

## The Parties Spring into Action

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As fascinating as the 2002 midterm election results were, this may go down as one of the most overinterpreted national elections in modern American history. It displayed promising signs for Republicans in the future, but it was hardly the seismic shift in the political landscape that many pundits have claimed. Republican Senate, House, gubernatorial, and state legislative victories were based on strategic, tactical, mechanical, and financial reasons, not a fundamental movement in public attitudes in their favor. The United States remains an evenly divided nation; as a result, most of our national elections, more likely than not, will remain competitive.

By any historic standard, the 2002 midterm elections were remarkable. For only the third time since the end of the Civil War, the party holding the White House gained House seats in a midterm election, the previous exceptions being 1934 and 1998. For this reason, President George W. Bush and his party have every right to be proud. After all, Republicans won this election; they were not simply the beneficiaries of some massive and spontaneous shift in voter preference for Republicans over Democrats.

In the final days and weeks before the election, either party was capable of popping out a one-, two- or even three-seat net gain; and neither party was more likely than the other to score. In the end, Republicans scored a net gain of two seats in the Senate, bringing the margin to 51 Republicans to 49 Democrats (counting Senator Jim Jeffords [I-Vt.] as a Democrat). Upsets were few and, for the most part, occurred in cases where the races that were already known to be very close broke disproportionately in the Republicans' favor in the end.

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 26:2 pp. 211–217.

In the House, nearly the same thing occurred. For weeks going into the election, either side scoring double-digit gains seemed unlikely, and it was virtually certain that Republicans would hold on to control of the House. Furthermore, Republicans were increasingly likely to pick up between two and five seats. Republicans ended up winning six—still the general direction that the House races seemed to be headed—and hardly a large number. The simple fact is that, if 77,441 votes out of 75 million had been cast in the other direction, the United States would have a Democratic House and Senate. Many of the same pundits talking about the Republican tidal wave

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would be writing a premature political obituary for the Bush presidency.

In the gubernatorial races, there were two legitimate upsets, with one Democratic seat in Georgia, held by incumbent Roy Barnes, unexpectedly going Republican and one open Republican seat in Oklahoma won by Democrats in an equally surprising outcome. Otherwise, every leaning, likely, or solidly Democratic or Republican seat remained in each party's column, respectively. Republi-

cans were expected to lose between three and seven governorships overall, but in the end they lost just one. Thus, compared to expectations, the biggest win for Republicans on November 5 was governorships. The GOP now holds a 26-seat to 24-seat advantage. Apart from the two upsets split between the two parties, Republicans won 11 of 16 toss-up races.

Interestingly, although Republicans lost gubernatorial races in the key industrial states of Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, they retained governorships in some of the most liberal states in the nation—Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island. They also picked up other states not normally hospitable to Republicans, such as Hawaii and Maryland. To the extent that there was a common theme to the gubernatorial elections, it was that the state's in-party, so to speak, was thrown out. For instance, Republicans managed to hold on in several states such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island where, although Republicans had held the governorship, Democrats were more widely perceived as the state's governing party.

## **A Strategic Victory**

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As is often the case in young presidencies, prior to the election the country was in either a recession or economic downturn, depending on one's perspective, and the performance of the president's economic team was consid-

ered less than admirable. On a strategic level, Republicans knew that this election could not be reduced to a report card on the economy and Bush's handling of the economy or domestic concerns, as midterm elections—particularly first-term elections—usually are. Worse yet, if the electorate focused on corporate corruption (Enron and WorldCom), Republicans were far more likely to lose. Although the president scored early and important victories in getting both his tax cut and education reform packages through Congress, neither win provided the big boost in the polls that his team had hoped. Bush's fate seemed inextricably linked to the worsening economy. During the summer of 2001, the president's job approval numbers were declining, and his approval numbers in the last Gallup poll conducted before the tragedy of September 11, 2001, were just 51 percent approval, the lowest of his presidency thus far, and 39 percent disapproval, the highest so far. In short, 2002 seemed to be shaping up to be a classic midterm election.

As horrible as the September 11 tragedy was, it offered Bush an opportunity to escape what might otherwise have been his political fate. Bush and the Republicans moved the venue of the election to a more favorable place by shifting public focus away from the economy and domestic concerns. Foreign policy, national security, and terrorism provided the opportunity to exhibit bold leadership that the public had not previously seen.

