

Mike Berman's

WASHINGTON POLITICAL WATCH

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STATE OF THE NATION

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PRESIDENT OBAMA
Hitting his stride

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HEALTHCARE
After the action
Its Social Service Ancestors

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THE CONGRESS
50% would retire the whole Congress

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RESTAURANTS
Could it be the building at Octavia & Bush?

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Public opinion as to whether the country is headed in the right direction or is on the wrong track is static since December. In the NBC/WSJ poll, the wrong track number continues to edge up, while the right direction number has not moved.

	NBC/WSJ <u>RD/WT</u>	NYT/CBS <u>RD/WT</u>	WP/ABC <u>RD/WT</u>
March	33/59%	----	38/60%
February	----	33/62%	----
January 2010	34/54%	36/55%	37/62%

December 2009	33/55%	37/56%	xxxxxx
October	35/52%	xxxxxx	44/54%
September	39/48%	41/53%	xxxxxx
August	xxxxxx	xxxxxx	44/55%
July	39/49%	42/49%	xxxxxx
June	42/46%	44/50%	47/50%
April	43/43%	39/53%	50/48%
February 2009	41/44%	23/68%	31/67%

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Satisfaction with the way things are going in the United States dropped to 19% in early March. As recently as August 2009, satisfaction was recorded at 36%. Since Gallup began using this measurement in 1979, this is only the 3rd time that satisfaction has dropped below 20%.

The lowest reading, 7%, was recorded in October 2009. [Gallup]

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In January 2008, Gallup, along with Healthways, began tracking how Americans were evaluating their lives – were they "thriving, struggling or suffering?"

In late 2008, 37.4% said they were striving, while 58.3% said they were struggling. By February 2010, there had been a substantial change in views. 53.7% now say they are "thriving," while 42% say they are "struggling."

Those who said they were suffering reached a high in early 2009 of 4.7%. Today that number is 3.4%.

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In early March, 55% of Americans said that "unemployment" (31%) and the "economy in general" (24%) were the most important problems facing the country. [Gallup]

This reflects little change from February, when 52% listed "jobs" (27%) and the "economy" (25%) as the most important problems. [CBS/NYT]

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While the number of wholly unemployed is steady at 9.7%, when one takes into account those who are "underemployed" and those who have stopped looking, the real number is 20%.

61% of underemployed are not hopeful about finding jobs in the next month. This includes 55% of the unemployed and 68% of those working part-time. [Gallup 2/10]

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Americans were asked:

What are one or two

- strengths that make you most optimistic about the future of the country?
 - * 35% American people (spirit, strength)
 - * 24% U.S. military strength
- weaknesses that make you most pessimistic about the future of the country?
 - * 20% Poor governance (politics/congress/corruption)
 - * 15% Military/Homeland security/terrorism/war
 - * 13% Economy
 - * 11% Lack of healthcare for many
 - * 10% Unemployment

[Gallup 2/10]

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By 57% to 37% Americans are more concerned that the government will over-regulate business versus there not being enough regulation. [Gallup 2/10]

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In 2000, 70% of respondents thought that protection of the environment should be a priority even if it resulted in curbing economic growth. 23% placed the economy first.

By 2004, 49% favored the environmental position and 44% favored the economy first position.

By 2007, the pro-environmental position had risen to 53% and the economy first position was at 37%.

Sometime in 2008, the lines crossed. Today only 38% place the environment first, while 53% want the focus to be on the economy, even if the environment suffers. [Gallup]

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An increasing number of people believe that the "seriousness" of global warming is generally exaggerated. In early 2001, 30% had that view. Today the number is 48%. [Gallup]

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53% say that the quality of the environment is only fair or poor. 46% say it is excellent or good. These are exactly the same number of respondents who held these views 10 years ago. During that period as many as 61% said the environment was only fair or poor. [Gallup]

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64% think the U.S. is the #1 military power in the world, but 56% believe this will not be the case in 20 years. [Gallup 2/10]

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44% of Americans now see China as the world's leading economic power, compared with 27% who continue to give that designation to the United States. Just over a year ago 41% of Americans thought the U.S. was the world's top economic power, with China running 2nd at 30%. [Pew Research Center 12/09]

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Although there has been a certain amount of ebb and flow in attitudes, the number of people who believed in July 2009 that abortion should be legal under any circumstances (21%) is the same as it was in 1977 (22%). The number saying it should be illegal in all circumstances was 18% in July 2009 and 19% in 1977.

