POLITICAL PARTIES

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READINGS ON MIDTERM ELECTIONS

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Midterm Elections Offer a Mixed Bag

Before we plunge head-first into the election season, we should recount the various ways that midterm elections have affected the course of American politics over the years.

Of course, the most basic historical fact about midterm elections is that the president’s party almost always loses seats in the House, and loses seats in the Senate about two-thirds of the time. Even when the midterms have little broader impact—for example, on the next presidential election—they usually make life harder for the president. In typical years, he finds the composition of Congress less to his liking, both because fewer members of his party are there and because, often, the members of his party who were defeated were disproportionately drawn from those closely associated with the president or his ideas.

Less tangibly, when the opposition party gains seats, they gain—and are almost always declared by the media to have gained—an important (though mostly psychological) measure of political momentum. In a related vein, the modern plebiscitary presidency draws no small portion of its power from the perception of "mandate" flowing from the president’s election. Losses in the midterm year have the effect of negating that mandate, and perhaps even allowing the opposition to claim a counter-mandate.

Not to be ignored is the tendency of midterm elections to throw up a new set of attractive opposition leaders who, together with their party as a whole, test issues and themes for the next election.

When midterm elections follow the historical anti-administration pattern, they also have a long-term effect on American politics working from the bottom up. As it turns out, the midterm pattern manifests itself in state elections as well; the president’s party usually loses governorships (a real danger for Republicans this year) and state legislative seats. The effect on governorships can be particularly strong, since three-fourths of governors are elected in midterm years. Governors often run for Senate, and state legislatures are breeding grounds for future congressmen—meaning that the opposition party can plant seeds in midterm years that will bear great fruit, though sometimes many years later.

In some midterm years, the effect is even more pronounced. In about one-third of midterm elections since 1894, the result contributed significantly to a change in party control of the presidency two years later. Not only did the president’s opponents gain seats in Congress, but they gained control of the congressional agenda and used that control over the next two years to stymie and embarrass the president and his party. Sometimes (though not always) they also pursued an alternative policy approach, which attracted public attention and defined the party in a new and positive way for voters.

On the other hand, a few midterms, though inflicting serious losses on the president, had the effect of consolidating his position rather than upending it completely. In those cases, the midterms were an opportunity for voters to slow and refine a popular reform program without reversing it. The opposition cooperated by running a campaign aimed at making the president’s program more "efficient" or more "fair" rather than repealing it. The elections of 1938, 1982, and 1986 fit this mold. The president’s leverage was trimmed, but he or his party won the next presidential election and his reform program became a central fact of American political life.

And, of course, there are a handful of exceptions to the rule—cases in which the president’s party actually gained seats in the House or otherwise fought the opposition to a
standstill. Prior to 1998, there had only been one House gain by a president’s party in the previous hundred years. Now there have been three; both 1998 and 2002 bucked the historical trend. One can also add 1962 to the list of exceptions, as John F. Kennedy’s Democrats gained a few seats in the Senate and lost only a very few in the House. In these cases, the benefits that typically accrue to the opposition party went to the president instead, ranging from a friendlier Congress to intangible momentum to a renewed sense of "mandate."

Altogether, midterm elections have often served as the starting and ending points of key policy eras. Woodrow Wilson’s progressive "New Freedom" era really began with the midterm election of 1910 and ended when Republicans regained control of Congress in 1918. The New Deal was presaged by the elections of 1930 and came to a screeching halt (as a program for additional reform) in 1938. The Great Society was foretold in the 1958 Democratic sweep, and hit a brick wall when Republicans made big gains in 1966. And the Reagan Revolution was anticipated by the tax-cutting fervor of 1978 Republicans, and could not be significantly added to after 1986, when Democrats regained control of the Senate.

Will 2006 be a normal midterm that takes seats from the president’s party and makes his life more difficult? Will it go further, serving as a platform for a Democratic recapture of the presidency in 2008? Will it be another exception, and if so, will the exception now be the rule after the third time in a row? What role will the midterm election play in the political and policy history of our time?

To bring light to these questions, I will be using my next several columns to examining in greater depth some of the key midterm elections of the last century.

Democrats Put Themselves on the Road to the White House in 1910

Of all the midterm elections of the last century, the elections of 1910 have to rank among the highest in terms of significance.

Republicans had won the previous four presidential elections beginning with William McKinley’s first victory over William Jennings Bryan in 1896. Indeed, among Democratic presidential candidates, only Grover Cleveland had won the White House in the 50 years since Abraham Lincoln was first elected. The GOP seemed solidly in control of Congress, and the Republican Speaker of the House, "Uncle Joe" Cannon, ran the House of Representatives with an iron fist.

