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Terror, Terrain, and Turnout: Explaining the 2002 Midterm Elections

GARY C. JACOBSON

Contrary to a great deal of the postelection commentary, the results of the 2002 midterm congressional elections were neither surprising nor historically anomalous. Neither did they signal an end to the national partisan stalemate exposed by the 2000 elections.¹ Rather, the election results, summarized in Table 1, were entirely consistent with models treating midterm elections as referenda on the administration and economy, and they reflected once again the distinct, evenly-balanced partisan divisions in the electorate that solidified during the Clinton administration. Moreover, reinforced by reapportionment and redistricting, the long-term trend toward increasing partisan consistency in voting across federal offices continued unabated in 2002.

To be sure, Republicans enjoyed a modest victory, which in an era of evenly balanced legislative parties gave them control of the Senate and a slightly more comfortable House majority. And President George W. Bush and his party's operatives deserve full credit for a vigorous campaign that turned out the Republican vote, efforts essential to the victories in Minnesota, Georgia, and Missouri that led to the Senate's capture. The Republican victory was, however, much more a consequence of redistricting (in the House) and of the higher turnout among Republican loyalists than of any national shift in public sentiment toward the party. It was also the undeniable, if unintended, gift of Osama bin Laden. The Democrats' losses stemmed not so much from inferior issue

¹ Gary C. Jacobson, "A House and Senate Divided: The Clinton Legacy and the Congressional Elections of 2000," *Political Science Quarterly* 116 (Spring 2001): 5–27.

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TABLE 1
Membership Changes in the House and Senate in the 2002 Elections

	Republicans	Democrats	Independents	Vacant
<i>House of Representatives</i>				
Elected in 2000	221	212	2	
At the time of the 2002 election	223	208	1	3
Elected in 2002	229	205	1	
Incumbents reelected	196	185	1	
Incumbents defeated by challengers	2	2		
Incumbents defeated by incumbents	1	3		
Open seats retained	15	10		
Open seats lost	3	3		
New open seats	13	5		
<i>Senate</i>				
After the 2000 election	50	50		
At the time of the 2002 election	49	49	1	1
After the 2002 election	51	48	1	
Incumbents reelected	13	10		
Incumbents defeated	1	2		
Open seats retained	5	1		
Open seats lost		1		

Source: Compiled by author.

positions or lack of message—although the terrorist attacks of September 11 did transform the national agenda to their obvious detriment—as from structural features of the electoral system that now work to their disadvantage. Not least because of structural impediments, Democrats will face an uphill battle for control of Congress for the remainder of the decade.

THE 2002 MIDTERM AS A REFERENDUM

In 2002, for the second midterm election in a row, the president's party gained seats in the House. Prior to 1998, this had happened only once since the Civil War,² and some postelection analysts read the Republicans' upset of naïve expectations based on the historical pattern as both surprising and indicative of a pro-Republican national tide.³ But just as in 1998,⁴ nothing in the 2002 results challenges our current understanding of the processes that shape midterm congressional elections.

According to the extensive literature devoted to their study, party fortunes in midterm House elections are shaped by three basic conditions: the number

² The Democrats added House seats in 1934 during the New Deal realignment; both parties added seats in 1902, when the House grew by twenty-nine seats, but the president's Republicans picked up fewer than the opposition Democrats and so were relatively weaker after the election.

³ See, for example, James Carney and John Dickerson, "W. and the 'Boy Genius,'" *Time*, 11 November 2002, 41–45; Howard Fineman, "How Bush Did It," *Newsweek*, 11 November 2002, 29–31.

⁴ Gary C. Jacobson, "Impeachment Politics in the 1998 Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 114 (Spring 1999): 31–51.

of seats the president's party already holds; how well the economy is doing; and how widely the public approves of the president's performance in office. Although scholars dispute the relative importance of each condition and how they may directly or indirectly influence voters' decisions, there is compelling evidence that together they account for most of the variance in midterm House seat swings.⁵ The 2002 midterm is no exception, and it is easy to find off-the-shelf statistical models employing variables measuring these conditions that predict a modest Republican pickup of House seats.⁶ Yet all three of these fundamental conditions were shaped by extraordinary circumstances in 2002, and it is in these circumstances that a fuller understanding of the election must be sought.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL

In the final Gallup Poll taken before the 2002 election, 63 percent of the public approved of George W. Bush's performance as president.⁷ While Bush's approval rating was not as high as Bill Clinton's was in November 1998 (66 percent), it tied Ronald Reagan's 1986 rating for second highest in any postwar midterm election. Bush's high public approval, like that of Clinton and Reagan before him, clearly helped his party's congressional candidates, but this was in no way unusual.⁸ The unusual thing was the origin of his high ratings: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, and Bush's response to them.

The events of September 11 and their aftermath profoundly transformed the electoral context for 2002, most importantly by redefining the Bush presidency and transforming public perceptions of the president. Bush had entered the White House only after the Republican appointees on the Supreme Court had settled the fierce partisan battle over the Florida vote count in his favor. In polls taken shortly after the election, a large majority of American who had voted for his Democratic opponent, Al Gore, regarded Bush's victory as illegit-

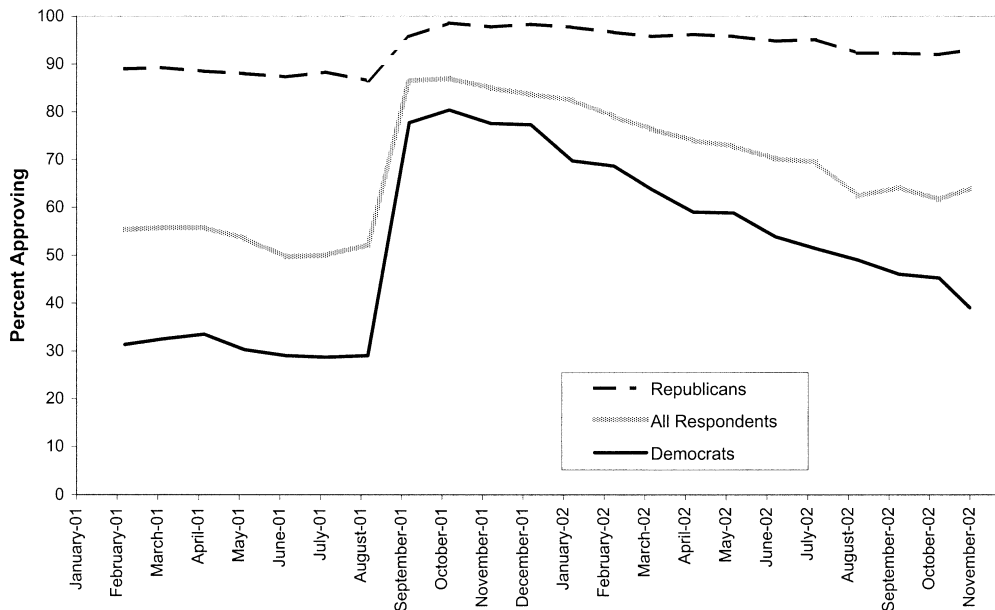
⁵ For a list of relevant citations, see *ibid.*, 33.

