

Obama's Democrats are about to take a hiding in the mid-term elections. Michael Barone explains why the US has turned its back on big government.

Why have American voters gone so sour on Barack Obama's Democratic party? It's a question that must puzzle many in Britain who – Conservative as well as Labour and Lib Dem – welcomed Obama's election two years ago and saw him leading America and the world into broad, sunlit uplands. But now it appears that Obama's party is about to take what George W Bush called a "thumping" in the mid-term elections on November 2.

And Democrats won the popular vote for the House of Representatives – a key index of public support – by a 54 to 43 per cent margin. That was their best showing since 1986.

Polls now suggest that those percentages could turn upside down. Republicans lead on the generic ballot question – which party's candidates will you support for the House of Representatives – by an average of 49 to 42 per cent. In no previous election cycle since the Gallup organisation started asking the question in 1942 have Republicans led by more than 4 per cent. Now in Gallup's "low turnout" likely voter model they lead by 17. Republicans seem very likely to win more – perhaps many more – than the 39 seats they need for a majority in the House and might, if they get lucky, win the 10 seats they need for a majority in the Senate.

After the 2008 elections, Democratic strategist James Carville predicted that Democrats would dominate US elections for 40 years; Republican strategist Karl Rove had predicted something similar for his party after George W Bush's narrower win in 2004. And Tony Blair's New Labour dominated British politics for nine or 10 years after its first landslide victory in 1997. But the Obama Democrats' dominance turned out to last not 40 years but 40 weeks – until Republicans overtook Democrats in the polls in August 2009. What gives?

In the 1930s, John Maynard Keynes famously said that practical men of business, who acknowledged no intellectual influences, were actually the slaves of some defunct economist. Today I would say that the Obama Democrats, who acknowledge no intellectual superiors, have been the slaves of defunct political scientists and historians.

To be specific, the defunct Progressive political scientists and New Deal historians. The Progressives argued that history inevitably and rightly moves Left, from no government to big government. The New Deal historians taught that in times of economic distress, voters will be particularly supportive of, or at least unusually amenable to, a vast expansion of government.

Obama and Democratic congressional leaders, coming to power in the wake of financial crisis and in the midst of a deep recession, acted on this theory. Oddly, Obama deferred almost entirely to the congressional leaders on the details of the legislation. Don't you worry about the small stuff, he seemed to feel; history is on your side.

They passed a \$787 billion stimulus package which, not accidentally, increased the baseline budgets of many agencies – a permanent expansion of government. A third of the money went to state and local governments, to spare public employee union members the ravages of the recession that were afflicting everyone else. (Unions, which mostly represent public employees, gave Democrats \$400 million in the 2008 campaign cycle.)

They passed a health care bill that was the most unpopular major legislation passed by Congress since the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. That law, which allowed settlers to decide whether to allow slavery in these new territories, resulted in the disappearance of one major political party, the demotion to minority status of the other and led to civil war. The effects of Obamacare will not be so dire, though some longtime Democratic officeholders may think so on November 3.

The Obama Democrats gave the theories of the Progressive political scientists and the New Deal historians as much of a fair test as a theory ever gets in our messy, real world. They clearly flunked. One reason is that the history cited in their support is not, in my view, so unambiguously on their side. Yes, voters did give Franklin Roosevelt's Democratic party big majorities in 1934 and 1936 after their New Deal policies seemed to stop the deflationary downward spiral and the economy started growing again.

But FDR's expansion of government did not pull unemployment down below 10 per cent in the 1930s. If you look at polls towards the end of that decade, you see that most Americans felt government was spending too much, that uncertainty about levels of taxation and regulation was stopping entrepreneurs from creating jobs and that the unions had too much power. It is at least arguable that Roosevelt's Democrats were heading for defeat in 1940. Such a defeat was avoided because by November 1940, the Second World War had broken out. Hitler and Stalin were allies, and with their confederates in Italy and Japan were in command of or threatening most of Europe and Asia, with Britain and its empire standing alone against them. In these dire circumstances, voters understandably picked the unflappable Roosevelt over his opponent, a utility executive with no experience of public office.

In other words, in times of economic distress voters do not necessarily support big government policies. Britons should know this better than Americans. British voters resoundingly rejected Labour in the elections of 1931 and 1935. Voters in Canada and Australia also rejected big government parties in that decade. Only after victory in the war, which enormously enhanced the prestige of the state, did Britons vote for Labour.

We are making history, the Obama Democrats proclaimed as they passed their health care bill, over the objections of a majority of the US electorate, expressed through polls and the unlikely medium of the voters of Massachusetts (who chose Republican Scott Brown for what had been Edward Kennedy's Senate seat in January this year). What they had in mind was the

New Deal historians' version of history. But that was not a fully accurate picture of the 1930s, and America today is a nation even less eager to have government "spread the wealth around", as Barack Obama told Joe the Plumber in Toledo, Ohio, in October 2008.

For economic redistribution is not a contemporary idea. It is an old, fusty idea, first advocated by elite, academic theorists a century or more ago. They saw around them a society in which small numbers of people had built giant firms and aggregated great wealth; in which masses of people, many of them immigrants from unfamiliar places, lived in packed tenements in burgeoning cities and dim factory towns; in which the ordinary person never accumulated significant property, indeed may not even have a bank account. Spread-the-wealth policies, these theorists imagined, would make these people better off and would also prevent revolution. For they did not know, as we do, that violent revolution Paris or Petrograd style would not come to Britain or America.

We no longer live in such a country. Ordinary Americans, over a lifetime, accumulate significant wealth in housing and financial instruments. That process has taken a hit from the recession, but most Americans haven't abandoned its pursuit. They believe big government policies are stifling the economic growth that makes wealth accumulation possible, and that the \$400 tax rebate in the stimulus package doesn't make up the difference.

The exact dimensions of the Democrats' rout are not yet clear. Nor is it clear whether Republicans will advance serious policies to roll back their expansion of government, and whether voters will support them if they do. Britain may give us some clues on that. But we do know that Americans who embraced "hope and change" two years ago are now rejecting the change they were given.

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