the administration and congressional Democrats want to go in the opposite direction."

The initial glimmering of a new center-right coalition appeared less than a month after Mr. Obama took office in January 2009. The first tea parties were held in response to the budget—with its sharp increase in spending (8.4%) and 8,000 earmarks—as well as the stimulus and bailouts.

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By April, independents had begun their migration from left to right. This wasn't prompted by the economy. At the time, most Americans blamed George W. Bush for the economic mess. The cause was spending,

and the soaring deficit and long-term debt it was creating.

Then came the summer, dominated by growing disapproval of what Republicans dubbed ObamaCare. That trend has never reversed. Democrats were confident that their health-care reform would be a political asset. But it helped Republicans win governor's races in Virginia and New Jersey last November, and it was pivotal in January to electing Scott Brown to the Massachusetts Senate seat held for 48 years by the late Edward Kennedy.

Health care is a special thorn in the side of independents. A week ago, a George Washington University/Politico poll found that 62% of independents look unfavorably on ObamaCare. Only 6% regard it favorably. Independents, who were an indispensable part of the Democratic juggernauts in 2006 and 2008, favor Republicans by 14 percentage points.

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There's a simple way to test whether Democratic policies, rather than the economy, are the dominant factor in the midterm election: Consider the alternative.

After Mr. Brown was elected on Jan. 19, Mr. Obama could have abandoned his full-throttle blitz to pass health-care reform and other legislation, instead seeking compromise with Republicans. The bipartisan route, adored by independents, was open to him.

Mr. Obama could have yielded on health care and settled for a scaled-back bill that provided coverage for the uninsured and those with pre-existing conditions. He also could have proposed meaningful spending cuts or a second stimulus that included broad-based tax incentives for private investment. And he could have chosen to extend all the Bush tax cuts for another year or two.

On each of those issues, Mr. Obama would have attracted significant Republican backing—and he and his party wouldn't be in such dire straits. Democrats would still lose House and Senate seats, but not nearly as many.

And yet Democrats will explain their losses today by faulting the economy, not themselves. Their fortunes will improve once the recovery picks up, they say. And if that line of thinking isn't persuasive, they assert that there's a general anti-incumbent mood among voters this year.

Many incumbents are in trouble, but voters have a specific target: the party whose policies they so heartily dislike.

Mr. Barnes is executive editor of the Weekly Standard and a Fox News commentator.

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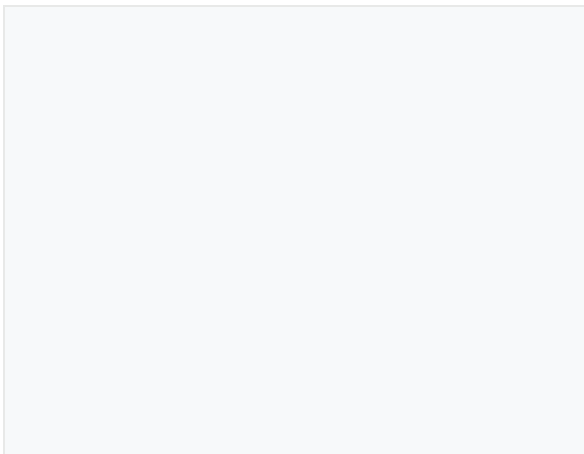
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