

Elections 2002

Voters Take Control

Well, that's the idea, anyway—the voters taking control, that is, of the governance of their nation, as they are supposed to do every Election Day.

Certainly, the Florida debacle in the last national elections should have made clear to one and all that citizens do, indeed, have a voice through the ballot box, and that every vote really does count. And, despite some cynicism over whether elections make the government pay attention to what they think, Americans are all but unanimous in agreeing that voting is an important part of patriotism.

But only the elections themselves will tell how well the former lesson has been learned, and how truly the latter is taken to heart. While 84% now say they plan to vote in November, turnout for the last midterm election in 1998 was estimated at a paltry 36%. And while three-quarters of the public claim actually to have voted for president in 2000, the final tally showed ballots cast by only around 51%. Actions speak louder than public opinion polls, apparently.

Of course, America—and Americans—have changed since the last time the nation lined up at the polls, and the turnout story may end up being different this time around. As we go to press, however, the political situation itself is surprisingly unchanged. According to CNN senior political analyst Bill Schneider, “Things... look more or less the same as they did on November 7, 2000, which is remarkable given what's happened in the country—particularly last September.”

As control of the Congress continues to rest on the tiniest of margins, Americans remain closely divided on which party they would like to see come out ahead—nearly identical percentages say it would be better or worse for the country, respectively, if either Democrats or Republicans take control. (The bad news for the parties is that half said “worse” in both cases, as opposed to the little more than a third who said “better.”)

The parties are seen as being equally competent to handle such important issues as the federal budget, regulating Wall Street, and education, but the wild card could be the one area in which the Republicans come out decisively ahead: defense and the war on terrorism.

Even this may not carry an inordinate amount of weight, though, despite whatever worries the public has about national security. For one thing, when given a choice among issues, registered voters still emphasize the economy and jobs above all else. For another, national issues in general come in third, behind character or experience and state or local issues, when voters are asked what would make the biggest difference in how they vote for Congress in their districts.

The picture is complicated; the national stakes are high. And while pollsters might prognosticate now about the outcomes of individual races, the larger significance of the 2002 elections may, like the presidential race of 2000, remain too close to call until the votes are in.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, *Editor*

