U.S. MIDTERM ELECTIONS
AND
THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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U.S. Midterm Elections and the Obama Administration

- Date: Thursday, May 27, 2010
- Time: 17:00~18:30 Roundtable
         18:30~20:00 Dinner
- Location: Main Conference Room (4F), AIPS
- Presenter: Charles E. Cook, Jr
- Moderator: Hahm Chaibong (AIPS)
Executive Summary

The Great Recession, Gulf oil spill, health care reform, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan... As the United States grapples with daunting challenges both internal and external, the world’s only superpower goes to the polls this November for midterm Congressional elections, in which all seats in the House of Representatives and at least 36 of the 100 seats in the Senate will be contested. To gauge the prospects for change in the U.S. Congress and its impact on the Obama administration and the international community, AIPS invited Charles E. Cook to a seminar on May 27, 2010, where the renowned analyst of U.S. politics and the publisher of The Cook Political Report elucidated the complex issues shaping this midterm election and delivered his forecasts of its outcome.

Pointing out that midterm elections are a referendum on the party in power, Cook discussed the reasons for public disaffection with the status quo, such as persistent high unemployment, controversial health care reform, and government bailout of financial and automobile industries. In support of his prognostication, Cook explained both historical voting patterns and recent changes in U.S. domestic politics, including the rise of Independent voters, the damage to the Democratic Party’s brand, and heightened voter impatience with politicians. Going into the fall midterm election, the U.S. electorate, according to Cook, is likely to hand the Democratic Party a resounding defeat, destroying the Democratic majority in the House, though falling short of ending the Democratic majority in the Senate.

Looking beyond the midterm election, however, Cook cautioned that midterm elections are poor predictors of upcoming Presidential elections and argued that the 2012 Presidential election will be determined by factors such as the economy and not by the outcome of this midterm election. In the Q & A session following his presentation, Cook shared his thoughts on topics such as the pending US-Korea Free Trade Agreement and the Tea Party movement in the United States, saying the current U.S. political environment impedes Congressional ratification of the FTA and explaining why the U.S. political system is stacked against the rise of a viable third Party.
Charles E. Cook, Jr.

Thank you. This is my first visit to Korea. When the Korea Foundation and the Embassy invited me to come, I jumped at the opportunity. I’m usually stuck in the mundane world of American politics, so anytime I have the chance to expand my horizons, I jump at it. It’s great to visit and meet with the people of America’s closest ally.

Historical Voting Patterns & Recent Change

One way of looking at what’s been happening in American politics in recent years is to look through the lens of the U.S. House of Representatives. For forty years from 1955 to 1994, the Democratic Party had a majority in the House of Representatives. In other words, from when I was two years old until 1994, the Democrats controlled the House. In 34 out of those 40 years, the Democrats also had a majority in the Senate. It’s true that for 26 out of the 40 years, the Republicans controlled the White House. But one party pretty much controlled the Congress for almost 40 years. Those years witnessed the Cold War, the Civil Rights struggle, Vietnam, three assassinations, and all kinds of tumultuous events. Yet, one party had the majority in the House for twenty consecutive elections and in the Senate for 34 years. Then in 1994, in President Clinton’s first-term mid-term election, we had that Newt Gingrich-led Republican tidal wave that washed the Democratic majority out and brought in the Republican majority. For the next twelve years, we had a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. For most of that time, we had a Republican Senate and the Presidency was split about even. Then, in 2006 after twelve years, we had yet another tidal wave in George W. Bush’s second term mid-term elections, which washed out Republican majorities in both the House and the Senate.

Here we are, four years later, trying to figure out whether the Democratic majority in the House is going to flip back into Republican hands. But think about it for a second: forty years of one party, and then twelve of another, and now potentially another shift in just four years. It’s as if the cycle is getting smaller, and things are moving faster. American voters are showing a lot less patience and a lot less tolerance than they used to. My hunch is that for my lifetime, or maybe for a couple of lifetimes, we will never see one-party control over the House that lasts forty years. We may not even see a party control the House for a dozen years. We may be going through a period of intense volatility.