Yet all was not well in the Republican camp. President William Howard Taft, elected with Theodore Roosevelt’s blessing in 1908, had alienated his predecessor and seemed ill-suited to navigate the political complexities of the times. In Congress, the split between "old guard" Republicans and "progressive" Republicans intensified. As the year wore on, an alliance of Democrats and "progressive" Republicans in the House revolted, stripping Cannon (and the office of the Speaker for decades to come) of most of his out-sized powers. Taft responded to the assertiveness of the progressives by attempting to read them out of the party. His attempts to have them defeated in the party primaries of 1910 were mostly unsuccessful; instead, a slew of old guard incumbents went down to defeat. For their part, Democrats were unusually united.

The general election produced several notable results:
- Democrats gained 57 seats in the House and 10 in the Senate, enough to give them outright partisan control of the House and working control of the Senate in combination with progressive Republicans.
- Democrats also made significant gains at the state level, where they won the governorships of New York and New Jersey for the first time since 1892, as well as gubernatorial races in Republican strongholds like Connecticut, Rhode Island, Ohio, and Massachusetts. These elections thrust forward a new cohort of Democratic leaders, including most notably Woodrow Wilson as the new governor of New Jersey.

- Psychologically, there was no question that the results dramatically boosted the confidence of Democrats, who had not had good news of this sort for almost two decades. In the words of the *New York Times*, "What a wonderful and quick regeneration has been wrought in the Democratic Party in this year."

- The internal composition of the President’s party shifted dramatically against him. Only a handful of congressional Republicans from progressive strongholds lost, while heavy losses were suffered by the GOP contingent from states where the old guard had been particularly strong. The consequence was a much-emboldened progressive wing within the Republican Party, which formed the National Progressive Republican League in January, 1911. This agitation contributed to the entry of Robert La Follette and Theodore Roosevelt into the Republican nomination race against Taft in 1912. Of course, Roosevelt would go on to bolt the GOP and run against Taft as the candidate of the Progressive (or "Bull Moose") party.

The new Democratic-progressive Congress elected in 1910 stymied Taft on numerous issues, as "deadlock" often reigned. Democrats also used their new power to advance their own agenda, establish a positive record for 1912, and force the President into unpopular vetoes, such as one for a bill lowering tariffs.

As scholar David Mayhew has pointed out, the 62nd Congress was responsible for the 17th Amendment (direct election of Senators), an eight hour federal work-day, creation of a federal Children’s Bureau, creation of the Department of Labor, and campaign finance restrictions. The Money Trust Investigation run by the House in 1912 pioneered the use of congressional hearings as a publicity tool for new policy.

When Wilson was nominated by Democrats as their presidential candidate in 1912, he ran on a platform that highlighted the progressive accomplishments of the 62nd Congress and excoriated Taft for blocking measures like the downward tariff revision. When Wilson won, he found that the Congress elected in 1910 had already paved the way for his New Freedom program.

**1930 Midterms Heralded New Deal**

When Herbert Hoover took office in March 1929, Republicans seemed to be on top of the world. Hoover had won a smashing victory against the Democrat (and Catholic) Al Smith of New York, even winning some peripheral South states that no Republican had won since Reconstruction. The GOP controlled Congress as it had since 1918, and for all but a few years since 1894. Most of the nation was enjoying the unprecedented prosperity of the 1920s, although farm prices were depressed.

Over the summer, though, the economy began to slow. Then, less than seven months after Hoover’s inauguration, the stock market suffered its steep descent. By 1930, the Great Depression was fully underway.

Democrats, so long out of power, sensed an opportunity to make big gains—and indeed they did. In the 1930 midterm elections, House Democrats added 49 to their number, Senate Democrats eight. Furthermore, Congress did not convene until a year later—in December
1931—and the results of thirteen House vacancy elections tipped control of the House to Democrats. All in all, one of every five House members was a freshman. In the Senate, Republicans kept a one-seat plurality, but Democrats and the one independent could block action, and there were enough progressive Republican Senators to form a working majority with Democrats on many issues.

Further, Democrats made big gains at the state level, especially in states like Ohio and Massachusetts that had long been GOP strongholds. Perhaps most importantly, Franklin Roosevelt won a second term as Governor of New York. His first win, in 1928, had been a squeaker; his 1930 reelection was by a massive 725,000 margin, instantly propelling him to the front ranks of Democratic presidential contenders.

Overall, news reports held that Democratic leaders believed that the 1930 elections "presaged victory for their presidential ticket in the elections of 1932."

