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Down the Stretch to November

The roller coaster that characterizes most election years appears to have even higher peaks and steeper drops in the 2001–2002 campaign. Immediately prior to the September 11 tragedy, a deteriorating economy and a national focus on domestic issues tilted the political playing field in favor of the Democrats. Just after September 11, the president's job approval rating soared to stratospheric levels, and the issue agenda swung 180 degrees to focus on foreign policy as well as national and homeland security—issues that have traditionally favored Republicans. That playing field seemed to level earlier this year, reflecting the underlying partisan equilibrium that exists throughout the country—neither party has a noticeable advantage, and each individual race is likely to be determined on its own merits. With the two parties today, Americans have seemed uncomfortable with the notion of giving either all the levers of power. As Congress entered its annual summer recess, that situation had not changed…yet.

Presidential Approval: Returning to Earth

In a wave of patriotism and solidarity, a staggering 72 percent of the American people expressed optimism about the country in a late September 2001 NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey, as measured by the question: "Do you think the country is headed in the right direction or do you think it's on the wrong track?" Popularized by Richard Wirthlin, President Reagan's pollster, this question has often been called "the Dow Jones indicator of American politics," reflecting its great predic-

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tive value, particularly for the direction of a president's job approval ratings.

Beginning in January 2002, those numbers gradually drifted down, but not to normal midterm levels. These numbers were already unsustainably high, but given the sluggish economy and declining stock market, a downward trend was perfectly predictable. In some private surveys during May and June of 2002, those numbers started declining at a more rapid pace, then plummeted in July. According to the semimonthly Ipsos-Reid/Cook Political Report poll, the percentage of people who think the nation is heading in the right direction has gradually declined from an average of 68 percent in the two January surveys, to 60 percent in March, to 54 percent in May; the numbers steadied in June, then dropped nine points to 45 percent in July—a decline of 23 percentage points in six months.[1] The percentage of people who think the nation is on the wrong track rose from 29 percent in January, to 35 percent in March, 40 percent in May, 39 percent in June, and jumped to 48 percent in July. The net numbers for the nation being on the right track have dropped from 39 points to –3 points since the first of the year. These pessimistic numbers are causing considerable angst among Republican campaign consultants. The impact of these numbers on individual races has not yet been seen, but GOP campaigners fear that it may be coming.

President George W. Bush's job approval ratings similarly returned to Earth from their stratospherically high levels late last year, but took a plunge in July. Since the beginning of January, the president's overall job approval ratings have dropped at a rate of about two to three points per month, then dropped five points in the July Ipsos-Reid/Cook Political Report polling. This decline has occurred virtually across the board in all public surveys—independent, Republican, and Democrat— suggesting that it cannot be considered merely a statistical anomaly.

Pollsters say the link between the drop in right direction numbers and the president's approval ratings is unmistakable. The cumulative impact of a wave of negative press stories rubbed off on President Bush and his administration, whether the public has actually blamed him or not. The plunging stock market, endless stories of corporate corruption and greed, the blame game between the FBI and the CIA, in combination with things entirely outside the realm of government and politics—the Catholic Church's pedophile scandal and the recent wave of child abductions—have collectively helped to sour the public mood. Voters are not enthusiastic about much of anything right now and that does not bode well for a sitting president or his party.

Historically, public opinion of how a president handles the economy has proved a key determinant of his approval rate. While the economy is, for the most part, improving (although the politically important unemployment rate has yet to turn around), Bush's approval rating on this issue is at 55 percent as of July, down 13 points from January and down 7 points since June. Public attitudes typically lag behind economic recoveries, as President George Bush learned in 1992 when the economy was reviving during his bid for reelection but the public had not yet perceived it. Similarly, the current president's approval numbers for his handling of the economy are likely to continue to decline. In his strongest area—foreign policy issues and terrorism—approval rates are dropping at an even faster pace; it is unlikely that his ratings on domestic issues or the economy will be much better.

Finally, the continued drop in right-direction numbers—more of a leveling than a drop—has manifested itself in the president's reelection ratings, with 42 percent saying that they will definitely vote to reelect him, down from 55 percent at the beginning of the year. Fifty-five percent, up from 43 percent in January, said they would either consider someone else (30 percent) or definitely vote for someone else (25 percent).