For Republicans, the challenge was to keep the emphasis on this new agenda and away from economic problems that they had little if any opportunity to affect. In the end, Democrats were never able to shift public attention back to the economy and domestic concerns despite numerous opportunities, most notably the corporate corruption scandals and wrongdoing at Enron and WorldCom.

## **A Tactical Victory**

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Strategic and tactical advantages come and go, but a party's ability to deliver its voters is something it can control. Republicans were effective in reaching out to their base conservative vote in ways that did not irritate more moderate swing voters. That is always a challenge for political parties, particularly in midterm elections, when the parties' respective bases constitute a considerably larger proportion of the total electorate, but the number of swing voters is still too significant to ignore. For example, Republicans skillfully used distribution of the so-called morning-after pill to enrage pro-life voters without motivating pro-choice voters to move from the sidelines. Although Democrats contended that states should be allowed to determine whether these pills should be distributed, they failed to inspire the same fervor in the Democratic pro-choice base as that with which the pro-lifers responded.

On a mechanical level, Republicans were able to get out the vote more successfully than they have at any point since 1994. Historically, Republicans have often been better able to get more supporters to the polls because better educated and higher-income voters are comparably more likely to vote. In recent elections, Republicans have ceded the responsibility of getting out the vote to the National Rifle Association (NRA), the Christian Coalition, and other socially and culturally conservative groups.

Although the NRA is just as influential and effective as ever, most of the other groups in this socially and culturally conservative coalition have declined in power and influence, leaving Republicans largely unable to deliver large numbers of voters when not motivated on their own (i.e., 1994). The lack of Voter News Service exit-poll data from the 2002 elections prevents a more careful analysis of this point, but the overall election returns and anecdotal evidence suggests that Republican turnout, particularly whites in small towns, rural areas, newer suburbs, and exurbs, was unusually high. In many cases, it swamped Democratic turnout even in situations where Democrats successfully mounted very strong turnout operations of their own. In Georgia, Governor Barnes was quoted as saying that he received the number of votes that he thought he needed to win comfortably, but Republican nominee Sonny Perdue simply and unexpectedly received many more. The Republican Party's ability to turn out their voters, even in a midterm election, is potentially the most important development in this election year.

## **A Financial Victory**

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The financial advantage that Republicans had in 2002 was most visible at the House race level. Although both parties were amply funded in the key Senate contests, the National Republican Congressional Committee simply swamped the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in fundraising. The Republican advantage forced Democrats to spread their resources thinly across key races. In many potentially competitive open and Republican-held seats, particularly those in more expensive media markets such as Detroit and Philadelphia, Democrats did not have the money to compete.

With the McCain-Feingold/Shays-Meehan campaign finance law having taken effect on November 6, the Republican financial advantage is likely to become even more important. Democrats had grown far more dependent on soft money than Republicans, who have proven to be far more successful in raising hard dollars under the constraints of the Federal Election Campaign Act.

## The Impact on the 108th Congress

The impact of the 2002 elections on the operations and productivity of the House will be minimal. Given that a simple majority is sufficient to rule the body, and the ranks of moderate-to-liberal Republicans and moderate-to-conservative Democrats have thinned, even a modest House majority is sufficient on most issues.

The shift in control of the Senate will obviously redirect the agenda and schedule for both floor and committee action and clear the logjam of judicial nominations, but the substantive legislative output may change less than is widely expected. Republicans will simply have one more Senate seat than they did before Jeffords switched from the Republican to the Democratic side. Republicans were able to get the president's tax cut and education reforms packages through a 50-50 Senate, but compromise was the name of the game and will remain so in the next Congress. Republicans must still contend with the challenge of holding on to the support of moderate-to-liberal Republican senators such as Lincoln Chafee (R.I.); Olympia Snowe (Maine); Susan Collins (Maine); Arlen Specter (Pa.); and, on occasion, John McCain (Ariz.), among others. In a tight vote, Republicans may only be able to gain support from Georgia's Zell Miller, the only true conservative Democrat left in the Senate.

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As political scientist Norm Ornstein points out, if Republicans had won the Louisiana Senate runoff, they very likely would have succeeded in getting more than a one-seat advantage on committees. With at least one moderate-to-liberal Republican on each committee, Republicans might not have the votes they need on some key issues. Given these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that more conservative legislation will clear the House and Senate in the next Congress.