Years ago, the hamburger chain Burger King used to have the slogan, “Have it your way,” where you could customize your hamburger. I think what we’re seeing now is that voters want it their way, and when
they say they want change, they want it immediately, and they want it exactly the way they want it. If they don’t get what they want, they’re going to throw incumbents out in a way that they never did before.

**Midterm Elections**

A couple of important things to keep in mind in terms of midterm elections. The first is that midterm elections are not about voter preferences between two parties. What they typically are is a referendum on the party in power. Especially, if one party has the Presidency and both the House and the Senate, these elections are a referendum on the party in power. It’s a matter of whether the voters are happy or not. If they’re unhappy about anything, they have only one party to blame and that’s the party in power.

One of the most famous sayings in American politics was by the late Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, who said, “All politics is local.” To me, what Tip O’Neill meant was when you look at a Congressional or State legislative district, and you look at the history of the place, the population, and the historical voting pattern, you notice that the candidates campaign on local issues, as each district operates independently of all others.

That sounds great but doesn’t explain these tidal wave elections of 1958, 1966, and 1974. The same applies to the already mentioned tidal wave elections of 1994 and 2006. You can’t tell a Democrat in 1994 when they were having all their candidates washed out to sea that “all politics is local” or tell the same to the Republicans in 2006. In these elections, you find strong candidates losing to weak candidates, you see districts and states that normally vote for one party swing over to the other party, and you see poor campaigns beating good campaigns. It’s almost as if the laws of gravity are repealed for one year or one night during these wave election years. That’s why I think this statement about all politics being local is a bit misleading.

**Public Opinion Polls**

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of this year’s politics, it’s important to look at where the parties are right now. Recently, the Gallup organization started tracking nightly voter preferences for the first time during a period when there was no campaign or when a presidential election was not imminent. Since the Obama administration took off, we get numbers everyday at one o’clock PM Eastern Standard Time. We get the President’s job approval rating from the night before. For example, the numbers that came out today were 47 percent approval for the President, and he’s been at 49 percent give or take two percent for the past four or five months. But they’re also aggregating the weekly test or what they call the Generic Congressional Ballot Test: they combine all kinds of data.

But when you ask about party identification, for the first quarter of this year, 32 percent of Americans called themselves Democrats, 28 percent Republicans, and 39 percent Independents. We’ve seen a big rise in Independent voters in the last few years. This is important because pollsters have found that people who
call themselves Independents who identify more with the Democrats vote almost as much Democratic as do real Democrats, and the same for Independents who lean towards the Republicans. So when you push these “leaners” and get what you call a “lean” party identification, the Gallup Poll identifies 47 percent Democrat and 45 percent Republican – a near even split. Therefore, only eight percent are true Independents: they don’t lean one way or the other. This 8 percent is the most critical element in an election.

It’s interesting when you look at the polling data of each of these focus groups, because each group looks at politics very differently. Among Democrats, 84 percent approve of the job President Obama is doing. Many of them have some misgivings: a lot of Democrats aren’t happy about the troop surge in Afghanistan, and they weren’t happy when he endorsed building new nuclear power plants or when he came out with offshore drilling or about the BP Gulf crisis. But no matter what, even when they disagree with him, they are intensely loyal to him: they think it is historically very important that he won. But while Democrats “love” Obama, they only “like” the Democratic Congress. The affection and intense loyalty they have towards the President does not extend to the Democratic Congress.

When you look at the Republicans, the President has a job approval rating of 14 percent. Now I’m not even sure who these people are because I haven’t met any in a long time. I actually know a lot of Republicans who voted for Senator Obama, but most Republicans I know who voted for him sort of fell off the bandwagon sometime over the last year, and so he gets a 14 percent. Now, I don’t want to say Republican voters hate President Obama. Let’s just say they just really intensely dislike him. The thing is, even when he does something they agree with, they figure he has an ulterior motive.