The number saying abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances was 55% in 1977 and 57% in 2009.

The number saying abortion should legal under any circumstance was as high as 34% in 1992, and the number saying it should be illegal in all circumstances was as low as 12% in 1995.

One thing that has changed is the relative attitudes of Republicans, Independents and Democrats when it comes to abortion being legal under any circumstances. In 1988, the attitudes of all three groups were in the 23%-25% range. Last year - legal in all circumstances - was supported by 31% of Democrats, 20% of Independents, and 12% of Republicans. [Gallup]

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The last two years have seen a rather dramatic change in attitudes toward gun ownership. In April 2008, 56% felt that controlling gun ownership was more

important than protecting the rights of gun owners (37%). Today 46% are supporting each of these positions, and the trend is clearly for protecting gun owners' rights. [Pew Research]

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There has been a democratization of news and information generally. There are an endless number of sources of information on the internet and the number is growing daily.

Much of the information flow on the internet is uncensored as to quality, accuracy and completeness.

As traditional media search for ways to compete in this new information-everywhere environment, many organizations have lowered their previous standards for accuracy and completeness.

In part, as a result of this lowering of standards, confidence in the mass media has declined. In 1999, 55% of respondents said they had at least a fair amount of confidence in the mass media. By 2009 that number had dropped to 45%. And those expressing little or no confidence in the media had risen from 44% in 1999 to 55% in 2009.

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In a late March survey, USAToday/Gallup found that since early 2009, when roughly the same number of people described themselves as Independents and Democrats, there has been a surge in those describing themselves as Independents. Currently 39% describe themselves as Independents, 32% as Democrats, and 28% as Republicans.

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The era of 6-day-a-week home mail delivery and post offices around the country open on Saturday may be coming to an end. Facing a financial crisis, the U.S. Postal service is proposing to end 6-day delivery and perhaps Saturday opening of post offices.

The public supports both ideas. The end of 6-day home delivery is supported by 78%, and of 6-day postal office hours by 68%.

But when asked about closing some post offices altogether, the limits of public support are very clear. 86% oppose that idea. [Gallup 3/10]

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The demand for mail service has been much diminished by the advent and growth of email. Here are a few tidbits about email:

- 1.4 billion email users worldwide
- 90 trillion emails sent on the internet in 2009
- On average 247 million emails are sent each day
- 81% of emails sent each day (200 billion) are spam
- 10.8% of adult internet users tweet

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THE PRESIDENT

President Obama has hit his stride. As March drew to a close he has achieved a number of victories.

Healthcare legislation was passed and has now been signed into law. The student lending system has been modified substantially, resulting in additional sums being available to be lent to students.

Negotiations of a new nuclear treaty with Russia have been successfully completed. The Senate Banking Committee has cleared a financial reregulation bill for Senate floor action. It is anticipated that the Senate will act and that a conference with the House will be successfully completed.

And finally, having decided enough is enough, Obama has made 17 recess appointments of nominees to significant Executive Branch positions that had been languishing in the Senate for months because of the refusal of Republicans to cooperate.

Now the question for Obama is the extent to which he can parlay these achievements into further legislative successes. Financial reregulation legislation is likely to be enacted. Whether members of the House and Senate will be in the mood to take "hard" political votes on other issues remains to be seen. At least at the moment, it does not appear that they are excited about that prospect.

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Roughly speaking, President Obama's overall job performance rating in late March is where it was in December. However, a CNN/OR survey taken just before final passage of healthcare legislation was significantly more negative, with 51% disapproving his overall job performance.

	<u>NBC/WSJ</u>	<u>NYT/CBS</u>	<u>WP/ABC</u>
	<u>Obama overall job approval</u>		
March 2010	48/47%	49/41%	53/33%
February	----	46/45%	51/46%
January 2010	48/43%	50/40%	53/44%
December 2009	47/46%	50/39%	50/46%
October	51/42%	----	57/40%
September	51/41%	56/33%	54/43%
August	51/40%	----	57/40%
July	53/40%	----	58/37%
June	56/34%	63/26%	65/31%
April	61/30%	66/24%	69/26%
February 2009	60/26%	62/15%	68/25%

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When matched against the approval ratings of the last 8 Presidents in March of the 2nd year of their initial terms in office, Obama is now 8th, just ahead of Ronald Reagan. [Based on Gallup surveys]

	<u>App</u>	<u>Dis</u>
GW Bush (II)	79%	17%
Kennedy	79	12
G Bush (I)	74	15
Eisenhower	66	22
Nixon	54	34
Carter	48	39
Clinton	52	41
Obama	46	46 (3/25-27)
Reagan	44	45

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Personal feelings about the President remain in relatively high positive territory, but here too, the period of the healthcare debate appears to have taken its toll.