⁶ For example, the model reported in Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), 144, which estimates seat swings as a function of the president's party's current seat share, changed in real income per capita over the election year, and the president's approval rating in the Gallup Poll taken immediately prior to the election, updated to include the observation for 2000, predicted a nine-seat Republican gain in House seats for 2002. Other plausible models predict larger or smaller Republican gains or small Democratic gains. All predictions from such models have wide error bands that would include almost any plausible result. See Nathaniel Beck, "We Should Be Modest About Predicting the 1992 Election," *The Political Methodologist* (Fall 1992): 23–27.

⁷ His average rating in the fourteen polls taken during the month preceding the election by Gallup (4), CBS News/*New York Times* (2), Pew Research Center (2), *Newsweek* (2), ABC News/*Washington Post* (2), NBC/*Wall Street Journal* (1), CNN/*Time* (1) was also 63 percent approving; see <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob.htm>.

⁸ Democrats picked up five House seats in 1998; Reagan's Republicans lost only five seats, the best performance at the midterm for any Republican administration before 2002.

FIGURE 1
Approval of George W. Bush's Performance (Monthly Averages)



Sources: Gallup and CBS News/*New York Times* Polls.

imate.⁹ As a result, Bush never enjoyed the customary winner's honeymoon. His initial reception by the public showed the widest partisan differences for any newly elected president in polling history.¹⁰ In the twenty-eight Gallup and CBS News/*New York Times* polls taken prior to September 11, Bush's approval ratings averaged 88 percent among self-identified Republicans but only 31 percent among Democrats.¹¹ This 57-point gap marked Bush as an even more polarizing figure than the former record holder, Bill Clinton (with a 52-point average partisan approval gap for the equivalent period). Among Democrats at least, Bush's competence and legitimacy remained in doubt until September 11.¹²

The shock of September 11 and the president's forceful response to the crisis rallied the entire nation to his side. The terrorist attacks radically altered the context in which people responded to the approval question; the president was now to be evaluated as the defender of American democracy against shadowy foreign enemies rather than as a partisan figure of questionable competence and legitimacy. As Figure 1 shows, Bush's approval ratings jumped to

⁹ Jacobson, "A House and Senate Divided," 19.

¹⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection" (paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, 29 August–1 September 2002).

¹¹ The average among independents was 50 percent approving.

¹² As late as June 2001, among Democrats, 68 percent thought Bush could not be trusted to keep his word, 59 percent thought he did not have strong leadership qualities, 78 percent doubted his ability

record levels. The already large supportive Republican majority grew to near unanimity, but Democrats accounted for most of the change, as their approval ratings shot up by 50 percentage points.¹³ Although Bush's approval among Democrats declined steadily after the beginning of the election year—with important implications I discuss below—the question of Bush's legitimacy was laid to rest in the rally inspired by his effective leadership in responding to the crisis.

The president's rise in public esteem improved the Republicans' prospects for 2002 in a variety of ways. It helped the administration escape the consequences of the financial scandals, epitomized by the collapse of Enron, involving Bush's political cronies and campaign contributors. It is easy to imagine how the Democrats would have exploited the president's vulnerability on this dimension had his status as commander-in-chief in the war on terrorism not put partisan criticism beyond the pale at the very time the scandals emerged. In the end, Democrats derived no apparent electoral benefit from scandals otherwise ideally suited to their strategy of depicting the Bush administration and the Republican party as agents of greedy corporations who are indifferent to the jobs, investments, and pensions of ordinary Americans.

Bush's popularity also scared off high-quality Democratic challengers. One important way in which national conditions affect midterm election results is by influencing strategic decisions of potential candidates. Favorable conditions for a party attract talented and ambitious challengers to its standard and make it easier to finance their campaigns; unfavorable conditions have the contrary effect. The better the relative quality of a party's challengers and the greater their financial advantage, the better the party does on election day.¹⁴ Bush's sky high ratings during the period when potential candidates had to make decisions about running evidently discouraged politically experienced and ambitious Democrats. As a result, the cohort of Democratic House challengers fielded in 2002 was the lowest quality (in terms of prior success in winning elective public office) of any postwar election except the 1990 midterm.¹⁵

Other changes in the electoral environment wrought by September 11 went beyond the president's rise in public esteem and were equally beneficial to Republicans. The shift in political focus from domestic issues to national defense

to deal wisely with an international crisis, 70 percent thought he did not have the skills needed to negotiate with world leaders, and 54 percent doubted his judgment under pressure. See "Bush and the Democratic Agenda," CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, 14–18 June 2001, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/bushbac.pdf>.

¹³ The ratings of independents are usually within a percentage point or two of the president's overall ratings; thus approval by independents rose from about 50 percent before to about 85 percent after September 11, then declined gradually to about 64 percent by November 2002.

¹⁴ Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), chaps. 3–6.

¹⁵ Only 10.8 percent of Republican incumbents were opposed in 2002 by Democrats who had ever held elective public office, a figure 1.9 standard deviations below the postwar mean of 24.9 percent. The postwar low was 10.1 percent in 1990.

and foreign policy moved the debates from Democratic to Republican turf. Asked in preelection polls which party in Congress would do a better job dealing with health care, education, Social Security, prescription drug benefits, taxes, abortion, unemployment, the environment, and corporate corruption, most respondents chose Democrats. Asked which party would do a better job dealing with terrorism, the possibility of war with Iraq, the situation in the Middle East, and foreign affairs, most preferred Republicans.¹⁶ Voters put terrorism and the prospect of war at the top of their list of concerns, providing a major assist to the Republican cause. Without September 11, the election would have hinged on domestic issues, and the talk of invading Iraq would have seemed like “wagging the dog,” a transparent attempt to deflect attention from the economy.

The war on terrorism also helped deflect blame from the administration and its congressional allies for the return of budget deficits. The extraordinary expense of dealing with the physical and economic damage inflicted by the attacks and of tightening homeland security against future threats was unavoidable. Wars, after all, are always fought on borrowed money.