Democrats ultimately used their new power in Congress to undermine Hoover and lay the groundwork for some of the policy departures of the New Deal. Their initial strategy was less confrontational, and aimed at letting Hoover propose policy and take responsibility for national conditions. However, House Democrats rebelled against this leadership strategy in March 1932, voting to restore spending cuts proposed by Hoover and rejecting his proposed national sales tax in favor of higher taxes on wealth.

A key moment came in July 1932, when Congress sent to Hoover a major federal relief bill that went beyond what the President was willing to support. He ended up vetoing the bill, which had been sponsored by Sen. Robert Wagner and House Speaker John Nance Garner. (He later signed a revised version of the bill, but had made such a point of opposing federal relief that he got no credit for it.)

Not only did Hoover stand on the opposite side of these issues from the Democratic Congress, but most Republicans stood by the President. Seventy-five percent of House Republicans supported the national sales tax, while 75 percent of House Democrats opposed it; almost no House Republicans voted for the Democratic relief bill. Thus the 72nd Congress elected in 1930 had the effect of substantially clarifying in the public mind the partisan division over social welfare and wealth distribution. Indeed, academic studies have shown that the "social welfare" dimension of issue voting in Congress—what would ultimately be the very basis of the New Deal—either first emerged or was greatly strengthened in the 72nd Congress.

The presidential campaign of 1932 was clearly influenced by these congressional disputes. Roosevelt’s nomination roughly coincided with Hoover’s relief veto, and FDR’s deal with John Nance Garner guaranteeing Garner a place on the Democratic ticket bore great symbolic importance given Garner’s sponsorship of the relief bill. Late in the campaign, Roosevelt praised Congress, attacked Hoover’s vetoes, and claimed the previous two years had proven Hoover incapable of working with Congress.

Though any Democratic nominee would have been a favorite against Hoover in 1932, the election of 1930 both launched Roosevelt’s nomination and set the policy stage for Roosevelt’s program, neither of which were inevitable.

The New Deal Comes to a Screeching Halt in 1938

When Republicans and Democrats faced off for the 1938 midterm elections, it had been a decade since Republicans had done well in congressional elections. They had lost seats in both houses of Congress in 1930, 1932, 1934, and 1936, bringing their totals to a mere 88 in the
House and 16 in the Senate. In the wake of Franklin Roosevelt’s landslide reelection victory in 1936, it was an open question whether the Republican Party was capable of serving as a viable opposition party.

As FDR began his second term, his program was hardly complete. He aimed for a "Third New Deal" of further government economic controls and redistributionism, and seemed to have the votes in Congress to push it through.

Then, a series of events damaged Roosevelt’s standing and rejuvenated the GOP’s chances.

First, overestimating his popularity and persuasive powers, Roosevelt embarked on his "court packing" scheme, bringing a backlash even among many Democrats in Congress. The attempt seemed to verify Republican charges that the President was engaged in a campaign for one-man rule.

Next, the nation was hit with a sharp economic downturn, a recession inside the Depression that soon came to be known as the "Roosevelt recession." The 1937-38 downturn pushed the unemployment rate back near the 20 percent level, and accentuated the question of whether FDR’s economic policies were actually helping or hurting recovery.

During 1937-38, America was also rocked with a series of sit-down strikes and instances of union violence, mostly instigated by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Many Americans associated the surge in aggressive unionism with Roosevelt’s encouragement of unions in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act.

Finally, in mid-1938, Roosevelt embarked on a campaign to deprive a number of anti-New Deal congressional Democrats of renomination in local Democratic primary elections. With a few exceptions, FDR failed, and incurred three costs: he turned a number of Democratic skeptics into irrevocable enemies, he appeared impotent, and he once again contributed to the picture of himself as power-hungry, perhaps dangerously so. It was particularly significant that in 1938, when the Moscow show-trials were running full-time, the press labeled FDR’s intra-party efforts a "purge."

Altogether, while there were few signs that Americans were ready to thoroughly repudiate Roosevelt or the New Deal, there were many signs that they were ready to rein the president in. An August 1938 Gallup poll showed that 66 percent of Americans wanted FDR to pursue more conservative policies.

When the election results were in, Democrats had lost six Senate seats and 71 House seats in what former Roosevelt advisor Raymond Moley called "a comeback of astounding proportions." Republicans nearly matched the Democratic national House vote total, 47 percent to 48.6 percent; if one takes into account overwhelming Democratic predominance in the one-party South, the GOP clearly led the House vote in the rest of the country. Democrats also lost a dozen governorships, including such crucial states as Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, Democratic losses were concentrated among pro-New Deal Democrats. Once the dust had settled, the Senate was about evenly divided between pro- and anti-New Deal forces, and the "conservative coalition" of Republicans and conservative Democrats was also solidified in the House, and started any given issue within range of victory. As political scientist David Mayhew has observed, the conservative coalition proceeded to dominate Congress for the next twenty years, until the election of 1958.

