

## **Between domestic rock and foreign hard place**

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There were predictions aplenty prior to the U.S. mid-term elections. One of the most accurate was provided by Larry Sabato in his electronic newsletter called The Crystal Ball. He teaches political science and directs the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia and has been forecasting election outcomes for over 30 years on the basis of detailed state-by-state and district-by-district information.

At the end of August, he predicted a net Republican gain in the House of 47-plus seats; at the end of October it had risen to 55-plus. Because of the electoral characteristics of states going to the polls this year, Republican gains in the Senate were never expected to reach the magic number of 10 required for a majority.

Sabato's Crystal Ball was accurate enough that the outcome can hardly be called a surprise.

The results of more than 600 electoral contests pose some interesting options for one person not running, President Barack Obama. Many pundits have drawn the obvious conclusion: with the Iowa caucuses only 15 months away, Obama has already begun his campaign for a second term. But what policies will Obama campaign on?

After the American Revolution, the U.S. Constitution institutionalized the informal checks and balances that were integral to British parliamentary government. The executive in both a presidential and a parliamentary regime, including ours, is especially strong in shaping and conducting foreign policy. Domestic policy, particularly in the U.S., depends a great deal on a cooperative Congress.

Democratic control of Congress has gone but the Republicans do not have enough votes to override a presidential veto. Thus both sides will have to negotiate and compromise. Given the evident animosity, vitriol, and division in American politics, moderation and restraint will require enormous political creativity to avoid domestic deadlock.

If Obama continues to press his domestic agenda, of which health care legislation was a first instalment, he will ensure acrimonious Republican opposition. If he tries to cooperate with the new Congress, he will have to abandon his core (and successful) 2008 agenda. Either option poses major risks for his 2012 reelection.

For just this reason we can expect Obama to play to his institutional strength, namely foreign policy. This is what President Ronald Reagan did during the early 1980s. In 1999, after the Monica Lewinsky scandal, President Bill Clinton launched the air war in Kosovo. Domestic weakness does not mean a president is prevented from conducting an assertive foreign policy. Indeed, Machiavelli would advise a prince that gridlock at home makes foreign adventures more appealing.

Today the international environment is filled with opportunities for an assertive foreign policy. Consider Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, China, Russia -- the range of options is impressive. Unfortunately, Obama faces major problems in running for reelection on the basis of an assertive foreign policy.

First, most Americans are more concerned with the economy than with, say, corruption in Afghanistan or Russian resurgence in Central Asia. And second, President Obama to date has been more interested in conciliation and accommodation in foreign affairs than in confrontation. About the only place where Obama could rally public opinion behind him is on the one state omitted from the list given above: Iran.

The attractiveness of a foreign policy initiative on Iran is bipartisan agreement that Iran is a problem. Obama's problem is that continuing the present course or prolonging negotiations makes him look more like an appeaser than a statesman. But by taking aggressive action, which means air strikes followed by a prolonged air war and naval operations to try to ensure the Strait of Hormuz remains open to oil tankers, Obama would also be taking a huge risk.

Were he to succeed, Obama would win a second term. But the consequences of anything less than a quick and decisive victory involve real dangers not simply to the president's re-election prospects but to the United States, to the other countries of the region, and ultimately to the rest of us.

With his domestic agenda shut down and his foreign policy options surrounded with serious and probably unacceptable dangers, wouldn't it be nice to think that Barack Obama would on his own decide to be a one-term president? Fat chance.

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