

## A Summer of Discontent

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Over lunch recently, a Republican member of the House of Representatives privately acknowledged problems that his party and his president were encountering at the midyear, calling it the “summer of our discontent.” Both President George W. Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress are facing discouraging poll numbers at almost every turn. The majority of Americans say that the president and Congress have a different agenda than their own. Most public opinion surveys show that the president’s job approval ratings are “upside down”: the disapproval number is higher than the approval number on virtually every specific measurement except “handling terrorism.”

Unfavorable developments in Iraq and less than resounding public support for the president’s proposal to create personal Social Security accounts raise the question of whether Bush won a mandate coming out of his 2004 reelection or, if he did, whether it is now lost. Democrats seem willing to take the president on at almost every turn, and Republicans are increasingly wary of giving him the unqualified support that seemed routine during his first term. Furthermore, although broader economic statistics remain largely encouraging, the public is fairly pessimistic about the country’s direction and the slow pace of job creation and is also critical of the president’s stewardship of the economy. The profound hope among Republicans is that this is just a summer of discontent and not the onset of two or more years of misfortune, coming on the heels of an exhilarating electoral victory.

Those with knowledge of history may detect a sense of *déjà vu*. Many of the circumstances that have led to devastating electoral defeats in five of

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the last six second-term, midterm elections may yet again be replicating themselves as the elections of November 2006 begin to approach. The only exception to that pattern over the last 75 years came in the 1998 midterm elections during the second Clinton administration, when Democrats had already suffered massive losses four years earlier and a highly unpopular Republican effort to remove Clinton from office backfired on the GOP.

The public doesn't intentionally mark its calendar for Election Day of the sixth year that a party is in power to punish it. Yet, there is a very strong historical pattern for things to go awry for those parties during midterm elections, particularly during the second term.

**The public believes politics have been consumed by small, petty, or partisan issues.**

The president's party has lost House seats in all but three midterm elections since the end of the Civil War, but the losses have been of a greater magnitude during second terms for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the administration simply runs out of ideas and energy halfway through its second term, losing the focus and crispness in execution that helped get its candidate elected twice. Some incumbents get arrogant and overreach. In other

cases, the first team and perhaps even the second team is off the field, with the administration's third string not nearly as talented. The economy may take a dip in the aftermath of a presidential election and its concurrent economic stimulus, or a scandal might have hurt the president and his party.

Since Bush's reelection, the public has seen Congress and the president consumed by small, petty, or partisan issues, often more cultural in nature, while the country is faced with more substantive problems that are going largely unaddressed. Congress has been focused, for example, on the Terri Schiavo case and the ensuing controversy over a person's right to die; the fight over the president's judicial nominations, filibusters, and the so-called nuclear option; and the nomination of John Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. At the same time, public support for the war in Iraq is diminishing; there is a public perception that the economy is not creating sufficient jobs; and oil and gasoline prices continue to climb, along with record federal budget and trade deficits.

Even to the extent that they recognize the large problem of Social Security's future insolvency, Americans see the president's proposal to create personal accounts as a distraction that does not address the larger problem of long-term funding for the program. Few seem aware of more immediate insolvency issues for the Medicare and Medicaid programs, but those who recognize the problem understand that these programs are also facing a cri-

sis. Furthermore, although Congress has passed legislative reforms dealing with bankruptcy cases and class-action suits and is close to passing a long-awaited highway bill and, one hopes, an equally long-awaited energy bill, these efforts had largely gone unnoticed, overshadowed by more partisan battles as well as nonpolitical events that dominated the news at the time, such as the Michael Jackson molestation trial and the papal transition.

Making matters worse, two scandals threaten to hurt the GOP. One involves allegations that senior White House aides leaked the name of an undercover CIA official to retaliate for a highly critical *New York Times* op-ed that her husband wrote challenging the Bush administration's assumptions on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There have also been allegations of wrongdoing surrounding House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) and lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Republican insiders expect that, at the very least, Abramoff will be indicted and tried on a number of charges. Some prominent Republican representatives are also expected to be hauled up as witnesses, if not defendants, in such trials. Whether DeLay or any other representatives are actually charged, the drumbeat of negative stories hurts the Republican Congress and recalls the scandals and embarrassments that accompanied the final years of the Democrats' control of the Congress in the early 1990s.

In sum, Americans seem unimpressed either by the accomplishments of Congress and the administration this year or by the agenda both are pursuing. Regardless of how one views Congress's productivity, it is difficult to dispute the idea that their efforts will always be overshadowed by other issues. It will be important to see if Congress and the president can reposition themselves in the coming months to be perceived as more engaged on the issues that voters care about in the run-up to the midterm elections.