The important thing is that there is a subset of these Republicans and conservatives who truly believe he is a traitor. There are people who think he wasn’t even born in the United States. There is an intense hostility. I thought there were some Republicans and conservatives who hated Bill Clinton; there were certainly some Democrats and liberals who hated George W. Bush. But we’re looking at a group of which the Tea Party movement would be a part but not all, which is really remarkable and, I would add, disturbing. I didn’t want to say Republicans hate President Obama. But as for Nancy Pelosi of the Democratic Congress, I think the better terms might be “loathe” or “despise” and that even “hate” wouldn’t be nearly a strong enough term. This is an incredibly intense emotion.

Then, you get to the Independents. Among them, the President gets about 42 percent approval ratings. Keep in mind that he won the Independent vote by 8 percentage points back in 2008. And his approval ratings were in the 60s until mid-summer. By late summer, they dropped below 50, and he’s been in the 40s ever since.

What makes the Independents different from Republicans is that typically they like President Obama, think he is very smart, and feel it was symbolically important for America to elect an African-American President. That said, they started suspecting last spring and then believing more and more last summer that he’s not the centrist/moderate they thought he was during the campaign. And they began thinking, although they
don’t dislike him, that he has a different view of the size, scope, and direction of government than they have. At first it was a suspicion, but then they gradually became more convinced of it, and now they really are kind of convinced. They don’t hate him, but they don’t like where he is going. The analogy I would draw is let’s say you went on a vacation cruise. You get on the ship, and it’s beautiful, but once you are on, you realize it’s not going where you thought it was going: it’s a nice ship but not the cruise you signed up for. That’s where the Independents are right now. They don’t hate him, but this isn’t where they wanted to go, and this isn’t where they think their country should go. And that is very important. The thing is they still like him, but they don’t like the Democratic Congress. They don’t despise them the way Republicans do, but they don’t even like them the way Democrats do. So, it’s a pretty dicey situation in trying to figure out if this will be a normal “all politics is local” election or one of those wave elections.

Public Mood

We look at a couple of diagnostic indicators, and one question is, “Do you think the country is heading in the right direction, or do you think it’s on the wrong track?” This is a question that Dick Wirthlin, who was Reagan’s pollster, used to call the “Dow Jones indicator” of American politics. It’s a good barometer to gauge whether the public is happy or not. In the most recent survey earlier this month, only 34 percent of Americans thought the country was going in the right direction. 56 percent thought it was going off on the wrong track. That’s like a danger signal flashing. And there are other danger signals to consider. For example, Congress’ approval rating: only 21 percent of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing. And even among Democrats, only 38 percent approve of the job Congress is doing. Only 13 percent of Independents approve, and only 10 percent of Republicans. When you ask people, “Do most members of Congress deserve reelection?”, only 28 percent say yes and 65 percent say no. That’s lower than the last two times voters threw a party out of power back in 1994 and 2006. It’s a record low. For a long time, Democrats took some solace, saying “Well, voters are not happy with us, but at least they hate the Republicans,” because Republicans did a great job over the last decade of destroying their own party’s brand. During the six years they controlled the Congress and the eight years in the White House, Republicans did a pretty awful job and really destroyed their party’s image.

What we’ve seen in the last year and a half is that the Democratic Party’s brand has become just as damaged as the Republican Party’s brand. And indeed, in the Gallup Poll, 42 percent rate the Republican Party favorably, and 41 percent rate the Democratic Party favorably. Polls vary slightly, but voters now don’t like either party, so the one advantage the Democrats had has pretty much disappeared.

The final thing we look at is the Generic Congressional Ballot Test. This asks people if elections were held today, whether they would vote for Democratic or Republican candidates, or, alternatively, which party
they would rather see in control. For 2006, 2007, and 2008, Democrats typically scored high single-digit to low double-digit range. But these numbers started dropping last year, and now Republicans pulled ahead. This is among all registered voters, meaning everybody. Well, sadly, everybody doesn’t vote in the United States. We don’t even all vote during Presidential elections, and, in these midterm elections, the turnout is about a third lower than in Presidential elections. Among all registered voters right now, it’s about evenly split between Democrats and Republicans. But, when you look at voters in midterm elections, they tend to be older and not African-American or Hispanic; they tend to be a good bit more Republican than in typical elections. Moreover, when the question asks people how interested they are in voting in this election or how motivated they are this time, the Republicans have had huge leads. What I’m getting at here is that all these diagnostic indicators have been pointing towards a big Republican year.