THE ECONOMY

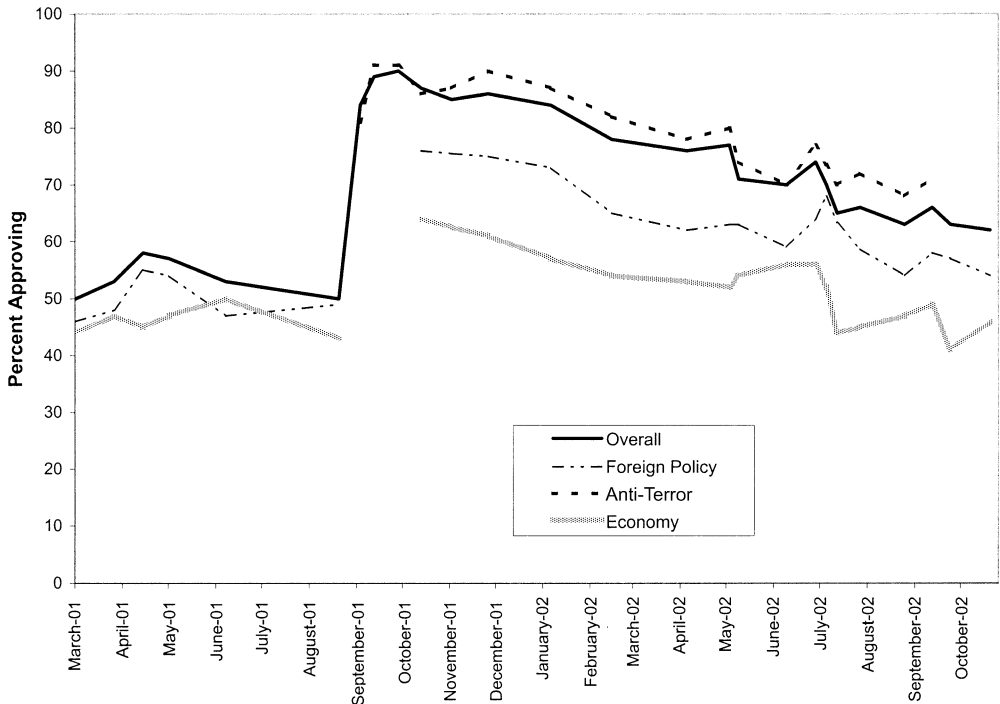
The slow economy was potentially a much greater electoral threat to Republicans than the return of red ink, to which it also of course contributed. Had Democrats succeeded in making the economy the dominant issue, they might well be running the 108th Congress. Yet once again, September 11 and its aftermath shielded the administration and Republican congressional candidates from the full force of economic discontent. Although the president sought to blame the terrorist attacks for aborting the recovery from the mild recession of 2001, he could not escape generally negative public reviews of his economic performance. Despite less than stellar grades on the economy, however, his leadership in the war on terrorism kept his overall ratings high.

Normally, a president’s overall approval rating does not differ by much from his rating on specific policy domains, and economic perceptions help determine levels of presidential approval.¹⁷ As Figure 2 indicates, this was the case with Bush before, but not after, September 11. Prior to the attacks, his overall rating was on average only 8 percentage points higher than his rating on the economy; afterward, it ran an average of 21 points higher. The initial rally in approval on his handling of the economy after September 11 had totally dissipated by election day. Had the terrorist attacks not occurred, Bush’s overall

¹⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Republicans Trail in Congressional Race Despite Advantage on Issues,” Gallup News Service, 26 September 2002, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr020926.asp?Version=p>; Lydia Said, “National Issues May Play Bigger-Than-Usual Role in Congressional Elections,” Gallup News Service, 31 October 2002, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr021031.asp?Version=p>.

¹⁷ Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), chap. 5.

FIGURE 2
Approval of George W. Bush by Policy Domain



Source: CBS News/New York Times Polls.

approval rating would have remained much closer to his rating on the economy, and if standard midterm referendum models are to be believed, this alone might have cost Republicans control of the House.¹⁸

Going by past elections, however, the economy would not have produced anything like a Democratic landslide in 2002, even if the focus had not shifted to terrorism and Iraq. By the usual measures, the economy was not in particularly bad shape during the election year. It compared favorably to the seven other postwar midterm elections under Republican administrations. (See Table 2.)¹⁹ Only 1986 enjoyed superior economic growth; only 1970 had greater real income growth; only 1986 and 1954 had lower inflation. Unemployment, at 5.8 percent, was the economy's weakest spot, comparatively, but even that rate was better than the average for Republican midterms (6.4 percent) or for the previous two decades (6.3 percent). The economic numbers were far more typical of years with small Republican losses (1986, 1990, and 1970) than with years in which Democrats made substantial gains in the House.

¹⁸ The model mentioned in footnote 6 would predict Republicans to lose the House if Bush's overall approval rating were less than 50 percent.

¹⁹ Figures for 2002 are annualized averages through the third quarter.

TABLE 2
*Economic Conditions at Postwar Midterm Elections
 under Republican Administrations*

<i>Election year</i>	<i>Consumer prices^a</i>	<i>Unemployment^b</i>	<i>GDP^a</i>	<i>Real income per capita^a</i>	<i>Republican House seats</i>
1954	0.7	5.3	-0.8	-0.7	-18
1958	2.8	6.8	-1.0	-0.6	-48
1970	5.8	5.0	0.1	3.0	-12
1974	11.0	5.7	-0.4	-1.6	-49
1982	6.2	9.8	-2.0	0.4	-26
1986	1.9	6.9	3.5	2.3	-5
1990	5.4	5.6	2.8	1.1	-8
2002 ^c	2.0	5.8	3.0	2.9	6

^a Percent change during the election year.

^b Annual percentage rate.

^c Annualized, based on data through the third quarter.

Sources: Consumer prices and unemployment data: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Real Income data: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

On the other hand, the economy was probably a greater liability to Republicans than these numbers suggest, because public perceptions of economic conditions were negative and pessimistic. Only about a quarter of Gallup Poll respondents rated the economy “excellent” or “good,” whereas nearly three-quarters found it only “fair” or “poor,” the worst net rating of the economy since 1994. People who thought the economy was getting worse outnumbered those who thought it was improving, 54 percent to 34 percent.²⁰ Consumer confidence was at its lowest level since 1993.²¹ The readiest explanation for the public’s sour view of the economy is an economic variable not usually included in election models: the performance of the stock market. With more than half the adult population now invested in equities or mutual funds, the market’s steep decline since 2000 produced losses in wealth that made the economy feel worse than other indicators would suggest. All the more important, then, that Bush’s approval ratings were detached from the economy and that Republicans were able to deflect attention from the domestic economy to foreign policy and defense issues.

EXPOSURE AND REDISTRICTING

A party’s fortunes at midterm depend also on how many seats it already holds, which depends in part on what happened in the previous presidential election.

²⁰ From four Gallup Polls taken between September and the election, reported at <http://pollingreport.com/consumer.htm>, accessed on 18 November 2002.

²¹ Consumer Research Center News Release, 29 October 2002, at http://www.crc-conquest.org/consumer_confidence.

The longer the president's coattails and the greater his party's gains, the more seats the party has at risk in the subsequent midterm. To the degree that a president lacks coattails, his party's midterm exposure is smaller, for it cannot lose seats it does not possess. Just as in 1998, low exposure helps explain why the president's party gained rather than lost seats.²² George Bush lost the popular vote by 540,000 votes and Republicans lost a net two House seats in 2000; their majority had been shrinking by small increments since 1994. Because Bush had no discernable coattails and left House Republicans with no additional marginal House seats, Democrats had relatively few easy targets in 2002.

Redistricting diminished the number of potential Democratic targets even further. The reallocation and redrawing of House districts after 1990 had given the Republicans a substantial boost that was crucial to their takeover of the House in 1994.²³ In 2002, the Republicans were once again poised to benefit from redistricting, for the states that gained seats after 2000 were more Republican in their voting habits than were states that lost seats. Al Gore had won six of the ten states losing seats, while Bush won seven of the eight states gaining seats; 54.1 percent of the total major-party vote in the former had gone to Gore; compared with 48.3 percent in the latter. Republicans also controlled the redistricting process in several large states set to lose or gain seats.

A convenient way to assess the redistricting-induced changes in district party balances is to compare the distribution of the major-party presidential vote from 2000 in the old and new districts. The Bush-Gore vote division provides an excellent approximation of district partisanship. Short-term forces were evenly balanced in 2000, and party line voting was the highest in decades, hence both the national and district-level vote reflected the underlying partisan balance with unusual accuracy.²⁴ Thus districts won by Gore lean Democratic, while districts won by Bush lean Republican. By this measure, the net effect of redistricting was to give Republicans more hospitable terrain, as it increased the number of House districts where Bush won more votes than Gore by nine, from 228 to 237.

