Election 2010: The Implications for Geography

By now, readers of this column have no doubt watched countless news broadcasts and read multiple articles about the 2010 elections and what is to come as a result. But I wanted to offer some thoughts on what the impacts will be for geography.

The biggest change, of course, is in the U.S. House, where as of this writing, it is likely that the Republicans will have a majority of about 242-193. This will give the GOP control of House Committees and will make Speaker-designate John Boehner (R-OH) a serious power player in Washington. The Republicans gained six seats in the Senate, but the Democrats will maintain a 53-47 advantage in the 112th Congress and Harry Reid (D-NV) will remain as Majority Leader. So what will all of this mean for geography for the next two years? Here is an issue-by-issue look at some possible implications.

Reauthorizing the ESEA: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—known to many as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—has been due for reauthorization since 2007. Political circumstances have forestalled action to this point, but that may finally change in 2011. The two parties will likely face serious differences on tax and budgetary issues and they may look to other policy topics as a way to forge a bit of compromise and good will.

The ESEA is likely to be one such topic. In 2001, President Bush scored political points by working on a bipartisan basis with Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA) to develop NCLB. President Obama may now look to do the same as he prepares for his 2012 reelection campaign. The key figure for the Republicans will be Rep. John Kline (R-MN), the incoming Chair of the House Education and Labor Committee. Kline spent his career in the Marine Corps, retiring as a Colonel, before running for office.

In a statement released the day after the election, he indicated that his immediate priority would be on workforce issues and promoting job creation. But Kline also asserted that he views education reform as a key priority for the 112th Congress and that his focus will be on “restoring local control, empowering parents, letting teachers teach, and protecting taxpayers.”

There will no doubt be some philosophical differences between Kline’s education goals and the priorities that President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have discussed over the last two years. That having been said, my best guess is that the parties will try to reach a compromise on the ESEA reauthorization. Several of the key figures from the current Congress will remain in place in the Senate – and the upper chamber has already begun internal discussions on the reauthorization under the leadership of Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Ranking Member Michael Enzi (R-WY).

Doug Richardson, Susan Gallagher, and I have met with key figures in the Administration and the Senate this year about the reauthorization. Given the massive turnover in the House, our immediate priority will be on promoting the importance of K-12 geography education to Kline and his colleagues. We will work to position geography to be a winner should the reauthorization finally occur.

Research funding: Despite the obvious differences between the parties on funding issues, it will be incumbent upon the President and House Republicans to find some way to enact appropriations bills over the next two years – lest we end up in a government shutdown as happened in 1995. This unfortunately means that research funding for geographers could be in jeopardy.

Science leaders in the House expended significant energy in 2010 trying to pass the COMPETES legislation, which authorizes the National Science Foundation (NSF) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) Education programs at a variety of federal science agencies. After some complications, the bill was eventually completed and sent to the Senate, where it has languished.

There is some hope that the Senate will pass COMPETES during the lame duck session (which has not happened as of this writing), but it is not a given. Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN), the outgoing Chair of the House Science Committee who is retiring from Congress, released a statement after the election thanking science advocates for their hard work during his time in Washington and indicating that his goal is to get COMPETES through the Senate and to the President’s desk by the end of the year.

Even if Gordon is successful and the bill is enacted, the appropriations game will still be a critical one in the next few years. Some current GOP members of Congress – and others who won election this year – have indicated skepticism towards federal research funding, especially for the social and behavioral sciences. There was an effort made a few years ago in the Senate to defund the NSF’s political science program and various members have openly criticized specific peer-reviewed grants made by research agencies.

It is also possible that the new House majority could target grant funding at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). While the NEH does not have a huge budget, some members have vowed to cut any available program – and the NEH and its cousin Arts agency have faced challenges in the past.

We at the AAG will work diligently with our friends in the educational and research communities to state the case for strong federal funding for education, research, science, and the humanities. I urge each of you to do the same as you have opportunities to interact with your members of Congress in the coming months.

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

Call for Authors/Editors

Highly regarded reference book publisher ABC-CLIO is seeking qualified authors and editors to author/edit books in Geography/World Cultures subject area. Projects include:

- Resource Conflicts around the World, 3 volumes
- Cultural Etiquette and Taboos around the World, 2 volumes
- Ethnic Groups of the Americas, 1 volume
- United Kingdom, 1 volume
- Natural Resources of the World, 4 volumes

Interested authors please submit c.v. to Kaitlin Ciarmiello at Kciarmiello@abc-clio.com for more information.