Although the president's overall approval ratings of 42–50 percent are fairly discouraging for Republicans, these are hardly the lowest presidential approval ratings of the last half-century. After all, at various points during their terms in office, Richard Nixon's approval ratings dropped all the way down to 24 percent, Gerald Ford's fell to 37 percent, and Jimmy Carter's dipped to 28 percent. Ronald Reagan's low point was only a balmy 40 percent, but George H. W. Bush's numbers plunged to 29 percent and Bill Clinton's to 37 percent. What is different for Bush today is that he is serving during a period of intense partisanship and polarization that, in effect, have created a high floor and a low ceiling in terms of his job approval rating. With Bush's approval rating among Republicans this year averaging 89 percent, absent a major defection among members of his own party—a development that is difficult to imagine given this level of intense partisanship—his ratings are unlikely to drop down below Reagan's 40 percent.

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At the same time, Bush's approval rating among Democrats is averaging just 18 percent, meaning that, in the absence of an upheaval similar to the September 11 attacks or some other extraordinary event, he is unlikely to hit the peak levels that some of these other presidents reached, and his approval rating will be unable to climb much beyond the mid-to-high 50s.

Volatility and the likely potential to drive his overall numbers up or down exists among only the 30–35 percent of Americans who are independents, whose feelings toward the president are less anchored than are partisans' attitudes.

This suggests a very bleak picture for the GOP as it enters the 2006 midterm election campaign, but there is a silver lining. No matter how bad the situation gets, it remains extremely unlikely that Republicans will lose

their majority in either the House or the Senate in the next election. There simply does not seem to be enough Republican seats in jeopardy in either chamber for Democrats to close the gap completely. In the Senate, for example, Democrats have two incumbents in their sights, Rhode Island's Lincoln Chafee and Pennsylvania's Rick Santorum, and have decent chances of unseating one or both of them. Furthermore, in Tennessee, where Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist is not seeking reelection, Democrats have a very promising candidate in Representative Harold Ford, and Republicans seem destined for a divisive and costly primary campaign. Yet, even under these hopeful circumstances for Democrats, the fact remains that Ford is a Democrat in a region in which the party went 0-for-6 when trying to retain their own Senate seats in 2004.

The next seat on the Democratic target list is probably in Montana, against three-term incumbent Conrad Burns. Six years ago, after a campaign that had appeared defeated just weeks before Election Day, Burns managed to eke out a victory. The Democrats have two promising candidates in Montana, but it remains to be seen which candidate will emerge and whether the Democrats' hopes will survive the primary.

After those four targets, prospects start to look even more difficult for Democrats, who will still need to find two more upsets to pull off. Democrats are currently eyeing freshman Jim Talent (Mo.) and two-term incumbent Jon Kyl (Ariz.), among others. In addition, even with Democrat victories in all six of those races—which would be just short of a miracle—the party must still retain all of its own jeopardized seats. These include an open seat in Minnesota where freshman Mark Dayton is stepping down, as well as two seats whose incumbents, Maria Cantwell (Wash.) and Debbie Stabenow

(Mich.), are vulnerable. In short, it would take a tidal wave for Democrats to capture control of the Senate in 2006. A more plausible goal for them would be to score a net gain of two or three seats, setting themselves up for a more realistic shot at capturing a majority in 2008, when Republicans will have a disproportionate number of seats up for grabs.

In the House, the odds are no less long. For Democrats to recapture the majority they lost in 1994, they would need a net gain of 15 seats, but there are only 32 seats that seem to be competitive today, and 14 of those are currently held by Democrats. To regain control, Democrats would effectively have to hold on to all 14 of their own competitive seats, while winning 15 out of the 18 competitive districts now held by Republicans—an extremely tall order. Expanding the playing field, only 42 districts nationwide are either currently competitive or seem even remotely capable of being competitive, and 20 are held by Republicans and 22 by Democrats. Democrats would have to hold on to all 22 of their own seats, while winning 15 out of 20 seats currently occupied by Republicans—a higher proportion than the number Republicans achieved in 1994. As was the case in the Senate, a more plausible objective for Democrats would be to try to pick up five to seven seats in 2006, putting themselves just eight to 10 seats away from a majority going into 2008.

Obviously, the November 2006 midterm elections are more than a year away, and much can change that would alter the dynamics of that election. After all, four years ago who could have foreseen how the events of a day like September 11, 2001, could change the U.S. political landscape and dynamics as dramatically as they did? At this juncture, however, unless circumstances change drastically, the historical forces that created unfavorable results in past second-term, midterm elections appear very likely to replicate themselves next year, only with significantly smaller losses. The summer of discontent may prove to be just that.