Table 3 offers further detail on these changes. The first section shows that the reduction in Gore-majority districts was concentrated in the states that lost seats. The number of Bush-majority districts actually grew in these states despite their total loss of twelve House seats. This lopsided outcome reflects successful Republican gerrymanders in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The general consequences of partisan control of redistricting are shown in the second section.²⁵ Plainly, both parties used control of redistricting to improve their can-

²² Jacobson, "1998 Congressional Elections," 33.

²³ Gary C. Jacobson, "Reversal of Fortune: The Transformation of U.S. House Elections in the 1990s" in David Brady, John Cogan, and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Continuity and Change in Congressional Elections* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 10–38.

²⁴ Jacobson, "A House and Senate Divided," 5–13.

²⁵ The classification is from Republican National Committee, "Redistricting Party Control," at <http://www.rnc.org/images/congonly.jpg>, accessed on 9 September 2002.

TABLE 3
Effects of Redistricting on the Partisan Leanings of House Districts

	<i>Gore-Majority Districts</i>			<i>Bush-Majority Districts</i>		
	2000	2002	Change	2000	2002	Change
<i>All Seats</i>	207	198	-9	228	237	9
<i>Seat Reallocations</i>						
State lost seats	80	65	-15	63	66	3
No change	65	66	1	85	84	-1
State gained seats	62	67	5	80	87	7
<i>Partisan Control of Redistricting</i>						
Republicans	41	30	-11	59	68	9
Democrats	64	69	5	69	66	-3
Shared or neither party	100	97	-3	95	98	3
At-large states	2	2	0	5	5	0
<i>Partisan Makeup—Incumbent Districts</i>						
Democrats	147	153	6	39	33	-6
Republicans	37	24	-13	158	171	13

didates' prospects, but Republicans more so than Democrats, and Republicans also came out ahead in states where neither party had full control of the process.

The third section of Table 3 reveals another crucial consequence of redistricting: marginal incumbents of both parties got safer districts. Redistricting gave eight Democrat incumbents who had been representing Bush-majority districts new Gore-majority districts; only one suffered the contrary switch, leaving a net increase of six. All thirteen of the switches involving Republican incumbents were from Gore- to Bush-majority districts. Of the twenty-five districts Republicans had won in 2000 with less than 55 percent of the major-party vote, eighteen were strengthened by increasing the proportion of Bush voters; of the nineteen similarly marginal Democratic districts, fifteen were given a larger share of Gore voters. Thus three quarters of the marginal districts were made safer by redistricting, half of them by more than 2 percentage points (in presidential vote share). If analysis is confined to districts with marginal incumbents who sought reelection in 2002, thirty-two of their forty districts (80 percent) were made safer by redistricting.

In addition to giving Republicans more favorable terrain, redistricting also dampened competition for House seats. California, where a bipartisan gerrymander left not a single one of the state's fifty-three House districts truly competitive, led the way; but the pattern was similar in a number of other states as well.²⁶ Usually, the shakeup set in motion by redistricting produces a bumper crop of competitive races in years ending in "2." Not in 2002; the number of districts classified by *Congressional Quarterly* as "tossup" or "leaning" prior to the election totaled only 48, compared to 103 in 1992 and 84 in 1982.²⁷ Redistricting

²⁶ Gary C. Jacobson, "All Quiet on the Western Front: Redistricting and Party Competition in California House Elections" in Peter F. Galderisi, ed., *Redistricting in the New Millennium*, forthcoming.

²⁷ "CQ Ratings: The House," *CQ Weekly*, 26 October 2002, 2795.

TABLE 4
Redistricting and Election Results

	<i>Won by Democrats</i>			<i>Won by Republicans</i>		
	<i>2000</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>Change</i>
All Seats	211	205	-6	223	229	6
<i>Seat Reallocations</i>						
State lost seats	72	59	-13	71	72	1
No change	70	73	3	79	76	-3
State gained seats	69	73	4	73	81	8
<i>Partisan Control of Redistricting</i>						
Republicans	40	31	-9	60	67	7
Democrats	74	79	5	59	56	-3
Shared or neither party	96	94	-2	99	101	2
At-large states	1	1	0	5	5	0
<i>Partisan Makeup</i>						
Gore-majority districts	166	170	4	40	27	-13
Bush-majority districts	45	35	-10	183	202	19

Note: Independent Bernard Sanders was also reelected; for this table, districts held by Virgil Goode (VA 5), elected in 2000 as an independent but switching to Republican in 2001, and Randy Forbes (VA 4), Republican elected in 2001 to replace deceased Democrat Norm Sisisky, are treated as Republican districts.

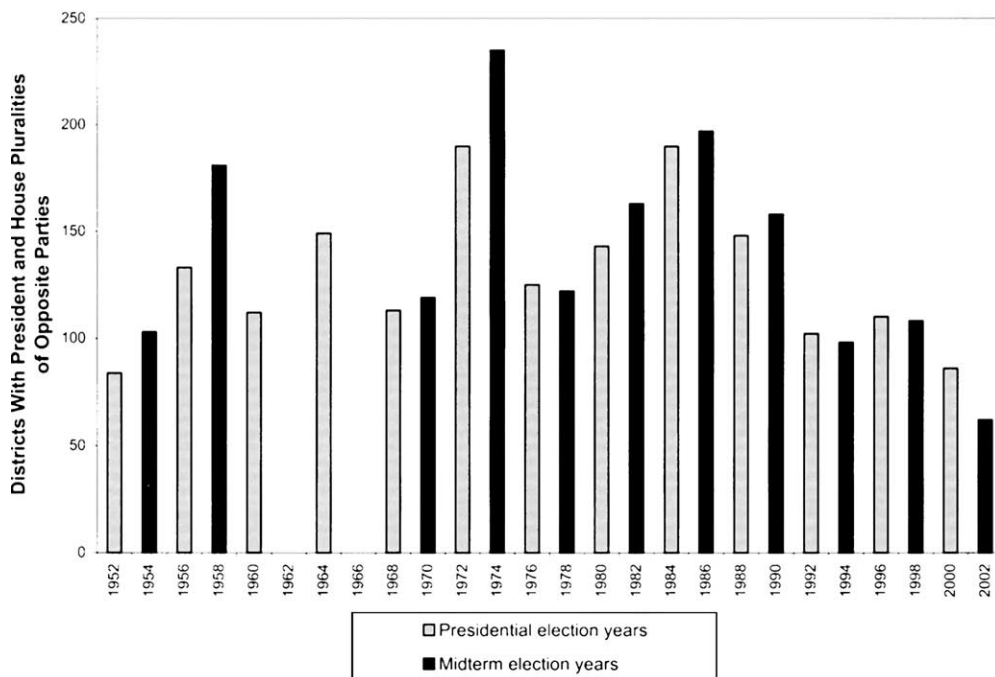
tricting patterns are a major reason for the dearth of competitive races in 2002 and help to explain why 2002 produced the smallest number of successful House challenges (four) of any general election in U.S. history.