Political correspondent Arthur Krock held that "the New Deal has been halted; the Republican party is large enough for effective opposition; the moderate Democrats in Congress can guide legislation." In addition, "the country is back on a two-party system… and legislative
authority has been restored to Congress." Republican spirits were revived, and the momentum of the New Deal halted.

The result in Congress was not a wholesale reversal of the New Deal but a stalemate in which Roosevelt was unable to make significant new departures, and indeed found himself in a defensive posture vis-à-vis Congress for the first time since assuming office. Congressional investigations began to embarrass the administration; Congress passed the Hatch Act (limiting political activity by federal employees) and Smith Act (cracking down on internal subversion) over FDR’s objections. For his part, Roosevelt offered no major new reform proposals in 1939 for the first time in his presidency.

If it makes sense to consider the 1930 midterm as the leading edge of the New Deal policy era, the midterm elections of 1938 clearly served as the endpoint of that era. Roosevelt was not rejected as Hoover had been—indeed he went on to win the next two presidential elections. But he never again dominated American domestic politics in the same way as before.

### 1946 Midterm Gives GOP First Majority Since 1928 Elections, Helps Ensure Truman’s Reelection

In 1946, President Harry Truman was in serious trouble. Having assumed the presidency in April 1945 after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman had large shoes to fill. Inflation was rising, labor unrest concerned many, most wartime economic controls remained in place, and tensions with Joseph Stalin were already escalating. After 14 years of unified Democratic control of government, voters were ready for a change.

The election results produced a change dramatic enough that many analysts saw them as indicative of a broad Republican realignment. The GOP gained 55 House seats and 12 Senate seats, enough to give them control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the elections of 1928. Furthermore, liberals bore the brunt of the losses. Democrats outside the South lost in excess of 40 percent of their seats, while Southern Democrats suffered no losses. In the states, Republicans gained three governorships, not a large number but enough to give them a majority of governorships. Richard Nixon was first elected to the House, and Thomas Dewey won a handsome reelection as Governor of New York, giving an additional boost to his presidential ambitions. Truman was so thoroughly damaged by the election results that Democratic Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas suggested that the President was a spent force. According to Fulbright, Truman should appoint a Republican Secretary of State and then resign his office, an act which, by the succession law of the time, would have made the new Secretary of State the next president.

Instead, of course, Truman made a legendary comeback. Subsequently, the Republican 80th Congress has become famous as the foil against which Truman ran his successful reelection campaign of 1948, a campaign that also brought renewed Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. Indeed, Truman made much hay criticizing what he called the "do-nothing 80th Congress," and it is tempting to view the Congress elected in the 1946 midterm as a fundamentally irrelevant blip in American history.

However, in reality, the 80th Congress was highly accomplished, bearing legislative responsibility for the following:

- Congressional approval of the 22nd Amendment limiting the president to two terms;
• Passage of the Taft-Hartley Act that allowed states to adopt "right-to-work" rules, drove communists out of the labor movement, and generally established balance between labor and business in labor law;
• Passage of a major tax cut;
• Pressuring Truman into ending wartime economic regimentation;
• Enactment of the National Security Act of 1947, which established the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council and National Security Advisor, and the Central Intelligence Agency;
• Approval of the Marshall Plan and aid to Greece and Turkey, the starting point of the policy of containment;

Most of these innovations have endured more-or-less intact to this day.

Consequently, the elections of 1946 helped reelect Harry Truman in two ways. Most obviously, Truman was able to force a number of confrontations with the 80th Congress that strengthened his image as a "fighter for the people." Less obviously, but at least as important, Truman was saved by the 80th Congress from being dragged down by public fears of high taxation, overly-strong unions, and over-centralization of power. The Republican Congress might be said to have cleared the road for Truman’s reelection by forcefully removing the issues that most endangered it.

Not least, the 80th Congress left a legislative legacy that put in place the presidential power, the national security apparatus, the foreign policy framework, and the labor laws that defined American policy for the rest of the century.

1958-1962 Midterms Pave Way for Great Society

From 1950-1958, Democrats and Republicans were locked in close combat in Congress. Republicans held a very small majority in both houses from 1953-1955, and Democrats held a very small majority the rest of the time. Even when Democrats had numerical control, liberals did not. A coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats held sway.

Then the precarious balance was undone. The deep recession of 1957-58, the aging of the Eisenhower administration, and a miscalculation by right-to-work forces who stirred up organized labor with a series of state right-to-work ballot initiatives combined to give Democrats a big win in the 1958 midterm elections. Republicans lost 48 House seats, 13 Senate seats, seven governorships, and 686 state legislative seats. Moreover, almost all of the new Democrats were northern and western liberals. As scholars Edward Carmines and James Stimson argued, new Senate Democrats read "like a who’s who of the Democratic coalition that would dominate the Senate for two decades”—including Edmund Muskie of Maine, Philip Hart of Michigan, Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, and Thomas Dodd of Connecticut.