Even in a normal year during first-term midterm elections, the average result is a 16 seat loss in the House for the President’s party. Currently, you’ll see some numbers higher than that, but these numbers also include second-term midterm elections that behave somewhat differently. However, in the post-World War II era, first-term midterm elections result in an average of 16 seats lost in the House, and there’s usually a change in the Senate. Thus, these diagnostic indicators are pointing to something a lot bigger this year.

**Importance of 2010 Midterm Elections**

Here are some things to keep in mind that make this election particularly important. First, if your party is going to have a really bad election, you really don’t want to have a bad election in a year that ends in a zero. The reason is that they do the census every ten years in the year that ends in a zero. And in the following year, they redraw all the electoral maps for Congress and state legislatures. Moreover, new governors and state legislatures are elected in the zero years, and it is the new state legislatures that redraw the lines of electoral districts. Thus, you want to have as many governors as possible and control as many legislatures as possible so that your party gets to draw the lines in the most favorable way. This is why this is a bad year for Democrats to have a bad election.

Secondly, when Democrats won the majority in 2006, it was under absolutely perfect conditions. President Bush’s job approval rating was at 38 percent, ten points lower than President Obama’s right now; the war in Iraq was at a low point, and there was a series of Republican scandals in Congress. Moreover, there was a very serious “Time for Change” movement, and Democratic voters were really energized. In contrast, Republican voters were lethargic: their party was in charge, but it performed very badly, and they knew it. So, Republican voters
were not motivated, and Independent voters swung for Democrats by an 18-point margin. As a result, Democrats picked up thirty seats in the House, six Senate seats, and got majorities in both places.

Fast forward to 2008. President Bush’s job approval ratings were not 38 percent anymore: they were 25 percent. That’s barely above the level that gets you impeached under other circumstances. The war in Iraq had gotten a lot better, but the economy had collapsed, and the “Time for Change” movement was still pervasive. Republican voters were still lethargic: John McCain had not been able to motivate them. Democratic voters were still motivated and even more with Senator Obama running. Young people, African-Americans and other minority voters were really energized. Independents swung by another 8-point margin, and Democrats picked up another 21 seats in the House on top of the 30 that they had already picked up. They picked up another 8 Senate seats, so the majorities that they had created in ’06 went up to even higher levels in 2008.

Here, we enter this election year in which the Democratic margin in the House is 40 seats. Democrats now have 53 seats in the House that were in Republican hands four years earlier: 48 House Democrats in districts that John McCain won, and 47 Democrats in districts that went Republican in the last two elections. Thus, Democrats are enormously exposed going into this election.

The Democratic Vulnerability

And, finally, there’s the economy. As you can expect, any time your party is in power, and there’s a recession, your party is going to take a hit. Even if you inherited a lousy economy, by the time you’re two years in, you’ve taken some degree of ownership over that economy even if it started under the previous regime. When it’s the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, it’s a little bit more. But what I would argue is that the Democratic exposure on the economy is even worse for one very simple reason: the choice that President Obama and the Democratic Congressional majority made in terms of making health care their top priority last year.

When Bill Clinton ran for President in 1992, one of the things he said was – and we were going through an economic downturn then as well – “If elected, I will focus on the economy like a laser beam.” What a vivid metaphor. There was no ambiguity in what Clinton said. You can have a three-day symposium on to what extent the President of the United States or the Congress can affect the trajectory of the economy and job creation. The important thing is that voters want them to focus on the economy. Although polls show they would like to have health care reform, the same polls and same focus groups are a lot more interested in Washington focusing on jobs and the economy. I would argue that by focusing on health care last year to the point of obsession and not on the economy and jobs, the President and Democratic Congress just aggravated the problems they were going to have and made voters wonder, “Aren’t they listening to us? We are saying

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this, but they’re doing something else.”

