

Will the Republicans Retain Congress in 2006?

There are plenty of ominous signs in the polling data that worry Republicans going into this 2006 midterm election, but the outcome is far from certain. President George W. Bush's freefall in the polls, which began in January of this year, seemed to end in May when his approval rating had dropped to 31 and 33 percent, respectively, in consecutive Gallup polls and averaged 34 percent in 14 major national polls during that month. In June, he rebounded to an average of 37 percent in 11 polls, although this number is still far below the lowest figures for three of the last four second-term presidents. Among post-World War II presidents, Dwight Eisenhower's lowest Gallup approval rate in his second term was 48 percent, during the Sherman Adams scandal; Ronald Reagan dropped to 43 percent during the Iran-Contra affair; and Bill Clinton's lowest point was 53 percent. Only Richard Nixon's 24 percent was lower than Bush's May ratings. His numbers are still politically toxic, but they are not at the radioactive level they were previously. It would appear that the now-defunct Dubai port security deal and immigration issues temporarily peeled a layer of Republican voters out of the president's approval column, but they have since returned to the fold.

The public's outlook on the country has also dipped in the polls, another troublesome sign for the GOP. Generally, around 26–27 percent of Americans believe the country is headed in the right direction, whereas between 61 and 70 percent feel it is on the wrong track. That question, which Reagan's pollster Richard Wirthlin used to call "the Dow Jones indicator of American politics," is a terrific thermometer for measuring the public mood. These are

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The Washington Quarterly • 29:4 pp. 153–158.

obviously terrible numbers, and they are worse than they were in 1994, when Democrats were turned out of Congress in a landslide defeat.

A second foreboding set of polling data is Congress's job approval rating. The Gallup Organization has found that when Congress has a job approval rating of 40 percent or better in a midterm election year, the net

change in the House is minimal, averaging only five seats, which out of a total 435 seats is like a rounding error. When Congress has a job approval rating lower than 40 percent, however, the average net change is 29 seats, almost double the current 15-seat margin that Republicans have in the House. Congress's approval rating ranges from a low of 23 percent in a June NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll to a high of 29 percent in a Fox News survey conducted in the same month. The average

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for that month is 26 percent, another alarming diagnostic indicator.

A third troubling statistic for the GOP is the generic congressional ballot test. In some polls, respondents are asked whether they plan to vote for the Democratic or Republican candidate for Congress, and in others they are asked which party they would rather see in control of Congress after the next election. Either way, in June 2006 the Democratic advantage ranged from 7 points in a CNN survey to 16 points in a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll. Their average lead is 13 points, far greater than the Republican advantage was at any point during 1994, when they swept the country in such an impressive fashion.

A few other numbers are somewhat less definitive. In 1994, after the House Bank, House Post Office, Keating Five, Jim Wright, David Durenberger, and Tony Coelho scandals, the anti-incumbent fervor was greater than it is today. In the spring of 1994, 34 percent of Americans in the NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll thought that their representative deserved to be reelected; in June of this year, it was 42 percent. In 1994, 50 percent thought it was time to give a new person a chance, but now 45 percent do. The final 1994 preelection NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll numbers also were worse than they are today, with 39 percent wanting to reelect the incumbent and 49 percent wanting someone new. Thus, the argument that sentiment is more anti-incumbent than anti-Republican does not seem to hold up.

The final two indicators are the positive and negative ratings for each party. At this early stage in 1994, 41 percent had a positive impression of the Democratic Party, then the majority, and 31 percent had a negative impression, giving Democrats a net positive of 10 points. By election time, Democrats had a net negative of one point, 36 percent positive to 37 per-

cent negative. Today, the majority Republican Party has a net negative of 13 points, 34 percent positive to 47 percent negative. So, the majority party today is in much worse shape than Democrats were at either point in 1994.

Comparing minority parties, at this point the Republican Party in 1994 had a net positive of five points, 37 percent positive to 32 percent negative, and by November it had grown to a net positive of 11 points, 41 percent positive to 30 percent negative. Yet, Democrats today have a net negative of two points, 35 percent positive to 37 percent negative. So, the minority (Republican) party in 1994 was in better shape than the minority party (Democrat) is now, an interesting finding if the focus is on the “out” party that is trying to get into power. Midterm elections, however, typically are more about the “in” party, a referendum on the party in power. The Republican Party looks worse today than the Democratic Party looked at this point in 1994, but Democrats today do not have the positive image that Republicans had at this comparable stage.

These national poll data dovetail with historic precedent. Over the last 75 years, there have been six second-term, midterm elections.

In four of six (1934 for Roosevelt, 1958 for Eisenhower, 1966 for Johnson, and 1974 for Ford), the party holding the White House for six years suffered enormous losses in the House and Senate, with losses in the former ranging from 47 to 71 seats and in the latter from 4 to 13. In 1986, Republicans under Reagan lost only five seats in the House, a minimal loss, but eight seats and control of the Senate, a far greater defeat. In the sixth and most recent scenario, under Clinton in 1998, Democrats lost only five seats in the House and broke even in the Senate. Democrats had already been destroyed four years earlier in 1994, however, in the first-term, midterm election and had picked up few seats in the intervening 1996 election, so they really could not lose any more seats in the House. Between contemporary polling data and historical precedent, the case is pretty strong that Republicans are due for some very significant losses in the House and Senate.