Republicans would never come close to regaining control of the Senate until 1980 or the House until 1994. The added Democratic numbers, and the shift toward liberalism among the congressional Democrats, made possible the leftward shift in national policy that took place in the 1960s. Though it was necessary for that shift, it was not sufficient.

Despite bolstered liberalism in Congress, the conservative coalition with the backing of President Eisenhower was able to blunt significant policy movement in the immediate wake of 1958. Democrats were able to put Eisenhower and Republicans on the spot with proposed spending increases, measures like the Forand Bill (forerunner to Medicare), and the like, but they were unable to secure passage.
When John F. Kennedy was narrowly elected in 1960, Democrats actually lost 20 House seats, about 40 percent of their 1958 gain. Most of the New Frontier legislation was bottled up in Congress, and the 1962 midterm elections loomed. Even an average loss by the President’s party would have made progress on his program highly unlikely.

For much of the midterm year, the administration was on the defensive over Cuba. Castro had survived the botched Bay of Pigs invasion and had grown even more truculent. In the late summer, rumors began surfacing that Soviet missiles were being installed on Cuba, but the administration denied it. Some observers thought the GOP might be poised to make big midterm gains at Kennedy’s expense. For his part, the President planned a 19,000-mile speaking campaign, saying "History is so much against us, yet if we can hold our own, if we can win five seats or ten seats, it would change the whole opinion in the House and in the Senate."

When the United States resumed U-2 surveillance over Cuba in October 1962, it became clear that the Soviets were indeed placing nuclear missiles on Cuba, and the missile crisis was on. Kennedy cut his tour short after 5,500 miles, and the campaign was frozen. When the crisis was resolved a few days before balloting, Kennedy was the winner. On Election Day, Democrats won what was widely perceived as a moral victory by fighting Republicans to a draw, losing a mere four seats in the House and actually gaining four seats in the Senate. Democrats also suffered no net loss in governorships, the only time the President’s party could say that from the 1920s to 1986. Some of Kennedy’s fiercest critics, like Senators Walter Judd of Minnesota and Homer Capehart of Indiana, went down to defeat, and so did Richard Nixon in his bid to become Governor of California.

While not as complete as FDR’s 1934 sweep, 1962 was compared by many analysts to that election—a rare midterm win for a presidential party. Intangibly, Democrats received a huge psychological boost, and Kennedy’s claim to an electoral mandate—which in 1960 had seemed slender indeed, if it existed at all—was bolstered.

While Kennedy’s assassination is often credited for the passage of much of his program in 1964, James Sundquist points out that “the ice jam of stalled legislation had been thawing in the months before Dallas,” largely due to the President’s new political potency after the 1962 midterms. Even a modest loss of 20 seats, and much more the 30-40 seats some saw possible, would have foreclosed this effect and nearly completed the task, begun two years earlier, of wiping out the Democratic gains of 1958. While Lyndon Johnson benefited greatly from his 1964 landslide and accompanying congressional coattails, his tax cut, the landmark Civil Rights Act, and the structure of the War on Poverty all passed before the 1964 election, with the Congress elected in 1962.

1966 Midterm Foreshadows Republican Era

Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 election landslide, big Democratic gains in Congress, and the subsequent flood of liberal legislation flowing from Washington persuaded many observers that the Republican Party was nearly defunct. At best, they reasoned, it would take years for the GOP to reconstitute itself and regain relevance in the American system.

Two years later, Republicans were revivified and on the brink of an era of increasing political success, including near-domination of presidential elections that Democrats have occasionally overcome but have not yet ended four decades later.

A number of events took a toll on Johnson’s popularity by late 1966, including lack of demonstrable success in Vietnam, race riots and other civil disturbances at home, and an
increasing sense that the Great Society was running amok, spending too much and centralizing too much.

When all was said and done, the GOP gained 47 House seats, three Senate seats, eight governorships, and 557 state legislative seats. Republican governors controlled 25 states, the most since the early 1950s. Republicans actually won a majority of the aggregated national vote for U.S. Senate. Of the 38 House districts where Democrats had replaced Republicans in 1964, only 14 remained in Democratic hands in 1966.