> The fight for control of the U.S. Senate seems almost certainly headed for a photo finish.

A Nationalized Election?

Contrary to the view of the late House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., that "all politics is local," in roughly two-fifths of our national elections, politics is anything but local. In "normal" elections, the nature and past voting behavior of the state or district, the strength and qualities of the candidates, the caliber of the campaign organizations, the size of the campaign war chests, and a fair amount of pure luck all largely dictate the outcome of the vast majority of contests. Although each of these normal variables is important in "nationalized" elections, a handful of points determined by voters who make up their mind at the last minute is disproportionately allocated to one party, sometimes rendering an election result that would have seemed very improbable just a few months earlier.

Three-quarters of elections cited as nationalized elections are midterm elections. Instead of a president at the top of the ballot nationwide, attention is focused on different ticket leaders in every state and so-called coattails do not play much of a role. In years of unusual sweeps, national factors take precedence over local ones in determining the election's outcome. In those years, some circumstance or issue stimulates the turnout of partisans from one party or segment of the electorate, depresses the turnout of a particular group, or both. While individual candidates are far from irrelevant in such elections, party usually becomes far more important than normal, affecting victory margins in many races and the actual outcomes in at least a few. In the most extreme examples, such as in 1974 for Democrats and 1994 for Republicans, candidates who normally would not have had a prayer of winning woke up on Wednesday morning to find themselves being called "Honorable."

If this year's election does not become nationalized, Republicans will have the edge in retaining control of the House. If it does become nationalized, Democrats will almost certainly take control. Because of redistricting and only modest recruiting successes for both parties, however, few House races are truly competitive. Thus, the chances of this election turning into a rout for either party are quite slim.

So the question remains: is a nationalized election emerging this year? Ironically, just eight months ago, it was the Republicans who were rooting for one, hoping that President Bush's stratospheric job-approval ratings and a national agenda focused on foreign policy and national security would tilt the election in their favor. If these issues had continued to dominate this election cycle and resulted in Republicans holding their own or even gaining seats, that result would have been remarkable: the party in control of the White House has lost House seats in 32 of 34 midterm elections since the Civil War.

Some astute Republican campaign strategists, however, warned their clients not to count on this halo effect. They reasoned that the economy and other domestic issues would almost surely return to the top of the national agenda and that the GOP contenders should count on winning their races on their own, not with help from above. At that time, Democrats were nervously hoping that circumstances would change and that history would once again repeat itself by handing a midterm setback to the president's party.

Today, it's the Republicans who are biting their fingernails.

The Final Stages

One way to gauge whether significant GOP losses can be expected this fall is to look at a four-stage sequence of events common to many nationalized elections. The first is usually a drop in the "right direction" poll number. The second is a drop in the president's job-approval rating. Both of these stages have been passed.

The third stage is a drop in one party's poll numbers as measured by, for example, voters' party identification, how voters intend to cast their ballots in House contests, or which party they view as better able to handle particular key issues. In the two most recent Ipsos-Reid surveys, Republicans still have a statistically insignificant 44 percent to 42 percent lead in this so-called generic congressional ballot test.

Only when a nationalized election is in its final stages do observers start to see its impact on a large number of races around the country. As of today, there is absolutely no evidence that the fragile economy, the stock market's fall, the widening array of corporate scandals, and a multitude of other negative news stories souring the public mood in recent months have had a negative impact on a single Republican candidate in the country.

Republicans appear to have about a 60 or 70 percent chance of holding onto the House.

Republican National Committee (RNC) senior adviser, Matthew Dowd, who coordinates polling for the RNC and the White House, accurately predicted in March that the president's approval ratings would "drift lower" from their unsustainably high, post-9/11 levels and would "settle" in the low 60s. He argues today that this is precisely what we are seeing now and that things are heading back toward where they were before September 11, except that Bush's approval rating is not likely to fall to 51 percent—its level in the final Gallup poll before the terrorist attacks—and that the GOP's overall numbers are much better than they were a year ago and are not declining.

