

For Democrats, Midterm Peril Lies in the Public's Mood

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For Democrats, the 2010 midterm election was like a bad dream, one not to be repeated. So here is reason for Democrats to sleep uneasily right now: Public attitudes today are remarkably similar to those that prevailed just before that election disaster.

On most traditional readings of the political mood—direction of the country, ratings of the incumbent president's job performance, economic expectations and hopes for the outcome of the November vote—the feelings today are uncannily close to those that prevailed in October 2010, just before the election in which Democrats lost six Senate seats and a whopping 63 House seats, ceding House control to Republicans.

Indeed, a review of data by the Wall Street Journal/NBC News polling team also shows some similarities between public attitudes today and those that prevailed before elections in 1994 and 2006, in which the sitting president's party suffered significant setbacks. At a minimum, these readings suggest Democrats have precious little hope of taking back control of the House and will be lucky if they don't lose more ground there. More important, they show how favorable the landscape is for Republicans to seize the year's grand prize, which is to win the six seats they need to take control of the Senate.

Still, some important caveats are in order. It is May, not November. Six months is an eternity in modern politics, meaning Democrats have time to regain ground. Indeed, some poll numbers have ticked up for Democrats in the past month, so the trend line may be improving. It's hard to know for sure how much these readings might be nudged upward by a perception that the Affordable Care Act, Democrats' most significant but maligned legislative achievement, is working better.

Also, the race for control of the Senate isn't a national election. Instead, it consists of 12 to 14 key statewide races, each of which has its own dynamic in which national sentiments matter but aren't definitive. National mood tends to heavily influence House races in swing districts, but Senate races are more self-contained campaigns in which the personalities and strengths of individual candidates matter more.

Finally, the Democrats' ace in the hole remains the unpopularity of their Republican foes, whose standing doesn't seem to go up even if Democrats' goes down. In the latest survey, just 25% of respondents said they had positive feelings about the GOP.

Still, there is no doubt that the numbers show strong headwinds facing Democrats almost halfway through an election year that will determine the contours of the last two years of the [Obama](#) presidency. "The data continues to portend a very difficult election season for the Democrats," summarizes Republican pollster Bill McInturff, who conducts the Journal/NBC News poll along with Democrat Fred Yang.

The most striking characteristic of the public mood in 2014—and the area of most concern to Democrats—is the lack of economic confidence, seven years after the onset of the big recession

that has hung over the Obama era. Just 26% of voters surveyed in the most recent Journal/NBC News poll late last month said the country was headed in the right direction, while 65% said it was on the wrong track. That's actually a worse reading than recorded in October 2010, when 31% of voters said the country was headed in the right direction and 60% said it was on the wrong track.

Nor do people seem to see better times ahead. Just 27% of voters said the economy will get better in the next 12 months—again, a more pessimistic reading than in October 2010, when 37% said they thought the economy would improve.

President Barack Obama's own approval ratings are quite similar to those he was recording four years ago. In the most recent Journal/NBC News poll, his overall job approval among voters was 43%, compared with 45% in October 2010. In the recent poll, 42% said they approved of the job he was doing handling the economy; four years ago, that reading was 43%.

And on the key question of whether those surveyed wanted the outcome of the midterm election to be a Congress controlled by Democrats or by Republicans, Americans were evenly split, 45% to 45%, compared with 46% to 44% in favor of Republicans in October 2010. That even reading [is a warning light for Democrats](#) because they tend to have a harder time getting their supporters to turn out for midterm elections.

Democrats know the key among all these numbers is the reading of economic confidence—which explains why you will see a lot more effort to convince middle-class voters that Democratic policies give them a better chance of moving ahead, even amid an economy that isn't so hot overall.

Write to Gerald F. Seib at jerry.seib@wsj.com