

Elections in unstable times

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

November 5, 2014

The most troubling electoral result of the year, as far as I'm concerned, was the Scottish vote on independence. Not the referendum's failure itself—few people outside the UK had much of a stake in that either way—but the fact that elite opinion elsewhere seemed relatively unshaken by the implications when 45 percent of Scots voted to dissolve *the United Kingdom*. The defeat of an electoral coalition is a routine matter. From our privileged perspective, even the fragmentation of a country like Syria feels less shocking that it ought to. But a serious move to break up a historically successful first-world state with a common language and (more or less) common religion was, or should have been, an occasion for grave alarm. If the UK was facing a split, something in the global economy must be going very wrong.

Nothing so constitutionally radical was at play in yesterday's midterm elections, but as I read the details of the Democratic Party's national collapse, I found myself thinking about Scotland. Republicans performed dramatically better at every level than even the sanguine pre-election polls suggested, not only picking up most of the closely contested Senate seats but also increasing their majority in the House. The country's most divisive Republican governors—Wisconsin's Scott Walker, Florida's Rick Scott, Kansas's Sam Brownback, Maine's Paul LePage—were all re-elected; while Democratic strongholds that resisted the 2010 Republican wave—Illinois, Massachusetts, and Maryland—saw Republicans take over. One big factor was dramatically lower turnout than is typical in presidential years, but this isn't the whole story. Republicans also did better among Latino and African-American voters than they did in 2012.

Most interestingly, ballot initiatives to raise the minimum wage fared very well last night—even while candidates who support such an increase did badly. Voters in Arkansas approved a minimum-wage increase by a crushing margin; they also voted to replace Sen. Mark Pryor with current congressman Tom Cotton, who has supported budget proposals extremely unfavorable to the economic interests of poor and working-class people. Similar splits took place in Illinois, Alaska, and South

Dakota.

Such results may baffle or anger American liberals, but they should not come as a surprise. For many, many voters, voting is not an exercise in ideological coherence. It is very likely that Tom Cotton won for the same reason the minimum-wage hike did: the economy is producing stagnant incomes for most people, and they associate this economy with the Democratic incumbent.

The last two economic expansions have been mediocre at best for the bottom 90 percent of American households. The current expansion actually saw these households lose ground, at least through last year's data. Gross domestic product is growing at a meaningful if modest rate, and job creation is happening again—so it's easy to miss the fact that people aren't better off. But the benefits of economic growth have gone almost entirely to the wealthiest households, a trend that has been building since the 1950s but has now reached something like a crisis stage. Budget-cutting at the state and federal levels has not helped; austerity shrinks the electorate, even as it fails to win over the kinds of people who demand it on ideological grounds.

The Democrats were left in a position much like the Scottish unionists: arguing for responsible, safe stewardship of a bad status quo.

That the victorious Republicans have no particular answer to this deepening economic failure is at the moment neither here nor there. One unusual feature of our system is that it diffuses power in such a way that it is very hard to hold politicians accountable. In a divided government situation, dedicated partisans can choose whom to blame for bad circumstances—but casual voters will, it seems, tend to blame the president.

This is a danger beyond the celebrations and lacerations of today's partisan observers. Whatever we tell ourselves, election outcomes only reflect the failures or successes of our "side" in a marginal way. Behind the furious swings of the last ten years of U.S. elections is a troubling reality: our political and economic system has gotten very bad at delivering the kind of ordinary prosperity on which stable government relies.