While all that is true, the settling that occurred in several key poll numbers during the first five months of 2002 now appears to be more of a drop, with "right direction" and consumer confidence numbers falling rather precipitously. Republican Party numbers are surely better than they were a year ago, but there is no guarantee that they will stay that way.

The conditions that could lead to a bad election for Republicans do seem to exist for the first time since 9/11. While dark clouds may loom on the horizon for the GOP, Democratic victory in the House or Senate is in no way inevitable. The possibility of losing both chambers, however, is distinctly real.

Can We Expect Congressional Change?

The fight for control of the U.S. Senate seems almost certainly headed for a photo finish. While a nationalized shift in favor of Democrats could help, it should be remembered that Senate races tend to be somewhat less vulnerable to national trends than are House races. Senate candidates tend to be better known and defined in voters' minds, the races are more closely watched, get much greater news coverage, and often take on lives of their own. House races are more susceptible to national trends. Democrats have three Senate seats that can only be described as toss-ups: incumbents Jean Carnahan (Mo.), Tim Johnson (S.D.), and Paul Wellstone (Minn.). Republicans, on the other hand, have four: Wayne Allard (Colo.), Tim Hutchinson (Ark.), Bob Smith (N.H.), and an open seat in Texas. Democrats have four additional seats that appear somewhat jeopardized but where they still have the advantage: Max Baucus (Mont.), Max Cleland (Ga.), Tom Harkin (Iowa), and Bob Torricelli (N.J.). Along the same lines, Republicans have four close but favorable seats: incumbent Gordon Smith (Ore.) as well as three open seats in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

> Do not expect profound policy change or important implications from this election.

At this point in the 1992 election year on the House side, about 121 races could have been described as competitive, with either side having a realistic chance of winning. Of those 121, about 44 could be said to have been too close to call, true toss-up races. Today, about 44 races are competitive, with only about 11 considered to be "toss-ups." Therein lies the challenge for House Democrats—how to score a net gain of six seats when opportunities for gains are so limited for either party. For this reason, Republicans appear to have about a 60 percent chance, possibly even a 70 percent chance, of retaining control of the House, despite their seemingly perilous six-seat advantage. Although the GOP has an edge, the House contest is also going to be a close call and could go either way.

The big gains the Republicans predicted early in the redistricting process are simply not going to happen. Although Republicans hold more governorships and state legislatures than they did 10 years ago when maps were last drawn, they are not concentrated in the right places for maximum effect. Although Republicans did stick it to the Democrats in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida, Democrats returned the favor in Maryland and Georgia. These states, however, were all exceptions to the rule. Most states drew lines that simply protected incumbents from both parties—in essence, protecting their state's seniority in Washington, D.C.

Everything Changes, but it all Stays The Same

Regardless of the outcome, the same kind of political gridlock that Washington has experienced in recent years is almost certain to continue after this election. Although a party in the House traditionally has not had true control without a majority of 20–30 seats, the mere half-dozen majority that exists today is enough to determine the outcome of some votes when partisan lines are so clearly drawn. Nominal control of the House will likely continue as neither party is likely to score sufficient gains to have meaningful control of the chamber after this election. Even if one party or the other manages to build a Senate majority of 52 or even 53 seats, the rules of the body and the proportionally higher number of "free agents" in each party means that it still would not be running the place, even to the extent that Speaker Dennis Hastert and the Republicans control the House today.

Congress today reflects the country—very evenly divided between the two parties with neither party having enough of a governing majority to implement its agenda. Consequently, the only legislation likely to reach the president's desk is likely to represent the lowest common denominator—neither liberal nor conservative, not bold, innovative, or terribly memorable.

The bottom line is not to expect profound policy change or important implications to arise from this election. Neither party is likely to score the kind of decisive gains that would put it in a strong governing position.

Note

1. Ipsos-Reid/Cook Political Report polls are generally conducted the first and third weekends of each month by Ipsos-Reid U.S. Public Affairs for the *Cook Political Report*. Right Direction/Wrong Track numbers are based on 2,000 adults each month (margin of error +/- 2.2 percent). Other questions are based on roughly 1,600 registered voters (margin of error +/- 2.5 percent).