THE RESULTS

The pattern of House election results in 2002 reflects redistricting patterns with remarkable fidelity; the outcomes reported in Table 4 closely match the changes in district partisanship displayed in Table 3. Democrats suffered a net decline in states that lost seats (and where redistricting was controlled by Republicans) that was only partially offset by additional victories in states that gained seats. Republicans actually managed to add a seat among the states losing representation and won eight additional seats in the states gaining districts. The similarity between Tables 3 and 4 is not coincidental. Eight of the ten seats switching party control in 2002, including all four seats lost by incumbents, went to the party with the district presidential majority.²⁸ In eight of these districts, the incumbent party had been weakened by redistricting (by an average loss of 5.6 percentage points in their party's presidential vote share); in the remaining two, the incumbent party was already on the minority side of the presidential vote (less than 46 percent in both). Thirteen of the eighteen newly drawn districts

²⁸ The victories that defied this trend were those of conservative Democrats Lincoln Davis (TN 4), who won a district where Bush's share of the 2000 vote was 50.5 percent and Rodney Alexander, who won the 7 December runoff in Louisiana's 5th District, where Bush had won 58.0 percent.

FIGURE 3
House Districts With Split Results, 1952–2002



Note: Data for 1962 and 1966 are unavailable because of redistricting.

for which an incumbent party could not be identified also went to the party enjoying a presidential majority.

By this evidence, redistricting, along with a high-level of partisan consistency in district voting patterns, is sufficient to explain the Republican House gains in 2002. The level of partisan consistency was indeed extraordinary. As the third section of Table 4 shows, the number of House districts with split preferences—different majorities for House and president—was much lower after the election than before. The change affected both parties, but again Republicans more than Democrats. The increase in district-level partisan consistency extends a long-term trend of central importance to understanding contemporary American politics. Figure 3 displays the incidence of split results since 1952.²⁹ Normally, the number of split results rises between a presidential election and the following midterm; the opposite occurred in 2002, which produced the fewest split districts (sixty-two) of any election in the entire half-century covered by the data.

²⁹ The entries for midterm elections use the vote in the previous presidential election to determine the presidential plurality in the district. Where district lines have been redrawn since the presidential election, the presidential vote has been recalculated for the new districts. The recalculated presidential vote is not available for 1962 and 1966.

A PARTISAN ELECTORATE

The district-level data imply a high degree of individual party-line voting, and the available survey evidence is entirely consistent with this interpretation. Moreover, the regional, ideological, and policy divisions expressed so clearly in 2000 emerged once again in 2002. The failure of the Voter News Service exit poll effort complicates comparisons to previous elections, but data from national polls taken immediately prior to the election provide ample evidence that 2002 followed the 2000 patterns closely. Party loyalty among survey respondents likely to vote and declaring a choice ranged from 91 to 95 percent.³⁰ The sharp partisan division on the House vote reflected large partisan differences on the administration and its performance. The gap between Republican and Democratic approval of Bush's performance, which had narrowed from as high as 67 to as low as 14 percentage points immediately after September 11, had by November 2002 grown back to an average of 54 percentage points (Figure 1), comparable to Clinton in 1998 (55 percentage points) if not 1994 (60 percentage points). It was even wider among likely voters, with one poll showing 95 percent of Republicans, but only 30 percent of Democrats, approving of Bush's performance.³¹

Partisans in the electorate were also sharply divided on the state of the nation. For example, 63 percent of self-identified Republicans thought the country was moving in the right direction; 67 percent of Democrats thought it was on the wrong track. (See Table 5.) Sixty-one percent of Republicans thought the economy was good or very good, 67 percent of Democrats thought it was fairly bad or very bad. Republicans were also considerably more confident that the United States and its allies were winning the war on terrorism. Perceptions of national conditions, like presidential approval, were thus distributed in a way that reinforced rather than challenged partisan inclinations.

The same tendency appears in assessments of the parties' strengths, although here each party showed some appeal to the other party's voters on its issue turf. Republicans favored their party overwhelmingly on defense and terrorism; Democrats generally preferred their own party on terrorism but conceded defense to the Republicans. Democrats favored their own party overwhelmingly on Social Security and making prescription drugs more affordable for the elderly; Republicans favored their own party on the former but gave the Democrats an advantage on the latter. Very large majorities of partisans on both sides believed their own party was more likely to make the country prosperous.

³⁰ In the last Gallup Poll before the election (taken 31 October–3 November), 93 percent of Republicans and 92 percent of Democrats planned to vote for their party's candidate; the same figures for the 27–31 October CBS News/*New York Times* Polls were 95 percent and 91 percent, respectively. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr021104asp.?Version=p>, accessed on 4 November 2002; and http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/c2k/election_back.pdf, accessed on 20 November 2002.

³¹ Diana Pollich, "A Divided Electorate," <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/11/06/politics/main528295.shtml>, accessed on 6 November 2002.

TABLE 5
Opinions on National Conditions and Party Performance

	Party Identification	
	Republican	Democrat
1. Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have gotten off on the wrong track?		
Right direction	63	27
Wrong track	29	67
2. How would you rate the condition of the national economy these days? Is it very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad?		
Very good or fairly good	61	33
Fairly bad or very bad	38	67
3. Who do you think is winning the war against terrorism—the U.S. and its allies, neither side, or the terrorists?		
U.S. and its allies	50	24
Neither side	39	51
The terrorists	9	19
4. Regardless of how you usually vote, do you think the Republican party or the Democratic party is more likely to		
a. make sure the U.S. military defenses are strong?		
Republican Party	83	46
Democratic Party	5	36
b. make the right decisions when it comes to dealing with terrorism?		
Republican Party	72	29
Democratic Party	2	46
c. make the right decisions about Social Security?		
Republican Party	64	5
Democratic Party	14	83
d. make prescription drugs for the elderly more affordable?		
Republican Party	31	5
Democratic Party	40	86
e. make sure the country is prosperous?		
Republican Party	75	9
Democratic Party	7	74

Source: CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, 27–31 October 2002, at http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/c2k/election_back.pdf, accessed on 20 November 2002.

Neither party got much help from issues ceded by the opposition's voters, because partisans on both sides believed that the issues that mattered most were the ones their own party handled best. Asked in early October to specify "the single most important problem for the government . . . to address in the coming year," Democratic respondents put the economy and jobs at the top of their list; 51 percent chose a domestic economic issue, while only 28 percent mentioned terrorism, national security, or Iraq. Republican respondents inverted this pattern, with 49 percent listing terrorism, national security, or Iraq, and only 30 percent listing a domestic economic issue.³² The economy became

³² CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, 3–5 October 2002, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/sc2k/pol106.pdf>.

more salient to Republican voters closer to the election, but this did not help Democratic candidates win Republican votes, because Republican voters thought their own party would be more likely to deliver prosperity.

