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What Would GOP Gains in November Mean? By LAWRENCE HAAS

Despite President Obama's impressive first term on the domestic front, with the recent financial reform bill joining health reform and last year's stimulus measure as major accomplishments, the shaky recovery and high unemployment continue to bolster Republican prospects in this fall's mid-term elections. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman reminds us that, when it comes to elections, former Clinton campaign chieftain James Carville was right: "It's the economy, stupid."

The White House is trying to put up a brave face, with Vice President Biden predicting last weekend that Democrats will retain control of both the House and Senate. Nevertheless, polls suggest a problematic terrain for Democrats. Republicans have been salivating for weeks over their chances to retake control of the House, and the *Wall Street Journal* reports that they are increasingly eyeing the Senate for a possible takeover.

What gets far less attention, however, is what such prospects mean for progress on fiscal and related matters – for addressing long-term deficits, reforming the tax code, boosting the economy, and so on. That issue is more complicated than it seems, conventional wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding.

At first blush, more Republican seats should translate automatically into more gridlock in Washington.

A Republican minority with more seats in the House will have greater chances of teaming with conservative Democrats to block Obama's initiatives, while one with more seats in the Senate will be even better placed to find 40 of their members to filibuster such initiatives to death.

Obviously, GOP control of either or both chambers would put Republicans in the driver's seat. They will be able to block Obama's agenda, send their own bills to the President's desk, and use their control of congressional committees to hold hearings and launch investigations to embarrass the White House.

That's all true, but history tells a more complicated story – and it's one we should keep in mind as we look ahead.

Here, then, are possible scenarios for fiscal and other progress depending on how November's elections shine on the two parties.

Perhaps the surest path to further gridlock is the one that the White House and congressional Democrats hope to salvage – limiting their electoral losses enough to retain House and Senate control.

Yes, Democrats will still set the congressional agenda, run the committees, and so on. But, after November, the Democrats who remain on Capitol Hill will be running scared, eager to separate themselves from the party's leftward impulses, thus opening deeper fissures between rank-and-file Democrats and their congressional leaders and the White House.

Republicans will remain the "party of no," their oppositionist stance ratified by November's results. That will make it harder for the White House and Democratic leaders to push their agenda, leaving themselves open to Republican charges of inaction – even though it's those very Republicans who will make such inaction all but inevitable.

Things won't get much better if Republicans gain control of one chamber but not the other – likely the House rather than the Senate. In the House, Republicans will set the agenda and control the committees. In the Senate, a few pick-ups will give them the cushion to almost guarantee the 40 seats to filibuster almost anything.

But what happens if Republicans gain control of both chambers? Even more gridlock? Maybe not.

History sometimes tells a different story.

Remember 1994? Republicans won control of Congress for the first time in 40 years. President Clinton was supposed to become irrelevant, with all power to reside with incoming House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his merry band of revolutionaries.

Guess what? Republicans found themselves in power and, thus, accountable. They had to produce, and they could do so only by working with Clinton.

After the bitter budget battle of 1995-96, which led to two government shutdowns, the parties came together for a relatively productive relationship. Republicans even largely abandoned their presidential standard-bearer of 1996, former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, to pass landmark welfare, immigration, farm, health care, and telecommunications legislation in Clinton's re-election year.

Yes, in this time of bitter political polarization, it's hard to imagine a repeat of Clinton-Gingrich cooperation.

But it was hard to imagine such cooperation in the months leading up to the 1994 elections. Back then, Republicans who were then in the minority helped to kill Clinton's health reform as well as telecommunications, Superfund, clean water, and housing legislation.

Who could have predicted that Republicans, once they assumed the majority, would find reason to cooperate with Clinton?

Who, then, can predict what might occur if Republicans regain control of Congress while another Democrat resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue?

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