	<u>Postive</u>	<u>Negative</u>
March 2010	50%	38%
January 2010	52%	35%
December 2009	50%	30%
October	56%	33%
September	56%	33%
July	55%	34%

April	64%	23%
February	68%	19%
January 2009	66%	14% [NBC/WSJ]

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As healthcare reform legislation heated up late in 2009 and the President sharply increased his attention to the issue, approval of the job he is doing on the economy went negative for the first time in his tenure.

	<u>NBC/WSJ</u>	<u>NYT/CBS</u>	<u>Wash Post/ABC</u>
	<u>Obama job approval/disapproval on the economy</u>		
March 2010	47/50%	45/45%	45/52%
February	----	42/52%	45/53%
January 2010	43/49%	46/48%	47/52%
December 2009	42/51%	47/43%	46/52%
October	47/46%	54/38%	50/48%
June	51/38%	57/35%	56/41%
February 2009	56/31%	55/24%	60/34%

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In a survey taken 3-5 days after healthcare legislation was finally passed in the House and Senate, the country was split 48%-49% as to whether it approves/disapproves how the President has handled healthcare. [WP/ABC 3/10]

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53% approve of the job that Obama is doing in handling the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Opinion is split 35% to 33% as to how he is doing in improving America's image around the world. [NBC/WSJ 3/10]

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Here is how Obama is rated on his handling of the Federal budget deficit.

	<u>Approve/Disapprove</u>	
March	43/52%	
February	40/45%	
January 2010	38/56%	
December 2009	37/56%	
October	45/51%	
September	39/55%	
August	41/53%	
July	43/49%	
June	48/48%	
April 2009	51/43%	[WP/ABC]

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Attitudes about whether Obama will/or has done a good job in handling certain issues have declined over the past year. Here is the report card on three issues. [Gallup 3/10]

	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>
Protecting the environment	79%	52%
Improving energy policy	72%	43%
Making America prosperous	61%	38%

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Michelle Obama has very much come into her own. In addition to paying special attention to military families, she is leading the Administration's effort to come to grips with one of the country's most important health issues – the fatness (obesity) of children and young people. Currently, her approval rating is 78%.

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HEALTHCARE

[A note of caution: I asked Peter Hart the extent to which current polling on the political impact of healthcare legislation portends the future electoral impact of that legislation. Here is what he said:

"Unlike many events where public opinion polling often measures an 'instant reaction' with a fair degree of certainty, this is probably not the case for the healthcare legislation. The reason is that there needs to be a gestation period and a chance for the public to move from the red hot rhetoric to the reality of the new law. Some of the most intense feelings may subside some, but by late April and May we will probably get a sense of just how much hard and fast division there will be for the 2010 election.]

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In six major surveys taken during the 10 days before passage of the healthcare legislation, 49% opposed passage, while 40% supported passage.

In 4 major surveys taken since passage of healthcare legislation, 49% continue to oppose the legislation, while a slightly larger number, 44%, support the bill,

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A USA Today/Gallup survey (3/26-28) recorded the following reactions to the legislation:

- 50% - passage is a bad thing
 - Republicans 86%
 - Independents 54%
 - Democrats 15%
- 47% - passage is a good thing
 - Democrats 81%
 - Independents 43%
 - Republicans 11%

- 65% - Will expand government's role in healthcare too much
- 64% - Will cost the government too much
- 58% - Doesn't do enough to curb rising costs
- 52% - Should include a public option
- 51% - Doesn't go far enough in regulating the healthcare industry

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The number of people who think the new healthcare legislation will "make the U.S. healthcare system worse" has grown slightly from early November 2009, and a survey taken a week after the legislation was passed. The number who think it will make the system better has remained the same.