TURNOUT

For partisans on both sides, the election's frame—what the election was thought to be about—was far more conducive to party loyalty than to defection. Aside from reapportionment, what kept the election from duplicating the 2000 stalemate was turnout. Republicans did a better job of mobilizing their core supporters. The final pre-election CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup survey accurately predicted a 53–47 Republican advantage nationally in the House vote. Although Democrats held a lead in the generic House vote among registered voters, Republicans held the lead among likely voters, because expected turnout among Republican identifiers was 43 percent, among Democratic identifiers, 36 percent.³³

Superior mobilization was central to the victories in Minnesota, Missouri, and Georgia that gave Republicans control of the Senate as well as in several states where Republican Senate seats had been at risk. Bush's near-universal approval among Republicans, his energetic fundraising and frenzied last-minute campaigning in competitive states, combined with effective Republican grassroots drives to get out the vote, put Republicans over the top.³⁴ It is important to recognize, however, that Senate outcomes, like those of House contests, usually reflected the constituency's underlying partisan balance; of the thirteen Senate races rated as "tossup" or "leaning" in *CQ Weekly*'s October preelection review, ten went to the party that had won the state's presidential vote in 2000.³⁵ Minnesota was the only state won by Gore (barely, with 51 percent of the vote) where Republicans took a Senate seat from the Democrats.

Electoral results and polling data from 2002 recapitulated the regional and demographic divisions evident in 2000.³⁶ Democrats won 62.2 percent of House seats in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and West Coast regions (compared with 61.3 percent in 2000); Republicans won 63.3 percent of House seats in the South, Plains, and Mountain West regions (compared with 63.7 percent in 2000). The only notable difference was in the Midwest, where the Republicans' share of seats went from 52.1 percent to 59.3 percent.³⁷ Preelection polls showed

³³ The expected turnout rate among independents, who favored Democrats slightly, was 23 percent. See David W. Moore and Jeffrey M. Jones, "Late Shift Toward Republicans in Congressional Vote," Gallup News Service, 4 November 2002, at <http://www.gallup.com/releases/pr021104.asp?Version=p>.

³⁴ Mary Clare Jalonick, "Senate Changes Hands Again," *CQ Weekly*, 9 November 2002, 2907–2909; Rebecca Adams, "Georgia Republicans Energized By 'Friend to Friend' Campaign," *CQ Weekly*, 9 November 2002, 2892–2893.

³⁵ "Six Tossups Muddy Forecast for the Senate," *CQ Weekly*, 26 October 2002, 2792–2793; the exceptions were Minnesota, Arkansas, and South Dakota (lost by Republican challenger John Thune by 534 votes).

³⁶ Jacobson, "A House and Senate Divided," 14–18.

³⁷ Mostly because of redistricting, Democratic seats dropped from 46 to 37 in the region, while Republican seats grew from 50 to 54.

that Republicans continued to be preferred by whites, men, married people, people living in rural areas, the devout, and the prosperous. Democrats were preferred by women, minorities, urban dwellers, the secular, and the less prosperous. The marriage gap was even larger than the 9-point gender gap, with one poll showing 68 percent of unmarried women favoring Democrats, compared with 42 percent of married women.³⁸ The distinct regional and cultural divide between the parties' respective electoral coalitions revealed in the 2000 election was again fully evident in 2002. There is no sign that the electorate was any less polarized along party lines in 2002 than it had been in 2000. The upsurge in national unity provoked by the war on terrorism has not so far brought Americans together on the issues that put them into opposite party camps prior to September 11.

LONG-TERM TRENDS

Voting patterns in 2002 election results reinforce the long-term trend toward increasing partisan polarization in national politics, particularly in the House. The growing consistency in aggregate voting across offices (Figure 3) has produced a widening disparity in the electoral bases of House Republicans and Democrats (Figure 4). Back in 1980, for example, the vote for Ronald Reagan was only 11.5 percentage points higher in districts won by Republicans than in districts won by Democrats. After a steep increase between 1992 and 2002, the difference is now nearly 20 percentage points. Differences in the respective parties' electoral bases are strongly related to party differences in presidential support as well as in roll-call voting,³⁹ so the 2002 results promise a continuation of sharp partisan polarization in the House. The elections of Tom DeLay of Texas as majority leader and Nancy Pelosi of California as minority leader are indicative; both are considerably further from the center than their party's typical member.⁴⁰

The electoral bases of the Senate parties have also become more disparate, although in absolute terms the differences are much smaller than in the House. (See Figure 5.)⁴¹ Membership changes in 2002 might produce a slightly less po-

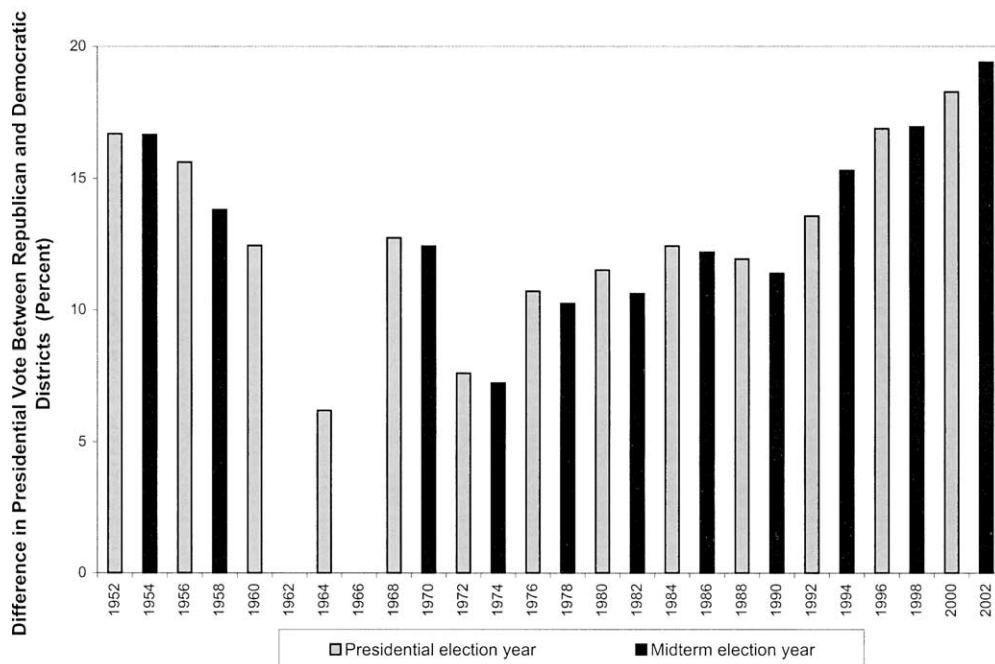
³⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Gender, Marriage Gaps Evident in Vote for Congress," Gallup News Service, 11 October 2002, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr021011.asp?Version=p>; David W. Moore and Jeffrey M. Jones, "Higher Turnout Among Republicans Key to Victory," Gallup News Service, 7 November 2002, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr021107.asp?Version=p>.

³⁹ Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support," 8–11.

⁴⁰ As of the 106th Congress, the most recent for which Poole-Rosenthal DW Nominate scores are available, DeLay's votes put him to the right of 92 percent of House Republicans, and Pelosi's put her to the left of 87 percent of House Democrats. Both were more than one standard deviation more extreme than their party's average.

⁴¹ This is because the state-level presidential vote has much less variance than the district-level presidential vote and because some states have one senator from each party. (Although fewer than in the recent past, in line with the increasing consistency of aggregate voting patterns, the proportion of split Senate delegations is now at its lowest level—26 percent—since 1954.)

FIGURE 4
The Polarization of U.S. House Districts, 1952–2002



Note: Data for 1962 and 1966 are unavailable because of redistricting.