And the thing is — and I say this as someone who believes we have in the United States some of the finest doctors and medical technology in the world — we also have the most expensive health care system in the world. It is horribly inefficient and badly needs reform. According to the President, there is no good time to do reform and no easy time to do health care reform. He’s absolutely right. If this were easy, somebody would have done it. Nixon tried health care reform back in the late 60s and the early 70s. But just because there’s no good or easy time to do it doesn’t mean there’s not a bad time to do it. If somebody had come to me two, three years ago and asked, “Charlie, what would be the worst imaginable time for Congress to try to take on significant health care reform?” — with health care being one-sixth of the economy — I would have said, “If we had the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and unemployment were in the 9.5-10.5 percent range, with the American people effectively terrified, that would probably not be a time when they would be terribly open-minded about doing something involving major changes to the health care system.”

Keep in mind that 85 percent of Americans have some form of health care coverage right now. Most of these Americans who have health care coverage don’t love it, but most of them are more or less satisfied with what they have. So, these people with health care coverage say, “Wait a minute, you’re going to insure 20-30 million new people. Now, how do you pay for that? Are my taxes going to go up? Or, if I’m paying health insurance premiums, are my premiums going to go up? Will my coverage go down? Or, some combination of all these?” As for people over 65 years old, you probably heard about trying to get 500 billion dollars savings out of the Medicare system for senior citizens. Therefore, these people would say, “Yes, we need to reform the system, but do we need to do it right now? I’m worried with what that does to my coverage.” The thing is, ultimately, they’re a lot more concerned with their health care than with somebody who is uninsured. Sad, but that’s the reality. Thus, we’ve got all these coming together in a pretty ugly situation for the Democrats.

**Role of Government**

We have seen a shift in public attitudes towards the role of government. There is a poll that asks, “Do you think the government should do more to solve our country’s problems? Or do you think the government is trying to do too many things better left to the private sector?” The American people are never lopsided on this question. It kind of goes back and forth, and it’s never overwhelmingly one way or the other. But, when Gallup asked last month, 57 percent thought the government was trying to do too much, and 38 percent thought it should do more. That is a 19-point spread, the widest it’s been in a dozen years and a fairly significant change from where it was a year and a half ago. What I think happened is this: for twenty, thirty, forty years, Americans have been told we need to get our government spending under control, we need to get our deficits down, we need to get something called entitlement — Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security — spending under control, and we need to get our personal savings rate up. We’ve been warned for years that if we don’t
do these, something horrible is going to happen. We’ve heard the warnings, but we’ve ignored them. Then, in September 2008, Lehman Brothers fell, credit markets froze, and the global economy basically went into cardiac arrest. This didn’t have anything to do with deficits, debt, entitlements or spending, but this did scare the hell out of the American people. It made them more aware or sensitive to all the warnings about the horrible things that could happen. And I might add that the current debt crises in Greece and elsewhere have reinforced that.

After Lehman fell, President Bush turned to Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and said, “This credit crisis must come to an end soon. You figure out what to do, and I’ll back you up on it.” And basically, in a matter of a few days, they put together something that was flawed and imperfect but something that worked. However, if you ask the American people about it, they thought TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) was totally unnecessary and a dangerous overreach of government. I think President Bush and, later, President Obama and Congress were afraid to tell the people, “Right now, if we don’t do something fast, we’re going to go off a cliff, and this is going to look a lot like the Great Depression except more complicated. So if we don’t do something, this is going to be horrific.” I think they were afraid of saying that because that would terrify people, and people would stop spending and make things worse. Therefore, the American people are convinced that TARP, the bailouts, and the takeovers of financial institutions and automobile industries – all these things that happened – was just Washington trying to grab more power and spend more of their money, totally unnecessarily and endangering the future of the country. That’s the view of the American people right now. Throw in cap-and-trade, health care, and it’s like a series of explosions that have rocked the country and spawned the Tea Party movement.

But all this is bigger than the Tea Party movement. Yes, the movement exists, and there are quite a few people in it, but I think the news media grossly generalized and put a label on it. What’s bigger than the Tea Party movement is that there are a lot of people who don’t wear funny hats or go to rallies but don’t like what’s going on in Washington. These people have effectively merged Washington and Wall Street into the rich that just help each other, take money from us, and are exploiting us. In their minds, TARP, the bailouts, and the economic stimulus were all one piece. Personally, I think they’re crazy, but, that said, there are a lot of them, and they feel very strongly. As you’ve seen in both Korea and America, when people believe the future of their country is in danger, they become very motivated, so they will be voting in this election, even though midterm elections tend to have a low voter turnout.