	<u>Worse</u>	<u>Better</u>	<u>Not much difference</u>
3/10	45%	42%	11%
11/09	40%	41%	14%

[Gallup]

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Between January and 5 days after the legislation passed, there has been little change in the level of enthusiasm or displeasure with the bill.

	<u>3/28/10</u>	<u>1/10/10</u>
Enthusiastic	15%	14%
Pleased	30%	33%
Displeased	27%	23%
Angry	26%	28%

The number who think their family would be better off with the bill has not moved since September 2009. The number who think their family will be worse off has grown slightly.

	<u>3/28/10</u>	<u>9/13/09</u>
Better off	22%	21%
Worse off	39%	35%
About the same	37%	43%

47% consider passage of the healthcare bill to be a major victory for Obama, while 20% see it as a minor accomplishment, and 33% see it as not being a positive accomplishment.

47% say the Congress should repeal the major provisions of the bill and replace them with completely different proposals. Half that number (23%) think the bill should be left alone, while another 27% would make additional changes to increase the government's role. [CNN/OR 3/25-28]

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The healthcare legislation is the law of the land because of three leaders, two of whom are not very popular with the public at large, and a 3rd who has seen his ratings drop as he focused on this issue.

The person that gets the most public credit is the President. But, not to take anything from him, this could not have been accomplished without the Democratic leaders in the Senate and House.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was operating under the pressure of his own difficult re-election effort in Nevada. He managed to corral enough Democrats to pass the original Senate bill on Christmas Eve, and then to lead his troops through the legislative dance in March that made passage possible.

But the person who was key to final passage and who does not get nearly enough credit is House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

If you think about it, it was the House that moved the most from its preferred positions, like the the public option.

It was Pelosi who through non-stop efforts that got the liberal block in the House (of which she is a part) to make concessions, while convincing many moderates to take the chance of supporting a bill which is less than popular in their districts.

There are those who say she may be the strongest Speaker in the last hundred years. Your editor has not been around quite that long, but in the 40+ years which I have been around, she is a step ahead of all the others.

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Looking at the history of the enactment of Social Security (1935), Medicare (1965), Medicare Part B (2003), and Health Care Reform (2010), Health Care

Reform is the first of these social welfare/health measures that did not have bipartisan support.

Social security would have survived a filibuster without Republican support. If there had been an effort to filibuster Medicare, it would not have survived without Republican support.

Medicare Part D was enacted as part of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003. A filibuster on a budget point of order relating to the conference committee report was defeated 61-39, with Republican and Democratic members voting to end the filibuster.

Senate

		<u>Yes Vote</u>		<u>No Vote</u>		<u>N/V</u>
	Year	D	R	D	R	
Social Security	1935	60	16	1	5	12
Medicare	1965	57	13	7	17	6
Medicare Part D	2003	12**	42	35	9	2
Health Care Reform	2010	60	0	0	39	1
Reconciliation	2010	56**	0	1	43	0

House

		<u>Yes Vote</u>		<u>No Vote</u>		<u>N/V</u>
	Year	D	R	D	R	
Social Security	1935	291*	81	18*	15	25
Medicare	1965	237	70	48	68	10
Medicare Part D	2003	16	204	190**	25	
Health Care Reform	2010	219	0	34	178	4
Reconciliation	2010	220	0	33	178	4

* Farm Labor/Progressive Party

* **Independent Members

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2010 CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS

50% of registered voters would vote to "defeat and replace every single member of Congress" including their own representative. An average of 72.5% would do so whether it meant that the Democratic Party or the Republican Party would control the majority in Congress. 47% would not vote to replace the whole Congress. [NBC/WSJ 3/10]

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65% of adults think that most members of Congress don't deserve re-election. [Gallup 3/10]

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77% of those surveyed by the NBC/WSJ and 72% of those surveyed by WP/ABC – in March – disapprove of the job being done by Congress. 17% and 24% approve. This level of disapproval has not been seen in the NBC/WSJ survey since October, December and June 2008. In the WP/ABC survey this high a level of disapproval was last seen in October 1994. Gallup has disapproval of Congress at 80%.

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In mid-March 2010, adults generally continue to prefer a Democratic-controlled Congress by 45% to 42%. [NBC/WSJ]

Early in the 4th week of March, registered voters said they would vote for the Democratic candidate in their Congressional district by 48% to 44%. [WP/ABC] In February, this same survey found registered voters voting for the Republican candidate in their district by 48% to 45%.