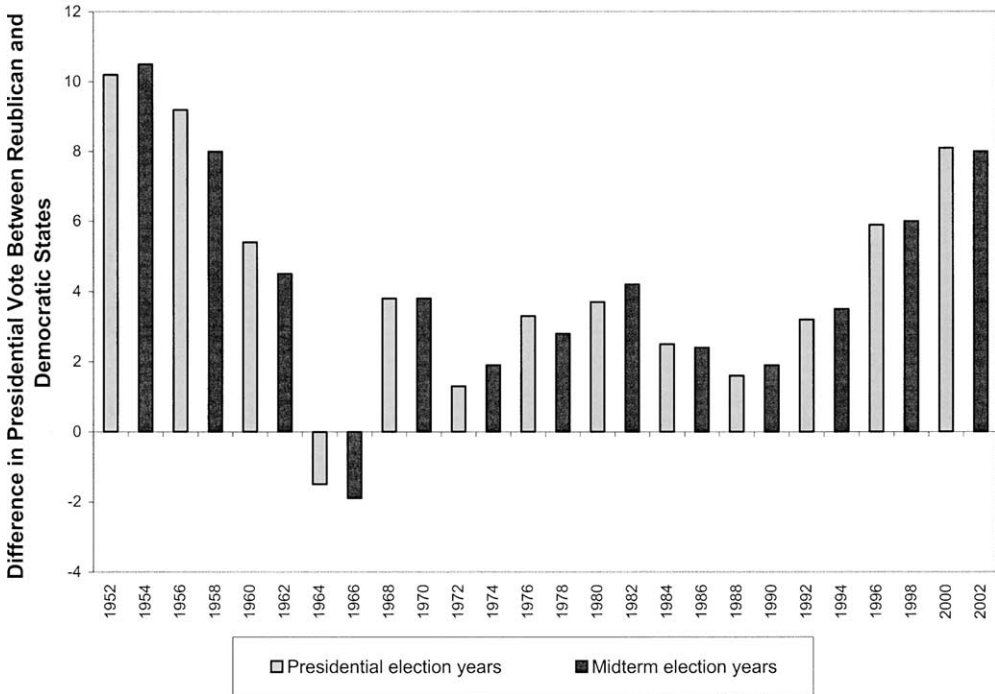
larized Senate. Its most liberal Democrat (Paul Wellstone of Minnesota) and most conservative Republican (Robert C. Smith of New Hampshire) are gone; the exit of such polarizing figures as Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Phil Gramm of Texas may reduce ideological tensions a bit. In all, six of the seven departing Republicans were more conservative than the average Republican senator.⁴² With the possible exception of Norm Coleman (Wellstone's successor), however, the eight newly elected Republicans are a solidly conservative group; all four who are House veterans were to the right of their party's median in that chamber.⁴³ Their presence is thus unlikely to move the Senate party more than a small fraction closer to the center. One newly elected Democrat, Mark Pryor of Arkansas, is relatively conservative, but so was the defeated Max Cleland of Georgia; and Frank Lautenberg's record is more liberal than that of the Democrat he replaced in New Jersey, Robert G. Torricelli.

The congressional lineup thus portends little change in the political fault lines that divided the 107th Congress. Deep party divisions in Washington are firmly rooted in electoral politics, and they reflect divisions in popular opinion on most domestic issues. The elite and popular consensus supporting the presi-

⁴² Based on their average career Poole-Rosenthal DW-Nominate scores.

⁴³ Based on their average career DW Nominate scores.

FIGURE 5
The Polarization of State Constituencies, 1952–2002



dent's war on terrorism and, by extension, confrontation with Iraq remains strong but narrowly focused; it has not spread to issues that divided the parties before September 11. With the Senate now in Republican hands, the administration and its allies will of course prevail more easily and more often; but Democrats will also have more opportunities for the kind of selective, free-wheeling opposition that served Republicans so well in 1993 and 1994. They will have plenty to oppose if Republican conservatives, enjoying their strongest position since the 1920s, try to make the most of their power.

IMPLICATIONS

In a period of evenly balanced parties, small electoral changes can produce large policy changes by shifting partisan control of the House, Senate, or White House. This is what happened in 2000, when Bush defeated Gore and the Democrats pulled even in the Senate (and then, with James Jeffords's defection from the Republican party, took it over). And it happened again in 2002, when Republicans recovered their Senate majority. Because the political effects of electoral swings loom so large, it is tempting to assume that they reflect some substantial shift in voter sentiments. However, the 2002 results reiterate rather

than depart from the 2000 stalemate.⁴⁴ Beyond endorsing the administration's homeland security policies and war on terrorism, the vote in 2002 was no more a mandate for the Republican agenda than had been the vote in 2000.⁴⁵ Democratic leaders were widely criticized (not least by other Democrats) for losing the election by failing to offer a compelling alternative to the administration's policies. But aside from creating the Department of Homeland Security before rather than after the election, it is unlikely that anything they could have done or said would have affected the outcome much. Insofar as the midterm election is a referendum, the focus is on the administration, not the opposition. The Republican advantages noted earlier in this article, not least the Republican identifiers' enthusiastic support for president, would have existed no matter what tack Democratic leaders took.

This analysis might be heartening to Democrats, but they actually face a much more serious problem than their leaders' alleged tactical or strategic miscalculations in 2002. As noted in Table 3, Bush outpolled Gore in 237 of the current House districts even though Gore outpolled Bush nationally. This means that Republican voters are distributed more efficiently than Democratic voters, and more so now after redistricting. As Figure 6 shows, Democratic voters are more likely to be "wasted" in lopsided districts; 53 percent of the Gore majority districts have more than 60 percent Gore voters, whereas only 41 percent of the Bush majority districts have more than 60 percent Bush voters. The Democrats' structural disadvantage is all the more telling because district-level voting for president and representative has become increasingly consistent. (Recall Figure 3.) Democrats would have to win twenty Bush-majority districts in addition to all of the Gore-majority districts to gain control of the House; Republicans would win a House majority similar to what they have now if they won only the Bush-majority districts.