Election Outcome & Its Impact

Given all this, what do I think is going to
happen this time? I think the House is really teetering on the edge. The Democrats are straddling the line determining whether they will hold on to the majority or not. Two, three, four weeks ago, or three months ago, I was sure the Republicans were going to take the majority back. With the special election we saw a week ago, and considering some of the other things we’ve seen, I’m not as sure as I was before, but I think it’s still more likely than not that the Republicans will get a House majority. In the Senate, they will not. They’re not going to get the ten seats they need. They may pick up five, six, seven, maybe eight, but I don’t think it’ll reach ten.

Two last points. One, let’s say I’m right, and this is a horrible election for Democrats. Don’t assume that means anything for the 2012 Presidential elections. Midterm elections are terrible predictors of what’s going to happen in the next Presidential election. Two examples: 1982 and 1994. In 1982, we had a recession, Republicans lost 26 seats in the House but would have lost more had Democrats had more candidates, and they lost 4 Senate seats. A horrible election for Republicans. But, two years later, Reagan won a landslide victory. Every state except his opponent Walter Mondale’s home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia. So, no predictive value in this case. In Bill Clinton’s first-term midterm election in 1994, as we already talked about, Democrats lost the majority in both the House and the Senate, but what happened two years later? Clinton got re-elected easily over Bob Dole. The fact is if you look at the last hundred years, only one elected president who took over from the other Party has lost re-election. That was Jimmy Carter in 1980, who lost to Ronald Reagan.

If you think about 2012 and all the people who might run for President on the Republican side, you’ve got some really bright, talented people: Mitch Daniels, the Governor of Indiana; Haley Barbour, the Governor of Mississippi; former Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts who ran for president the last time; and Tim Pawlenty, the Governor of Minnesota. You’ve also got a Senator from South Dakota and all kinds of people who may run, a lot of whom are bright, talented people, but I don’t see a Ronald Reagan out there. My point is not to predict Barack Obama’s re-election: it is to say whether President Obama gets re-elected does not depend on whether or not the Democrats have a horrible election this time. Whether he gets re-elected or not is going to depend on what the economy is going to be like in 2012. The President’s Council of Economic Advisors is predicting that unemployment is still going to be 8 percent in 2012, which is extraordinarily high. How the surge in Afghanistan goes and all kinds of other factors determine whether President Obama gets re-elected, but this midterm election isn’t likely to be one of those factors.

Finally, I think President Obama is one of the most intelligent presidents we’ve ever elected, but he’s also one of the least experienced. When you start running for president when you’re only two years out of the Illinois state legislature, that’s a modern record of inexperience. What you associate with inexperience is sometimes not necessarily having the best judgment. In terms of the decisions he’s made, he’s made some
terrific decisions as in picking Senator Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State. But some of the other decisions haven’t been so good. He has received advice from people that have been around Washington, know the players and understand the dynamics, but he has also turned down advice in a bunch of areas that have hurt him. As a result, I think it’s going to cost his party a lot this midterm election.

I have a theory about presidents having what I call the “midterm election face plant” where they go face down in the mud. They’re humiliated in front of the entire world in the midterm election. But I would argue that our presidents are better presidents after they’ve had that face plant. After the hubris is gone, there’s some degree of humility where your ego and aspirations are downsized or right-sized and you become a lot more pragmatic. I would argue Bill Clinton was a better president in the last six years than he was in his first two years. I would argue George W. Bush was a better president in the last two years after the 2006 second-term midterm election disaster than he was in the first six. Personally, I am an independent nonpartisan, but I hope President Obama is now getting the experience in terms of understanding how Washington works so that he will come out of this experience a better president than he was before. It is horrible that the 2008 Lehman crisis happened, but I’m actually glad that it happened when it did. If it had happened between 2003 and 2006 before President Bush’s view of the world changed after the 2006 midterm election disaster, I don’t think he would have turned to Ben Bernanke and Hank Paulson and said, “You guys do what you need to do even if I think it’s ideologically reprehensible, and I’ll back you up on it.” So, I think we’re actually better off that it happened when it happened, after President Bush became more pragmatic.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.
**Question:** By “pragmatic” you mean ideologically compromising? Reagan clearly compromised with Tip O’Neill after that disaster. You think the disaster had a marked effect on his turn towards a less ideological stance?

