



Politically Speaking

By Howard L. Reiter

Murdering the Midterm Myth

Or, Come home, Newt, all is forgiven

In November 1998, for the first time since 1934 and only the second time since the Civil War, the president's party gained seats in the US House of Representatives in the off-year elections. Four years later, a different president's party made gains in the House and enjoyed a two-seat gain in the Senate, which gave it control.

Were these elections flukes, or is it time to retire the hitherto ironclad rule that the party of the president—unless he is FDR—loses seats in the House? Or is it, as Rhodes Cook put it in the November/December issue of *Public Perspective*, “an open question how much history still applies in midterm elections”? I think history no longer applies, and here are the reasons why.

Observers of electoral politics have long been intrigued by the connection between how well an incumbent president ran and how many seats his party lost two years later. Landslide presidents like FDR in 1936, Eisenhower in 1956, and LBJ in 1964 saw their opponents make major gains in the House two years later. But the parties of JFK and Nixon, who won razor-thin victories in 1960 and 1968 respectively, suffered little erosion in the subsequent off-year.

Political scientists came up with several overlapping explanations for this pattern:

- Presidents make enemies, and voters who are unhappy with the state of affairs take it out on the president's party in the off-year. The better he ran, the more diverse his coalition and the more people he ends up antagonizing.

- Landslide presidents have long coattails, and pull in many co-partisans. When the president is not on the ballot two years later, those who were carried into office no longer have his help. Presidents without coattails leave fewer members of their party high and dry.

- Presidential elections have much higher voter turnout than off-year elections do. Landslide presidents draw to the polls many voters with limited interest in politics who like the winner. Two years later, they stay home, leaving the president's co-partisans to sink or swim. In close presidential elections, the casual voters do not heavily favor one candidate over the other, so their absence two years later does not affect the outcome very much.

Such explanations have one thing in common: an electorate with stable partisan identities. Only voters who pay attention to parties try to punish presidents by voting against members of his party; and voters who turn out in both presidential election years and off-years stick with their parties. However, as we know, many voters are far less tied to parties than they used to be.

As a result, there has been great erosion in the connection between a president's margin of victory and how his party does in the off-year. After about 1968, the correlation between the two virtually disappeared. Ronald Reagan won a landslide victory in 1984, but his party lost only five seats in the House two years later. Bill Clinton won by a modest margin in 1992, but in 1994 his party suffered the greatest losses since the 1940s. According to Cook, “What ebb and flow there has been in recent elections has had a nickel and dime quality to it,” except for 1994.

Cook attributed the vanishing coattail effect to the ability of members of Congress to run ahead of the top of the ticket, which is another manifestation of the decline in partisanship: candidates can build their own networks separate from their parties, and voters behave accordingly.

If voters no longer seem to be responding to the president's victory margin in the off-year, what is influencing House returns? The answer seems clear: his approval ratings at the time of the off-year election. In 1998 and 2002, Clinton and George W. Bush enjoyed Gallup approval ratings in the 60s. Out-party gains under Reagan in 1982 and Clinton in 1994 occurred when the chief executive's ratings were in the 40s.

In short, coattail effects and approval ratings have switched places as correlates of off-year House results. This makes sense for an electorate that is less moored to party identification, and therefore more open to short-term influences like how the president is doing at the moment.

The good news about 2002 for the Republicans is that their gains were due to Bush's high ratings (and his campaigning); the less good news is that their gains were not extraordinary.

So the next time—and there will be a next time, perhaps in 2006—the president's party gains in the House, let's not be so shocked. ●

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