

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Innovations

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#) [Innovations](#)

<a href="#">Previous</a> ← <a href="#">The 2010 Election Results and Higher Education</a>	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Arizona's Affirmative Action Ban</a> →
--	--

### Lessons for Higher Education From the American People

November 3, 2010, 3:28 pm

By [Richard Vedder](#)

The 2010 elections sent a very clear message: On average, Americans think government is too big, spends too much, and intrudes too much in our lives. The Republican gains in the House (at least 60) were the largest in 74 years, and third-largest in the history of that political party, only behind the 1894 and 1938 experiences. While they lost the California governorship, they gained control of that office on net in more than a half dozen states (giving them at least 30 governorships), including several populous ones, such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. Several powerful Democratic committee chairs in the U.S. House of Representatives lost not only their chairmanships but also their seats, such as James Oberstar, John Spratt, and Ike Skelton.

Does this make any difference for higher education? In the past, the impact of such changes was often more rhetorical than real. Higher education was a secondary budgetary item and there was something resembling bipartisan support for most programs. I think that support has frayed considerably, partially because of budget pressures, but partly because of the arrogance of university leaders regarding the political process. Nonetheless, because of likely gridlock in Washington reflecting the division of power between the two parties, revolutionary changes are unlikely to occur at that level—the rhetoric will change more than the reality once again. Yet budget realities are so grim (independent of the election) that federal higher education subsidies are in peril. A similar situation exists in many states. I would observe the following:

1. While the Senate has those wanting to scrutinize and attack for-profit higher education more (e.g., Senators Harkin and Durbin), the GOP controlled House will push for greater accountability from *all* institutions, opposing the singling out of for-profit institutions. Presumptive speaker John Boehner likes the for-profits, for example, if his earlier experience as chair of the House Education committee is any guide.
2. Because of budget pressures, the expansion of Pell Grants and direct student loans may be stopped or even reversed. In particular, I think the GOP might start putting some accountability into the Pell Grant program, a program which, [though apparently good at achieving its general goal, is excessively expensive](#). I am reasonably confident, for example, that more than 85 percent of Pell Grant recipients at the University of Texas at El Paso will never (at least not within six years) get bachelor's degrees. Why should that institution (and many others like it) be allowed to continue in the Pell Grant program if the apparent success rate is so low? Isn't that suggestion analogous to the Obama Administration's proposal that for-profit schools whose students' earnings from gainful employment are unacceptably low should lose the right to federal assistance?
3. The solid victory for legislation banning affirmative action in Arizona (joining similar laws in California, Michigan, Nebraska, and Washington) should further demonstrate the disconnect between the frequent call by university leaders for preferential treatment for people on the basis of group characteristics such as skin color or ethnicity, and the general view of the American people favoring an emphasis on meritocracy independent of racial, gender, or other status.
4. More generally, the political lesson this year is that "ignoring the people" has political consequences. Universities have been taking positions sharply out of tune with public opinion for decades. They ignore growing cries about rising tuition charges, for example. Could this contempt for public opinion lead to the further defunding of the universities?
5. I expect the defunding of higher education to accelerate a bit. Take my state of Ohio. The voters threw out a loyal Obama supporting liberal Democrat governor (Ted Strickland) for a rather conservative Republican (John Kasich) who has vowed to not raise taxes, at precisely the time the state faces the need for huge budget cuts, and at a time that Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey has proven that tough budget cutting can actually be highly politically popular. Therefore, in Ohio, I expect universities are in for a painful retrenchment of public financial support. My guess is the situation in Michigan is very similar, as it is in probably quite a few other states.

Higher education is very good at pleading, but not so good at listening, especially to those outside the Ivory Tower. Yet it is ordinary folks who provide the third-party payments that have allowed higher education to grow so much—too much—in my judgment. Direct subsidies to institutions and individuals by the government are supplemented by tax-sheltered giving from private donors. The general attitude in the Academy when the nation moves to the right is: "Be patient, this too will pass." But the fiscal imperatives of dealing with trillion-dollar federal budget deficits, and similar fiscal stress in many states may lead desperate political leaders to consider more radical changes in policies regarding those institutions so dependent on public support.

This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037