A Gallup survey conducted through out the 4th week in March found registered voters preferring the Republicans by 47% to 44%. A separate Gallup survey conducted March 26-28 reported the Republican margin at 46% to 45%.

A series of major polls conducted between March 12 and 29, when averaged, show Republicans come out on top by a couple of points.

It may be a little early in the cycle to test likely voters, but Fox/Opinion Dynamics did make that cut in a recent survey, and found them voting for the Republican candidate in their district by 42% to 38%.

When Democrats regained control of the House in the 2006 election, they had an 11-point margin over Republicans on this question.

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When asked whether specific issues will be important to their vote for Congress in November, here is how they responded: Economy 93% – Unemployment 86% – Healthcare 82% – Federal Budget Deficit 79% – Terrorism 76% – Situation in Afghanistan 69% – Environment.global warming 46%. [Gallup 3/10]

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To the extent that mid-term elections are at least an indirect referendum on the occupant of the White House, Democrats in contested races this year have a particular problem. By 60%-31%, registered voters prefer that different Parties control the White House and the Congress. [NBC/WSJ 3/10]

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Just after passage of the healthcare reform legislation, The Pew Research Center asked a group of people to provide a single word that best described their "current impression of Congress."

86% of all words chosen were negative.

The eight words most often mentioned (in order of most often mentioned first) were dysfunctional, corrupt, self-serving, inept, confused , incompetent, ineffective, lazy.

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Amy Walter, Editor of the Hotline, wrote an excellent column in the February 2nd issue of the National Journal. She makes two points that are well worth considering as we assess the current mood in the country. The statements...

Is it "anti-incumbent" or "anti-incompetent?"

Don't confuse "mood with a movement."

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Retirements

To date (3/31) there have been more retirements in the United States Senate (9) then in any election beginning with the 1990 election. In the U.S. House there have been more retirements this year (35) than in any year during the period, other than the 1994 and 1996 elections.

Of the 9 Senate retirements, 5 of the incumbents are Republicans and 4 are Democrats.

Of the 35 House retirements, 18 of the incumbents are Republicans and 17 are Democrats.

Of the 18 Republican seats, 3 of them have a Democratic Cook PVI. However, of the 17 Democratic seats, 8 have a Republican PVI. [PVI = Presidential Voting Index]

Total Retirements

Year	Senate	House
1990	3	27
1992	8	26
1994	8	48
1996	5	52
1998	5	32
2000	5	31
2002	6	33
2004	8	31
2006	4	29
2008	4	32
2010 to 3/31	9	35

Senate

Year	Total #	Split	Change	No Change	After Election	
1990	3	3 - R	0	3	D - 56	R - 44
1992	8	5 - D 3 - R	0	8	D - 56	R - 44
1994	8	6 - D 2 - R	6 D to R	3	D - 48	R - 52
1996	5	8 - D 6 - R	3 D to R	11	D - 45	R - 55
1998	5	3 - D 2 - R	1 R to D 2 D to R	2	D - 45	R - 55
2000	5	4 - D 1 - R	1 R to D 1 D to R	2	D - 50	R - 50
2002	6	2 - D 4 - R	1 D to R	5	D - 48	I - 1 R - 51
2004	8	5 - D 3 - R	2 R to D 5 D to R	1	D - 44	I - 1 R - 55
2006	4	1 - D 1 - R 1 - I	0	4	D - 51	I - 2 R - 49
2008	4	3 - R	3 R to D	1	D - 57	I - 2 R - 41
2010 to 3/31	9	4 - D	5 - R			

House

Year	Total #	Split	Change	No Change	After Election	
1990	27	10 - D 17 - R	6 R to D	11	D - 267	R - 167
1992	26	18 - D 8 - R	2 R to D 7 D to R	17	D - 258	R - 176
1994	48	28 - D 20 - R	4 R to D 21 D to R	23	D - 204	R - 230
1996	52	30 - D 22 - R	4 R to D 10 D to R	38	D - 206	R - 228
1998	32	16 - D 16 - R	6 R to D 5 D to r	21	D - 211	R - 223
2000	31	7 - D 24 - R	4 R to D 5 D to R	22	D - 212	R - 221
2002	33	12 - D 21 - R	5 R to D 5 D to R	23	D - 204	R - 229
2004	31	13 - D 18 - R	3 R to D 3 D to R	25	D - 202	R - 232
2006	29	10 - D 18 - R 1 - I	6 R to D 1 I to D	23	D - 233	R - 202
2008	32	6 - D 26 - R	11 R to D	21	D - 257	R - 178
2010 to 3/31	35	17-D	18 - R			

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U.S. SENATE

Since the first issue of WW in this cycle, April 2009, the number of Senate seats that are Solid or Leaning Democratic have dropped from 15 to 10. The number of Solid or Leaning Republican seats has grown from 15 to 18. The substantial majority with which the Democrats started the cycle is moving away from them.