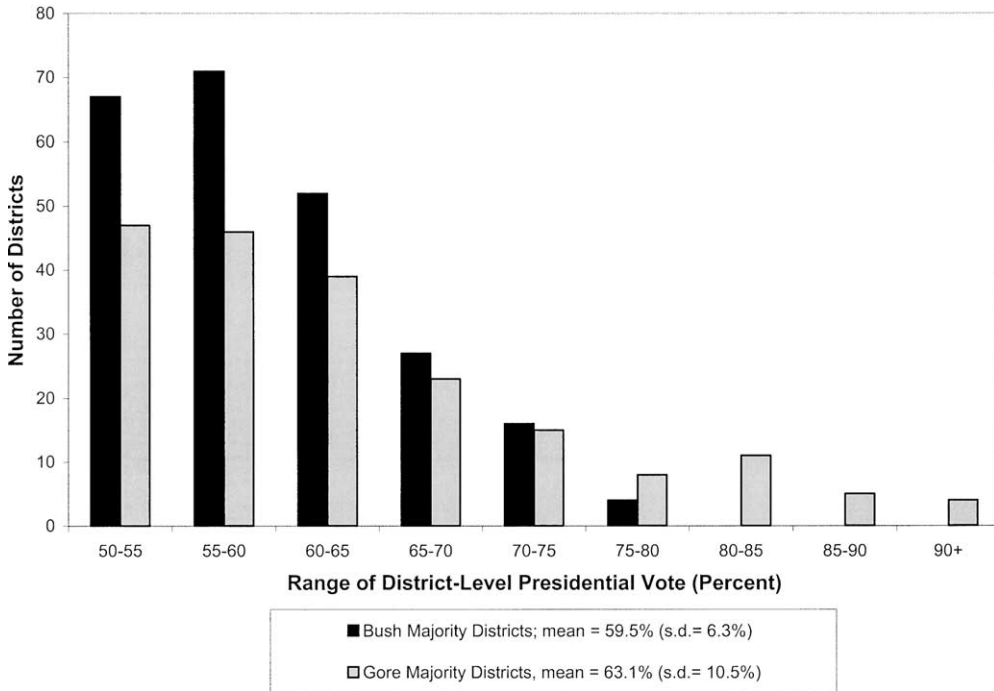
The decreasing number of competitive districts makes it harder for Democrats to win back the House, although it also makes it harder for Republicans to expand their majority. The growth in the number of relatively safe House seats over the past decade has been striking, as the data in Table 6 demonstrate. The table classifies districts according to whether the district-level presidential vote for the winning House candidate's party was above, below, or near its national average.⁴⁶ Representatives whose presidential candidate ran two or more percentage points below his or her national average are considered at risk. Those whose party's presidential candidate ran two or more points ahead of

⁴⁴ In seats contested by both parties, so that all the votes are counted, the Republicans' share of the total in 2002 was only about 1.7 percentage points higher than in 2000 (Alan Abramowitz, personal note).

⁴⁵ See, for example, "The Bush Agenda and the GOP Congress," CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, 20–24 November 2002, at http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/c2k/bush_back1125.pdf.

⁴⁶ The procedure assumes that the parties enjoy rough parity in the electorate and adjusts for whatever national tides may be running; however, any reasonable classification of districts as at risk, competitive, or safe would support the same substantive conclusion. The major-party presidential vote is used for the classifications in this table.

FIGURE 6
The Republicans' Structural Advantage in House Districts, 2002



his national average are considered comparatively safe. The rest are classified as competitive.

Since 1992, the number of House seats at risk according to presidential voting patterns has fallen from eighty-one to forty-one. The change occurred in two distinct steps, the first coming in 1994, when Republicans picked up thirty-one of the Democrats' sixty-seven at-risk seats, the second in 2002, when redistricting and a party-line election reduced the number of at-risk districts held by both parties. Note that nearly the entire net decline in seats at risk over the period occurred among Democrats. The number of competitive districts also fell, with the largest drops occurring in 1996 and 2002. Both parties have added safe seats since 1992, but Republicans more than three times as many as Democrats. And even after losing most of their at-risk seats, Democrats still hold a majority of such seats. More than half are represented by moderate or conservative southern Democrats and are by recent experience likely to go Republican when the incumbent retires.⁴⁷ Despite the narrowness of the Republican House majority and despite the Democrats' continuing slim advantage in popular partisanship, Democrats face an uphill battle in trying to win control of the

⁴⁷ Although the 2002 victories of Lincoln Davis (TN 4) and Rodney Alexander (LA 5) show that conservative Democrats can still be competitive in such districts.

TABLE 6
At-Risk and Safe House Seats, 1992-2002, by Party

<i>Electoral risk as determined by presidential vote</i>	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	<i>Change 1992-2002</i>
At Risk							
Democrats	67	36	40	36	36	28	-39
Republicans	14	20	22	18	24	12	-2
Total	81	56	62	54	60	40	-41
Competitive							
Democrats	49	32	27	31	26	19	-30
Republicans	23	40	29	27	27	19	-4
Total	72	72	56	58	53	38	-34
Safe							
Democrats	142	136	140	144	150	158	16
Republicans	139	170	176	178	170	198	59
Total	281	306	316	322	330	356	75

Note: "At Risk" seats are those in which the winning party's presidential candidate received at least 2 percent less than his average across all districts; "Safe" seats are those in which the winning party's presidential candidate got at least 2 percent more than his average across all districts; "Competitive" seats fall in between these ranges. The 1992 major-party presidential vote is used for 1992 and 1994; the 1996 major-party presidential vote is used for 1996 and 1998; the 2000 vote is used for 2000 and (recalculated for the new districts) 2002. The district presidential vote has been adjusted where necessary for changes in district boundaries required by court decisions after the initial post-1990 redistricting.

House. It is difficult to imagine them succeeding without the help of a sizable national tide in their favor.

Democrats also suffer a structural disadvantage in the Senate. As Alan Abramowitz has noted, the equal representation of states in the Senate now favors Republicans, because Democrats do relatively better in states with large populations, while Republicans do relatively better in states with small populations. Gore won six of the nine states with the most people, Bush won fifteen of the twenty with the fewest.⁴⁸ Bush, with less than half the national vote, took thirty states in 2000; Gore took only twenty.

As in House elections, the Democrats' problem is compounded by the trend toward greater consistency in voting across federal offices. The proportion of senators representing states where their party's presidential candidate was the most recent victor is, at 71 percent, now at its highest level in a half-century. This trend does not bode well for the Democrats in 2004; Bush carried ten of the nineteen states where Democratic Senate seats will be at stake, five by margins of more than 10 percentage points. Gore won only three of the fifteen Republican seats up in 2004, and only one by more than 10 percentage points.

The runoff elections in Louisiana on 7 December offered the Democrats a small ray of hope. Despite the all-out Republican campaign led by the president to defeat her, Mary Landrieu was reelected to the Senate by 40,000 votes. More

⁴⁸ Alan Abramowitz, personal communication, 7 November 2002.

surprising, a Democrat, Rodney Alexander, won the runoff for an open House seat in a district that had given Bush 58 percent of the vote in 2000. The Democrats showed that they could offset the Republicans' mobilization effort by an effective one of their own. The victories also indicated that moderate (Landrieu) or conservative (Alexander) Democrats could still hold out against the long-term Republican trend in the South. Finally, the Louisiana campaign made it clear to congressional Democrats that supporting Bush's policies would not stop him from doing his utmost to defeat them (Landrieu supported the president 74 percent of the time), a lesson likely to intensify partisan conflict in the 108th Congress.

Beyond these structural disadvantages, Democrats may also be facing a long period in which national defense and homeland security issues dominate the political agenda. The first President Bush enjoyed then-record approval levels after leading the war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, but he lost the White House in 1992 when the war ended, leaving the economy as the focus of public attention and as the standard for evaluating the president's performance. Regardless of what happens in Iraq this time, continuing terrorist actions directed against Americans and their allies are a virtual certainty, and the threat of terrorism will continue for the foreseeable future. Unlike the war to free Kuwait, the war on terrorism will not end with a decisive victory; it may not end at all. Thus even if the economy continues to falter, domestic security is certain to remain high on the list of public concerns. As long as Republicans continue to receive superior marks in this domain, Democrats will find it hard to gain traction. The electoral impact of September 11, so profound in 2002, will continue to be felt for a long time to come.