The 1966 elections had a number of important effects:

- Lyndon Johnson’s legislative momentum was halted entirely. He proposed few new initiatives in 1967, and saw anti-poverty budgets cut. As Newsweek put it, "in the space of a single autumn day… the 1,000 day reign of Lyndon I came to an end: The Emperor of American politics became just a President again."
- By all accounts, Republicans immediately gained a huge psychological boost as they contemplated their prospects for 1968 and beyond. Journalists Stephen Hess and David Broder contended that improved expectations had "altered the whole psychological climate of internal Republican politics."
- The bolstered GOP contingent in Congress was able to put forward new policy ideas that were later picked up on by Richard Nixon in 1968 and beyond, especially proposals for enhancing federalism.
- Republicans were able both to regain strength in their Midwest bastion and to make serious inroads in Congress and governorships in the South for the first time since Reconstruction. Indeed, 1966 was a breakthrough year for the GOP in the House, as it picked up about one-third of Southern House seats. That ratio would remain constant until the next big surge in 1994.
- A surfeit of Republican leaders were advanced. Indeed, all four of the men who were elected Republican presidents between 1969 and the present owed much to 1966. Richard Nixon campaigned hard for GOP candidates, correctly predicted the result, and later said that 1966 was a crucial step on his road to the White House. Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California in 1966, and immediately became a national conservative leader. George H.W. Bush began his elective career, winning a seat in the U.S. House in Texas in 1966. And without a President George H.W. Bush, there would probably not be a President George W. Bush.

Altogether, Republicans reaped huge benefits from the 1966 elections. It is no exaggeration to say that the Great Society era of federal policymaking ended with the elections of 1966, or that the modern era of Republican strength began in 1966. Republicans would win seven out of the next ten presidential elections, starting with Nixon two years later.

1974 Midterms Bolster Liberalism in Congress

At the beginning of November 1974, Democrats had many reasons to look forward to the upcoming balloting with great hope. Only three months before, the Watergate scandal had brought an end to the Nixon presidency. Only two months before, Gerald Ford had squandered a large part of the goodwill he had enjoyed upon entering office when he announced a preemptive pardon of Nixon. And 1974 had seen the United States slump into a deep recession while still fighting high inflation.
When the votes were counted, Democratic hopes had been realized. Republicans lost 48 House seats, five Senate seats, and statehouse after statehouse. The Democratic scythe cut most deeply in previously Republican suburbs where concerns about the economy and clean government resonated strongly.

The Democratic class of 1974, often known as the "Watergate babies," were liberals in the new, McGovern mold—reformist, anti-military, sympathetic to the counterculture, and white-collar-oriented. If McGovern’s nomination heralded the end of a New Deal liberalism centered on unions, culturally-conservative ethnic voters, and anti-totalitarian toughness, the 1974 midterm elections put an exclamation point on it. The Watergate Babies would dominate the House for the next two decades, until the GOP finally gained control of Congress in 1994.

In contrast with several previous examples, the Congress elected in 1974 did not do much to set the stage for the next presidential election. However, the new liberal Congress pressed Ford hard on spending, forcing the former House minority leader into a series of vetoes. Confrontation between the branches, already high since 1969, did not diminish.

The influx of liberals into the House also had an important impact on the internal workings of that chamber. Relatively junior liberals from north and west rebelled against a seniority system that had put disproportionate power in the hands of aging Southern conservatives. In 1975, Democrats adopted a new set of rules that undercut the committee chairs by empowering both subcommittees below the chairs and the party leadership above them. The party caucus was given greater power to choose committee chairmen outside the process of seniority. Four conservative Southern Democrats were stripped of their chairs.

Perhaps the most important effects of the midterm elections came in foreign policy, however. The new Congress was much more willing to confront the President—and much less willing to confront the spread of communism. When North Vietnam violated the 1973 cease-fire agreement and invaded the South again in 1975, Ford desperately asked Congress for funds to re-supply the South before it was overrun. Congress refused, and on April 30, 1975, Saigon fell. In a certain respect, the midterm elections of 1974 sealed the fate of Indochina.

When Portugal gave up control of Angola and Mozambique in 1975, the Soviets and Cubans began aiding the pro-communist MPLA guerrilla group. When Ford asked Congress to help fund the pro-western group UNITA, it not only refused but passed the Clark amendment permanently enjoining any sort of aid to UNITA. (The Clark amendment was finally repealed in 1985.)

In both houses, liberal Democrats were emboldened to hold public hearings about CIA covert operations. Those hearings not only embarrassed the executive branch but arguably conveyed information that was damaging to national security. The hearings resulted in intelligence "reforms" that hamstrung intelligence and covert operations for the rest of the decade.