	<u>Solid D</u>	<u>Lean D</u>	<u>Tup</u>	<u>Lean R</u>	<u>Solid R</u>
March 2010	7	3	8	6	12
November 2009	10	4	10	3	11
August 2009	9	6	7	3	12
June 2009	9	7	6	3	12
April 2009	9	6	7	4	11

Of the 8 Toss Up races, 5 lean to the GOP, 1 to the Democrats, and 2 are even.

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THE U.S. SENATE

Democrats 57
Republicans 41
Independents 2 (caucus Dem)

Here is how the 36 Senate elections (18 Democratic incumbents, 18 Republican incumbents) look to me at this time (underlining reflects retirement). (D=Dem incumbent in office, R=GOP incumbent in office, I=Ind. incumbent in office) [*Gillibrand]

Safe	Leaning		Leaning	Safe
<u>Democratic(7)</u>	<u>Democratic(3)</u>	<u>Toss-Up(8)</u>	<u>Republican(6)</u>	<u>Republican(12)</u>
Connecticut	California	Arkansas	Delaware	Alabama
Hawaii	New York (B)*	Colorado	<u>Florida</u>	Arkansas
Maryland	Wisconsin	Illinois	Indiana	Arizona
New York(A)		Kentucky	Louisiana	Georgia
Oregon		<u>Missouri</u>	<u>New Hampshire</u>	Idaho
Vermont		Nevada	No. Carolina	Iowa
Washington		<u>Ohio</u>		<u>Kansas</u>
		<u>Pennsylvania</u>		No. Dakota
				Oklahoma
				So. Carolina
				So. Dakota
				Utah

	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Republicans</u>	<u>Ind</u>
Seats not up in 2010	40	22	2
Safe in 2010	7	12	0
Leaning in 2010	3	6	0
Total	50	40	2
Toss-ups	8 (3R/5D)		
	Even 2		
	Lean GOP 5		
	Lean Dem 1		

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Assuming (as is likely) that Democrats retain control of the Senate after the 2010 election, their majority in that body will be severely challenged in the 2012 election. In that year 21 Democratic seats, 2 Independent seats, and only 9 Republican seats are scheduled to be on the ballot.

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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The number of seats that the Cook Political Report rates as solidly Democratic has dropped by 42 seats since the beginning of 2009, from 204 to 162. The total number of solidly Republican seats has grown from 147 to 160. The number of Toss-Up Democratic seats is at 22, up from 2 in April 2009. The number of Toss-Up GOP seats is at 2, up from 0 in April 2009.

Various organizations who review and rank House races suggest Democratic losses in the Fall of 25-35 seats.

THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Democrats	257
Republicans	178
Vacancy	5

	<u>4/1/09</u>	<u>8/15/09</u>	<u>10/6/09</u>	<u>12/16/09</u>	<u>3/31/10</u>
Total Dem	255	256	256	257	257
Solid Dem	204	195	183	174	162
Likely Dem	29	37	44	44	35
Lean Dem	20	17	20	29	30
Toss Up	2	9	11	19	27
D	2	7	9	16	25
R	0	2	2	3	2
Lean GOP	6	9	10	8	7
Likely GOP	26	27	21	16	14
Solid GOP	147	138	143	151	160
Total GOP	179	176	176	178	178

[As always, thanks to the Cook Political Report, which is the best when it comes to analysis of Congressional races (as well as other electoral matters)].

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RESTAURANTS

SAN FRANCISCO

Many of you were drawn to a restaurant called "Quince," reviewed in the May 2007 issue of WW. It has since moved to another part of San Francisco.

WW's instinct is that there is something special about the former apothecary store located at 1701 Octavia, on the corner of Octavia and Bush.

