

Odds on an Obama comeback improve

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It's been a bad week for Barack Obama and the Democrats who copped, in the US President's words, "a shellacking" in the US midterm elections.

Republicans won back a majority in the House of Representatives, gaining some 60 seats in the biggest shift since World War II. They increased their numbers in the Senate by six, although a Democratic rearguard action and Tea Party foolishness cost them a majority. They also won a slew of governorships and state legislatures, which will help them in the black art of redrawing electoral boundaries.

Obama and the zeitgeist are no longer in perfect sync. Even Shepard Fairey, designer of the "Hope" poster, is losing hope. Even "Obama girl", who lip-synched the 2008 viral hit I've Got A Crush on Obama, is unimpressed. But it's too early for Obama to open his veins into the White House bathtub. We need to keep last week's results in perspective. They were not as bad as the blow delivered to Bill Clinton and the Democrats in 1994. In that year, the Democrats lost both houses of Congress, real estate they had then owned for the better part of four decades.

Obama has to make hard choices in the next two years - but so do congressional Republicans. Should they meet the expectations of their overcaffeinated base, or dash them by becoming real legislators? Tea Party leaders expect them to throw bombs, some of them at Obama's healthcare legislation. Yet when the Republican revolutionaries of 1994 stuck to their hard-line principles, they helped Bill Clinton to an easy re-election.

Obama is in reasonable shape to be re-elected himself. Yes, his opinion poll numbers have taken a tumble. True, Republicans are energised and Democrats are disillusioned. The US economy remains listless and unemployment is stuck at 9.6 per cent. On the other hand, Republican control of the House means the party now shares responsibility for the country's problems. If it fails to deliver, Obama can run against them, as Clinton and Harry Truman did before him.

Presidents usually get re-elected, unless they face a serious primary challenge from within their party. The only Democrat in a position to mount one is now in Australia, serving as Obama's loyal Secretary of State. It is inconceivable that Hillary Clinton would challenge her boss.

Incumbency gives Obama significant ability to control events, as well as access to the best sound stages in the world: the White House, Air Force One and Marine One. To this, he adds his own intrinsic strengths: a base of African Americans and liberals who will come back to him, and the remarkable political skills that took him from the Illinois state House to the Oval Office in four years flat.

Obama has a good case for re-election, even if it is currently obscured. He capitalised the banks, reformed the financial system, rescued the car manufacturers and got the stimulus package through Congress. His healthcare act is a historic achievement that eluded other Democratic presidents. He has made few mistakes in the foreign policy sphere, certainly compared with his predecessor. Obama's record is not perfect, but it's pretty good.

Finally, the possible Republican candidates for his job are underwhelming. Several, including Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee, ran for president unsuccessfully last time around. Sarah Palin is not up to the psychological and intellectual rigours of a presidential campaign. Newt Gingrich was the guy who mucked things up for Republicans the last time they were in this position.

Cases can be made for other candidates - the Mississippi Governor, Haley Barbour; the Texas Governor, Rick Perry; even the independent Michael Bloomberg - but they are not convincing. Given the size of the Republican field and the power of the Tea Party, the eventual Republican nominee will probably have moved to the right, just as Obama tacked to the centre.

I am sometimes accused of being an Obama booster. It is true I thought he would run when most were sure he wouldn't; and that I thought he would win when the experts pronounced that Americans would never elect a black man. There are plenty of ways Obama could lose the White House in 2012, but I'm doubling down on him.

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