## Challenge for Republicans

In U.S. history, when one party has controlled the presidency, the House, and the Senate, more often than not, it was defeated in the next election. In 25 of the last 52 years, we have had some form of divided government. Four times (1952, 1964, 1968, and 1980), one party has gone into a presidential election controlling all three elected entities. In three out of four (1952, 1968, and 1980), that party lost the presidency; in the same three out of four, it lost seats

in both the House and Senate. In two of the four (1952 and 1980), it lost control of the Senate, and in one (1952), it also lost control of the House. Only in 1964 did the president's party hold on to the White House and not lose seats in the House or Senate, and that was when Republicans nominated conservative Barry Goldwater in the landslide that reelected President Lyndon Johnson. Simply put, when one party controls all aspects of the federal government, there is only one direction for blame to go.

Differing from previous cases, however, the Republican issue agenda in this election differed very little from the Democratic agenda. The election was anything but ideological. It is, therefore, imperative that Republicans do not imagine that voters rewarded them with a conservative mandate. To do so and then launch a highly ideological agenda on an exceedingly centrist electorate would run the risk of jeopardizing their majorities in both the House and Senate as well as their hold on the White House.

Parties have gone too far toward their ideological extremes during periods where they have exercised control over all levers of power. With Republican margins as narrow as they are in the House and Senate, however, to do so would limit their ability and perhaps their willingness to create legislation. Therefore, pushing the party too far to the right would expose it to the wrath of voters.

## **2004 Presidential Politics**

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Very little can be said reliably about the reelection prospects of a president still two years away from the general election. At this point in his presidency (December 1982), Ronald Reagan had a 43 percent job approval rating in the Gallup poll; Republicans had just lost 26 seats in the House and come within 34,000 votes of losing five U.S. Senate seats and control of the chamber. Unemployment had hit 10 percent just weeks before the election. Who would have guessed at that point that Reagan would not only be reelected two years later, but would carry 49 out of 50 states against former vice president Walter Mondale? At the same point in his presidency (December 1994), the Gallup poll gave Bill Clinton a 40 percent job approval rating, and Democrats had just lost 52 seats in the House and eight Senate seats in one of the more devastating elections that any party has ever suffered. Clinton recovered from this to beat former senator Robert Dole in 1996 by eight percentage points.

At the midpoint of his first term, Richard Nixon only had a 52 percent job approval rating, yet he carried 49 states two years later, winning by 23 percentage points over George McGovern. Nixon's 52 percent rating was just one percentage point better than Jimmy Carter's 51 percent approval rating, and Carter went on to lose to Reagan by 10 percentage points. The

classic example, of course, was George H. W. Bush, who, at this point in his presidency, enjoyed a 63 percent job approval rating. After the Persian Gulf War, it hit 89 percent, but Bush went on to lose reelection with the lowest percentage of any incumbent in 80 years. Thus, historically, there has been no correlation between a president's job approval rating in his first 31 months in office and whether he was subsequently reelected. Only in September and October of the year before the presidential election do patterns begin to emerge. Until then, talk of Bush's true vulnerability is not only entirely speculative but also extremely unreliable.

If the economy is strong in 2004 and if Bush is widely perceived as having performed well, Democrats could nominate the reincarnation of Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy and still lose to him. Conversely, if the economy is weak or if Bush stumbles badly, Democrats could nominate anything short of a trained monkey and have a good chance of winning the election. Obviously, if a war with Iraq goes horribly wrong, this could change. Still, it is more likely that the 12 months before the election and the economy's performance in that year will determine the president's reelection.

The Democrats' fate thus rests in the economy and the hands of George W. Bush. Democrats can only give Bush and the Republicans plenty of rope and hope they hang themselves. Only if these factors fall in their favor will the identity of the Democratic presidential nominee or the quality of the two campaigns waged really matter. Americans must first answer the question, "Do I want to reelect this president?" If the answer is "yes," then the election is over. If the answer is either "no" or "maybe," then candidates, campaigns, and other issues become important.

Former vice president Al Gore's decision not to seek the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination yields an open contest. In terms of name recognition, the former vice president would have begun the race as a front-runner. Party leaders and activists, however, considerably resisted another Gore candidacy, and most insiders do not believe that he would have ultimately received the nomination.

Predictions of nomination-battle outcomes among those in the field at this stage of the game are notoriously unreliable. Those candidates who look most promising on paper often fail to make themselves attractive to a sufficiently broad array of party voters and activists, while others who seem implausible contenders sometimes manage to succeed. At this point, it is most prudent to just sit back and watch events unfold.

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