**Cook:** You notice that I used Clinton and Bush as examples and not Reagan. This is because I think the ’82 election changed Reagan a lot less than the midterm setbacks changed Clinton or Bush. I don’t think President Reagan felt chastened by that. I think it was like, “We had a recession, and it was tough. There’s an expression, ‘You have to break some eggs to make an omelet.’ We had to do some tough things to change the government, and there are some short-term prices to be paid, but, in the long run, the country’s going to be better off.” So I don’t think he took that so much as a rebuke. And when the economy started turning back up in late ’83-early ’84, he was able to run in ’84 as “Morning/Rebirth in America.” It was like, “I had to administer some tough medicine, but the patient got better.” So, I don’t think it applies so much to Reagan.

What’s interesting about your point is that Republicans lost control of the Senate in 1986, Reagan’s second-term midterm election. When Reagan got elected, it was a ten-point landslide win over Jimmy Carter. And when a party has a landslide victory, among the winners are some bright, talented people and some who are marginally bright but also some who would never have won under normal circumstances. They just happened to run in the right year, they woke up one Wednesday morning, and they were members of Congress. With the six-year Senate terms, that class of Republican Senators elected in 1980 came up for re-election in ’86, and among them were some of the biggest fools you had ever seen in your life. In fact, Bob Dole was quoted as saying “Had we known we were going to win the Senate, we would have run better candidates.” But, the thing is that second-term midterm election disaster for Reagan almost sapped the life out of his administration, so it just sort of drifted in the last two years in office. I think a part of it, though, is that in the last two years of a presidency, they’re out of gas. All the new ideas are gone, the momentum they had brought in with them is gone, and you see this with the Bush presidency as well. At any rate, I don’t use Reagan as an example because I think there were other things going on, and he never saw ’82 as a rebuke.

**Question:** But do you think that Obama would view a defeat in the midterm election this year as a rebuke?

**Cook:** I think he should. One thing about Barack Obama is that there’s not a lot of self-doubt there. The good news is he is very confident; the bad news is that he’s very confident. One thing President Obama shares with the Republicans is that there’s not a lot of introspection or self-doubt. There’s a sort of moral superiority.

**Question:** So if the economy starts picking up a little bit, he might think the way Reagan did?

**Cook:** Economic forecasts do not show unemployment getting a lot better for a long time. In fact, I think
they’re predicting 8.4 percent going into 2012. For President Reagan, it was coming down at a pretty sharp rate. But it’s expected to be over 8 percent the whole year in 2012. It better come down pretty robustly. The thing is we’ve got a lot of structural problems that would make that bounce back not as strongly as we would like it to be.

**Question:** I think Koreans are interested in two questions: first, will the new Congress pass the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement?; and, second, is conservatism back globally? Do you foresee this year being a normal year or will there be a political realignment? Also, my friends in the United States say that Americans hate both parties, so maybe there’s a chance for a new party. And I’m wondering whether the Tea Party movement is different from the populism of the 19th -20th century, and whether it represents a positive force for the Republicans.

**Cook:** First, I think a recession and immediately afterwards is no time to push through a free trade agreement. Push it back, let the economy recover, get past the elections, and my assumption is the FTA will go through next year, whether Republicans take the House or not. I don’t think a FTA could pass right now.

Second, I don’t think there is a conservative wave taking place in politics. Yes, conservatives picked up strength in the UK, and liberals picked up in Germany a week later. What’s happening is the “ins” are being thrown out and the “outs” are being thrown in. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a liberal or conservative: if you’re in, you’re getting tossed out. That’s what’s going on out there.