Altogether, the Congress elected in 1974 set about almost immediately to undermine the capacity of the United States and its friends to resist the expansion of Soviet power in the world. The record of that Congress might profitably be considered by Americans before they vote in November 2006. Congressional elections might typically hinge on issues like the economy and scandal, but the consequences of those elections can reach far afield, and sometimes can even make vain the sacrifices of many.
In the mid-1970s, Republicans appeared to be in serious trouble. Despite winning the presidency in 1968 and 1972—the latter in a landslide—they had failed to make much headway in voter identification. After the disgrace and resignation of Richard Nixon, Republicans had been decimated in the 1974 midterm elections and had lost the 1976 presidential election to Jimmy Carter, albeit narrowly. Some talked of abandoning the party and forming a new party to supplant it. While the actual situation was probably not that desperate, the GOP had, at the very least, hit a very rough patch after a promising turnaround.

The 1978 elections changed much of that picture and put Republicans back on the road to long term success. More specifically, they set the stage for the ascent of Ronald Reagan to the presidency.

The campaign saw a number of new features. The National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) became active, targeting a number of liberal Democratic incumbents with hard-hitting independent expenditures. Under the leadership of Bill Brock, the Republican National Committee began investing heavily in state legislative races, both to build a "farm team" for future races and to begin positioning Republicans for the post-1980 redistricting wars.

Several issues were prominent during the campaign, but three stood out. One was tax cuts. Republicans broadly embraced the notion of across-the-board income tax cuts, an idea the Carter White House strongly resisted. Democrats who were up for election, however, were carried along. Weeks before election day, both the House and the Senate passed a version of the Kemp-Roth tax cut, only to see the White House force it out in conference committee with a veto threat. At roughly the same time, under electoral pressure, Congress passed and Carter signed the Steiger Amendment cutting capital gains taxes significantly. In specific races, Bill Bradley faced unexpectedly stiff opposition for a Senate seat from New Jersey by a candidate (Jeffrey Bell) who embraced Kemp-Roth and forced Bradley to adopt his own $25 billion tax cut proposal.

Another key issue was government spending. With inflation moving toward a gallop, Republicans called for government frugality and many Democrats followed suit.

Finally, foreign policy gained more attention than in recent elections. In particular, Republicans gained traction by calling for a tougher line vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Jimmy Carter himself ultimately agreed to a modest defense spending increase.

On election day, Republicans gained 15 House seats and three Senate seats. By historical standards, these were relatively small gains. However, a fixation on numbers is deceptive. In the Senate, five prominent liberal Democrats were defeated for reelection, including Dick Clark of Iowa, Floyd Haskell of Colorado, and Thomas McIntyre of New Hampshire, who had been expected to serve as the administration’s point man in the Senate whenever SALT II proceeded to the ratification debate. Ten new Senators were deemed more conservative than their predecessors; only four were more liberal than their predecessors. In the House, nearly all of the 77 freshmen across party lines were committed to tax and spending cuts.

At the state level, Brock’s attention paid off. Republicans gained six governorships—including those in Texas and Pennsylvania—and about 300 state legislative seats. Through statewide initiatives, the tax revolt gained tremendous momentum; the example set by California voters when they passed Proposition 13 in June 1978 was followed by the success of twelve out of sixteen tax and spending limits on the ballot in November.

Although GOP congressional gains were modest, the campaign and election shifted the national agenda in important ways. Newsweek noted at the time that "[t]he real message of the
All in all, the 1978 election dramatically raised the profile of the tax-and-spending issue, drove (as it was driven by) a new and more conservative policy climate, and highlighted the vulnerability of liberal Democratic Senators from not-so-liberal states, a phenomenon that would cost Democrats control of the Senate two years later. In many respects, 1978 can be considered the opening of the Reagan revolution, in the same way that 1910 anticipated Wilson and 1930 anticipated FDR.

1994 Republicans End Long Journey in the Wilderness

When Bill Clinton won the presidential election of 1992, restoring unified Democratic control of government for the first time in a dozen years, some observers detected the death of Reaganism and the onset of a long winter for Republican fortunes. Many had forgotten the admonition of congressional scholar Thomas Mann, who had argued in the late 1980s that "Republicans probably must lose a presidential election in order to position themselves to take a majority of the House seats."

Clinton entered office in a somewhat precarious position, having won only 43 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race. He proceeded to dig a deeper hole for himself by attempting to impose openly practicing gays on the military and ramming through Congress—by a one-vote margin with no Republicans in favor—a budget bill that included a large tax increase. He chose to deemphasize welfare reform, an issue that had helped distinguish him as a "New Democrat" in 1992, while offering a universal health care plan so expensive and so byzantine in its organization that it was easily targeted as a big government boondoggle. The Democratic Congress never brought it to a vote.

In the meantime, that Congress had distinguished itself by a number of scandals and other questionable activities, including the House bank scandal, the House post office scandal, and an unpopular pay raise. The approval rating of Congress fell below 20 percent. Republicans, inspired by Newt Gingrich, became more aggressive in Congress.