Baker & Banker
1701 Octavia
San Francisco, CA 94109
415-351-2500
www.bakerandbanker.com

Stan and Julia suggested that I try the new restaurant in this location. And so, off we went. As always, dinner with Stan and Julia is different and energetic. (Stan remains a bit of a legend in San Francisco, so going to a restaurant with him is always a treat.)

Baker & Banker is quite different than Quince, but in my view equally good, and in some ways better. The food is superb, tasty and creative, but there is a feel to the restaurant that is very comfortable.

The restaurant was opened in December of last year by the wife and husband team of Lori Baker, the pastry chef, and Jeff Banker, the chef. Interestingly, Jeff once worked at yet another restaurant in the same space. Each has worked in a variety of settings in San Francisco and around the world.

The room, which seats about 50 at tables of about 2 to 6, looks different than its previous incarnation. Dark wood has been added, and there are banquettes along both long walls. A series of large chalk boards have been added along the same two walls, on which are listed various beers and wines.

As starters, Julia ordered Roscoe's asparagus tempura with Meyer lemon aioli; Stan had the Jones Farm country rabbit and French prune pate with walnut toasts; and I chose the real winner, House smoked trout, celery root latke, horseradish creme fraiche, pickled beets, and shaved fennel.

For her main course, Julia went with Pan roasted monkfish, melted leeks, fingerling potatoes, chorizo and orange-saffron sauce. Stan selected Braised Pozzi Farm lamb shoulder, farro, San Marzano tomato sauce, and Nicoise olives. I picked the Black pepper pappardelle, braised shortribs, wild mushrooms, grilled radicchio, and shaved percorino.

Of course, we all tasted a bit of everything, and I would have been satisfied with any of the dishes, although I was particularly taken with the pappardelle.

And then there was dessert. The owners were taking their first night off since opening the restaurant in December, and decided to have a late dinner in their own restaurant. Stan decided to send them a bottle of wine. They in turn offered to provide dessert. We acquiesced.

A parade of servers then delivered one of each of the eight desserts on the menu. Each was better than the next. They included: Blood orange sorbet with orange chocolate chip shortbread; Chantenay carrot cake, kumquats, rum soaked currants, cashew brittle and cream cheese ice cream; XXX-triple dark chocolate layer cake (there are no combination of words to describe this cake); Rhubarb crisp, brown sugar pecan streusel, pink peppercorn-strawberry swirl ice cream; Meyer lemon icebox pie, creme fraiche, candied black olives with thyme syrup and Frangelico-hazelnut doughnuts with gianduja dipping sauce. (When the take-out bakery opens go for these treats alone.)

The wine person was well informed (according to Stan) but really casual, not one of those "I know better than you" types that so often play that role.

The seating is tight, and because of the closeness of the tables, it is relatively noisy, although I did not pick up on the conversations at the tables around us.

The service was very good. And when I asked why the beer I had ordered had not arrived, rather than one of the lame excuses that come out of the mouths of so many waiters, our waiter blushed and said "I spaced out."

Previously, there was a chef's table in the basement, reachable by some stairs at the back of the restaurant. It is no longer there. It is the plan to have a small take out bakery on that lower level, with an entrance that opens on Bush Street. (I subsequently read that they have received the necessary permits from the city to operate this "store" from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

The decorations in the unisex restroom have changed, but it remains the narrowest restroom that I can recall, certainly in a fine restaurant. It is about 4 feet wide and double that in length. But as it did before, even with its diminutive size, it fits the restaurant of which it is a part.

No surprise, the useful parts of the room (commode and washbasin) have not changed. The wall covering has changed. There are copies of signed menus from various well known San Francisco restaurants.

The restaurant is closed on Monday. Walk-ins are invited, but make a reservation. There is valet parking.

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Auntie Anne's Pretzels

Many Airports

(22 locations in the greater D.C. area, including
Reagan National Airport - also - Cleveland Hopkins Int'l Airport)

WW has become a devoted follower of Auntie Anne's Pretzels, but not just any pretzels....the Cinnamon Sugar Pretzels, more particularly the Cinnamon Sugar Stix.

The Stix are the same as the pretzels except there are 6 stix in a bag. Whether you consume a single pretzel or the 5 Stix you are consuming 470 calories (100 calories from fat).

One could argue that there is no nutritional value, but they are so good. One advantage of the stix is that you can easily share them with others (limiting the number of calories you consume.)

Mike

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