In terms of realignment, I don’t think anyone has even used the word “realignment” within ten years of a past election. It’s a long-term phenomenon that can never be well analyzed on a contemporaneous basis. I think we are seeing some de-alignment, but I don’t know about realignment.

I think the problem is, for all their great attributes, the Republicans don’t do a lot of introspection. After they were thrown out of Congress in 2006 and after 2008, it was astonishing to see how little self-examination had taken place. They were quick to say, “Oh, it was Bush, it was Iraq, it was scandals, nothing’s wrong.” The Reagan model had grown out of its usefulness, and there isn’t a new model. I think the Republican Party needs to reassess who they are, where they stand, what they are emphasizing and de-emphasizing, and what will be the role of socio-cultural issues. The Republicans have not done that. When I talk to my Republican friends, they say somewhat painfully that there’s no question that Democrats need to be thrown out, but they’re not sure whether they are ready to be thrown in again. And that’s a concern a lot of my Republican friends have.

In terms of a third party, I don’t think we’re going to see a third party. Our system is built in a way that precludes a third party movement. It doesn’t preclude independent candidacy. Now, Americans are much more open to independent presidential candidates than they have been in my lifetime. Do I think one will emerge? Probably not. I have met with thousands of House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates, and 99.9% of independent candidates I’ve met were crazy or unelectable for some reason. You don’t typically get high-caliber people who are not crazy, who have the funding and the organization necessary to replicate a
political party and win. Had Colin Powell run for President in 1996, that would have been an interesting experiment. If Mike Bloomberg, the Mayor of New York City, were to run for President in 2012, that might be kind of interesting. But simply put, independent candidates have a hard time replicating the financing and the organizational structure of a major party, and they tend to be on the fringes of American politics. I think our system really doesn’t lend itself to any enduring third party effort.

As for the Tea Party movement, first of all, there isn’t a Tea “Party.” The entity doesn’t exist. There are people and individual States that have grabbed the term and registered it, but there isn’t a unified Tea Party movement or leader. And the thing is it’s kind of hard to build a party based on the premise of being against everything. Sooner or later, you have to be for something, you have to have some cohesiveness, and the Tea Party doesn’t have that. I’m not sure how you’ll like this, but I’ve met very few Tea Party people who weren’t isolationists. You listen to Ron Paul’s view on foreign policy: there wouldn’t be any U.S. troops in Korea if he were President.
Biography

Charles E. Cook, Jr. is Publisher of *The Cook Political Report*, and political analyst for the National Journal Group, where he writes weekly for *National Journal Magazine* and *CongressDailyAM*. He also writes a regular column for *The Washington Quarterly*, published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and is a political analyst for NBC News.

Widely regarded as one of the nation’s leading authorities on U.S. elections and political trends, Charlie has appeared on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs, as well as on "Good Morning America," the "Today Show," "Nightline," "Meet the Press with Tim Russert," and "This Week...." He has also appeared many times on CNBC, MSNBC, CNN, C-SPAN and National Public Radio.


*The New York Times* has called Cook, "...one of the best political handicappers in the nation" and noted that *The Cook Political Report* is "...a newsletter that both parties regard as authoritative," while Bob Schieffer of CBS News has called *The Cook Political Report*, "the bible of the political community." *The Wall Street Journal*'s Al Hunt once referred to Cook as "the Picasso of election analysis," while David Broder of *The Washington Post* has written that Charlie Cook is "perhaps the best non-partisan tracker of Congressional races."
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS) was founded as an independent think tank to provide innovative policy solutions and spearhead public discourse on the core issues that Korea, East Asia and the global community face. In particular, the AIPS’ mandate is to contribute to the peace, prosperity, and unification of the Korean peninsula by engaging issues pertaining to national security, foreign affairs, and governance, both domestic and global. “Human security” matters such as human rights, humanitarian crises, energy and environment are also a major focus. The goal of the Institute is not only to offer policy solutions but also to train experts in public diplomacy and related fields in order to strengthen Korea’s capacity to better tackle some of the most pressing problems affecting the country, the region and the world today.