Although the big picture argues strongly that Republicans are in store for horrible losses, a number of extenuating circumstances and factors may offset some, although certainly not all, of those losses. In the Senate, the odds even seem to favor Republicans holding on to their majority, albeit a much narrower one than the 55-45 split that exists today. First, having only one Republican retirement in the Senate helps a great deal, considering that 81 percent of all incumbent senators who seek reelection win. For a big victory, large gains among open seats, in which neither side has the advantage of incumbency, are usually important. In 1994, six of the eight Senate seats

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lost by Democrats were open seats, and only two incumbents were defeated. The fact that the only Republican retirement is in the South, where Majority Leader Bill Frist is retiring in Tennessee, only makes the job tougher for Democrats, although they have a strong candidate and the race is expected to be quite close and still could change course.

Second, only six or at most seven Republican seats are in any degree of danger. Democrats must either win the open seat in Tennessee and defeat five of the seven potentially vulnerable Republican incumbents or, if they lose Tennessee, beat six out of seven—a very tall order. Universally acknowledged as the most endangered Republican incumbent is Rick Santorum (Pa.) followed by, in order of perceived vulnerability, Conrad Burns (Mont.), Lincoln Chafee (R.I.), Mike DeWine (Ohio), and Jim Talent (Mo.). In each of those states, Republican chances of retention at this point appear to be no better than 50-50 and in the first two are considerably less. After those five comes Jon Kyl (Ariz.), and George Allen (Va.) is a very distant seventh. No other Republican incumbents are in any danger at all.

The most endangered Democratic seat is in Washington state, where freshman Senator Maria Cantwell is facing an aggressive challenge, followed by an open seat in Minnesota. Democrats also face a challenge in New Jersey, where appointed Senator Bobby Menendez is competing to win the seat in his own right. Although Democrats are ahead in each of these states, they still remain in danger. After those three, there are still several states worth keeping an eye on. Although Democrats are strongly favored, open seats in Maryland and Vermont and incumbents Debbie Stabenow (Mich.), Ben Nelson (Neb.), and to a lesser extent Robert Byrd (W.Va.) all bear watching.

In short, there are 16 Senate seats with any real possibility of changing hands, and Democrats must win 14 out of 16, or 88 percent. Obviously, that is a tall order but hardly impossible. There tends to be a domino effect in Senate races, with the closest races tending to break overwhelmingly toward one party or the other at the end; they do not split down the middle. At the end of the 1998 campaign season, the *Cook Political Report* carried seven races as toss-ups, and Democrats won six out of seven (86 percent). Going into the Election Day in 2000, there were nine toss-ups, and Democrats won seven out of nine (78 percent). Two years later, there were nine again, and Republicans won six out of nine (67 percent), while in 2004, Republicans won eight of nine (89 percent). With between 67 and 89 percent of the races expected to be the tightest breaking the same direction, the explosiveness of Senate contests is apparent and leaves strategists in each party on their toes. It is important to note this paragraph is comparing apples and oranges: Democrats have to win 88 percent of the competitive and potentially competitive races, and over the last four election cycles, between 67 and 89 percent of the closest races, a much smaller and more exclusive group, went in the

same direction. Yet, the point that the close races tend to break toward one party and not split evenly is still valid. The bottom line in the Senate is that Republicans are certainly going to lose some seats, very likely three, four, or five, but the odds are that they will not suffer a net loss of six seats to give Democrats a majority after this election.

In the House, Democrats need to score a net gain of 15 seats to win a majority. This is, by historic terms, a small number for midterm election changes and quite small in terms of second-term, midterm elections. Given the current political climate, which is certainly the best for Democrats since the 1982 Reagan recession election and probably since the Watergate midterm election of 1974, this election should be a slam dunk for Democrats. A confluence of factors, however, tends to reduce the possibility for Democratic gains down to the point where it is roughly 50-50, higher some weeks, lower in others.

A confluence of factors tends to reduce the possibility for major Democratic House gains.

First, with the House incumbent reelection rate in recent years running in the 97–99 percent range, open seats, with neither side having the incumbency advantage, are hugely important. Republicans only have 16 retirements this year, a relatively low number; and only six of these appear to be truly vulnerable, limiting Democratic potential gains to a degree.

Second, the playing field of competitive districts has been reduced by redistricting, among other factors. Over the last two decades, the number of competitive districts has ranged from 80 to 154; but in 2004, just 24 House seats were competitive. Currently, 45 seats are competitive, 10 Democratic and 35 Republican, with only one Democratic seat in the toss-up column, versus 10 toss-up Republican seats. With a narrower playing field and fewer open seats, a 15-seat gain is far more difficult than in the past.

A third factor is that the quality of Democratic challengers is not what it should be, although certainly not for a lack of effort. National Democratic strategists tried hard to get experienced, first-tier challengers in potentially competitive districts, but many proven vote-getters, such as state senators and representatives, county council and commission chairs, prosecutors, and mayors, declined to run, with less-experienced and less-well-rounded candidates taking their places. Second- and third-tier challenges tend to make a disproportionate number of mistakes, and incumbents usually have the experience and resources to capitalize on those mistakes.

For this variety of reasons, an election environment where one might normally expect a 20, 30, 40, or more House-seat gain is really more like a 50-50 proposition for a gain of 15 seats.

In short, there appears to be a political hurricane coming, one that is almost certain to hit the Republican Party in November, but certain structural barriers help protect those Republican Senate and House majorities. So, if the hurricane hits and it is a Category One, Two, or Three, those GOP majorities should hold, albeit with diminished ranks. If it is a Category Four hurricane, then the GOP majority in the Senate probably survives, but the House will probably turn over to the Democrats. Only if it is a Category Five political hurricane will Republicans lose both the House and Senate.