As the elections of 1994 drew close, it was clear the political terrain favored the Republicans, and that Democrats had severely underestimated how much Reaganesque limited-government sentiment remained submerged in the electorate. Not least, the 19 percent who voted for Ross Perot in 1992 were leaning Republican on the basis of budget issues and distrust of inside-the-beltway power.

Republicans sought to take full advantage of the political atmosphere by nationalizing the election around the "Contract with America," a ten-point list of policy proposals that House Republican candidates promised to bring to a vote within the first 100 days of achieving a majority. (Interestingly, Richard Nixon advised the GOP to forego a positive program and simply try to turn the election into a referendum against Clinton.) Those proposals included a balanced budget and balanced budget amendment, tax cuts for families and investors, national missile defense, and reforms like term limits for members of Congress. Polls showed that a minority of Americans actually knew anything about the Contract, but polls also showed that Americans supported the content of most of the planks. By running on the Contract—no matter
how many or how few voters had heard of it—Republicans put themselves in a position to claim a mandate for their policies if they won.

For his part, Bill Clinton eventually rose to the bait and helped Republicans nationalize the election by conceding that the vote was a national choice between his leadership and a return to Reaganism.

When votes were tallied, Republicans did much better than most pundits had predicted. They gained eight Senate seats and 52 House seats, putting them in charge of both houses of Congress for the first election since 1952. They also gained eleven governorships, defeating big-name Democrats like Mario Cuomo of New York and Ann Richards of Texas (defeated by George W. Bush), and about 500 state legislative seats and 19 legislative chambers. This gave the GOP a majority of governorships and parity in legislatures.

Republicans in the 104th Congress came charging hard out of the gate, and for most of 1995 Clinton was on the defensive. They forced Clinton to the right on several issues; by the 1996 state of the union address, he declared "the era of big government is over." In perhaps the two most important policy shifts, Clinton was forced to accept the principle of a balanced budget, and he was forced to agree to a sweeping welfare reform measure after having vetoed it twice.

At the same time, Clinton—with the help of his maladroit opponents—carefully picked confrontations with Congress. Most notably, he allowed the federal government to shut down twice rather than sign Republican appropriations measures. He successfully framed the vetoes and the shutdowns as a moderate President taking a stand against an extreme Congress.

In both respects, Clinton imitated Harry Truman, who had made great use of confrontation with the 80th Congress but also undercut the Republican case against himself by adapting and shifting right with Congress on a number of key issues.

In the end, Clinton won re-election in 1996 in no small part because he lost in 1994. Congress remained in GOP hands for the next decade and has yet to be dislodged, though of course the 2006 elections may change that.

The status of 1994 as the most recent big "change" election has elicited a large number of commentaries on the question of whether 2006 might be another 1994. There are clearly some structural similarities, including the President’s low approval rating, Congress’s low approval rating, and the fact that almost all of the incumbents in close races are from the majority party. Another similarity is that a Democratic takeover of one or both houses of Congress might be premature from the standpoint of its presidential hopes; one can assume that the last two years of the Bush administration will be used by Bush and Karl Rove to confront and embarrass Democrats and lay the groundwork for a Republican comeback in 2008.

Three major differences are also present. First, the barrier to a big shift in House seats represented by gerrymandered districts has grown considerably since 1994 (though Democrats also need fewer seats). Second, in 1994, national security was a very low priority issue for most voters, and the party in power did not have the weapon at its disposal of being able to plausibly charge that a shift in party control would endanger national safety. Finally, unlike Republicans in 1994, Democrats in 2006 have no coherent positive message. This may make some difference on Election Day, and will make a bigger difference after Election Day if Democrats gain control of one or both houses. Republicans, who had to operate with a small majority after 1994, had the advantage of working with a plan already in place. Democrats have no such plan to hold their caucus together. Furthermore, although Clinton tried to paint them as extreme, Republicans could always point out that their program had been vetted by the voters on Election Day. House
Democrats, who are almost certainly farther to the left of the median voter than Republicans were to the right in 1995, will have no such cover. Indeed, if they do what they really want to do—try to impeach Bush, cancel all of the tax cuts, and impose a unilateral withdrawal from Iraq—they will have to answer a double charge, that they are both extremists and deceivers.

Andrew Busch’s editorials were posted at www.ashbrook.org

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- The New Deal Comes to a Screeching Halt in 1938, May 2006
- 1966 Midterm Foreshadows Republican Era, July 2006
- 1974 Midterms Bolster Liberalism in Congress, August 2006
- 1994 Republicans End Long Journey in the Wilderness, October 2006

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