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US midterm elections 2010 - What are the implications for Obama's Presidency?

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"Are there times when it's better to secure a medium-sized victory than go all the way to maximal electoral triumph? For the Republican Party, this may be just such an instance and a perfect night, for two reasons.

First, the party has managed to ride a wave of popular anger, swelled by the anti-government Tea Party movement, but without having to bear the burden of seeing that movement's angriest and wackiest messengers join the ranks of its elected officials. No doubt the Republican Party establishment would have preferred that such extreme and unpredictable figures as Christine O'Donnell, Sharon Angle and Joe Miller had never secured the nominations of their state parties. With their candidacies as a given going into the election, however, the best the Republican mainstream could wish for was that such high-profile populists might put on a strong showing but ultimately fall short, while more run-of-the-mill party figures racked up victories elsewhere. This would allow for a narrative of major Republican victory, while at the same time embarrassing individuals could be prevented from occupying the limelight beyond the election. This is precisely the outcome achieved on Tuesday. In effect, the Republican Party has benefitted nationwide from the support of an energetic, determined and mobilised political insurgency, but without ultimately having to find a permanent place in the public square for the most rabid of the revolutionaries themselves.

The second sense in which half a victory may be better than a full one is that these results have bestowed a gloss of success upon Republicans, as well as formidable institutional power to obstruct the president's agenda, but without the responsibility that would flow from winning full Congressional control. Mitch McConnell, the leading Republican in the US Senate, has pronounced that "the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president". Tuesday's elections represented the first instalment in a two-stage, four-year plan to frustrate the legislative agenda of the President, while simultaneously tarring him with responsibility for failing to improve the lot of the American people, and with a view to sweeping him out of power 2012. The Republican electoral platform consisted of a series of unspecified spending cuts, tax cuts for the wealthiest, and opposition to healthcare reform and financial regulation. Full control of both houses of the legislature would have placed them in the uncomfortable position of having no excuse not to pass laws spelling out the detail of such policies, at potentially significant cost to their current popularity, which is assisted greatly by the vagueness of their rhetoric. Divided control of Congress, on the other hand, sets the stage perfectly for a strategy of gridlock rather than cooperation through the 2011-12 legislative cycle, combined with a campaign to steer the blame onto the Democratic Senate and the president. This allows for obstructionism and populism in pursuit of power, unencumbered by present responsibility.