

Election '98: The Calm Before the Storm

By Charles E. Cook, Jr.

Handicapping elections, like forecasting the weather, requires analyzing both historical patterns and current conditions, and then, based on experience, making predictions. While it's anything but exact, it's possible with some degree of accuracy to identify the seats solidly in each party's column, the ones likely to remain with each party, where one side has some advantage, and, finally, which seats will likely be "too close to call."

With those caveats firmly in place, the 1998 midterm elections will likely be fairly boring at the national level, but some interesting individual contests are in the making that will pacify political junkies until the more exciting 2000 campaigns.

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Is All Politics Local? Yes, Except When It's Not

The first step in analyzing upcoming elections is to look for any strong, national "macro" political dynamic that could tilt the playing field in favor of one party in the closest races. If no such dynamic exists then it is more likely that an election will play out on a more "micro" political basis in which the results will be dictated race by race. The late Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill was fond of saying that "all politics is local," meaning that elections are largely driven by the nature of the state or district, the local circumstances, and the candidates and their campaigns. My own less-than-profound variation of this adage is that "all politics is local, except when it is not." In two-thirds of our national elections, all politics is local, but in the remaining third there is some degree of "nationalization." In such elections, it is as if an invisible hand is pushing the candidates of one party forward and holding those of the other back. In the 1958, 1964, 1966, 1974, 1980, and 1994 elections, strong partisan, national dynamics were at work that made politics anything but local. In both 1990 and 1992, we saw a more subtle but still impressive dynamic—an anti-incumbent mood—that caused the House re-election rate for both parties to drop simultaneously, a movement unprecedented in modern history. Usually when the re-election rate for incumbents in one party drops, it increases for the other party. The absence of this dynamic creates more "localized" elections.

There also have been two recent cases in which the dynamics shifted late in the campaign, creating profound changes in the national outcome. When President Bush in effect broke his "read my lips, no new taxes" campaign pledge in 1990, Republican candidates across the country saw their support levels in the polls suddenly drop. However, Republicans' prospects improved the weekend before the election when

Secretary of State Jim Baker successfully shifted public focus to the increased likelihood of war in the Persian Gulf.

Another example of a shift in political dynamics late in the campaign occurred in late 1995 and early 1996 when Democrats argued that House Speaker Newt Gingrich and congressional Republicans had "gone too far" and a strong Democratic tide began building. Democrats accused the GOP of attacking what they called "M2E2," (Medicare, Medicaid, education and the environment). Democratic momentum, however, largely dissipated in the final two weeks of the campaign when the M2E2 message ran out of steam and public attention shifted to the unfolding Indonesian campaign finance scandal. In addition, Republicans held their national money back until the end, employing a "don't fire 'til you see the whites of their eyes" strategy. Finally, the Republican message "Don't give Bill Clinton a blank check" played on a growing preference among some voters for divided government. In the end, the playing field ended up fairly level, but most Republican pollsters conceded privately that party losses would have been heavy if the election had been two weeks earlier.

A Complacent Electorate

Virtually every identifiable factor this year argues that 1998 will be a status quo election. The outlook is for minimal changes in the House and perhaps some gains for Republicans in the Senate and among the governorships.

The first major factor is the economy. With the current period of economic expansion now seven-years-old, Americans are feeling more secure in their jobs or businesses and there are few signs that the economy will weaken by November.

The second factor, which is related to the overall economy, is the national mood. Pollsters measure the public's mood using the ubiquitous "right direction/wrong track" question. By this measurement, the public is more optimistic today than any time since the period immediately following the Persian Gulf war.

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The third factor favoring the status quo is the balanced federal budget Congress passed and the President signed last summer, the first in 30 years. While many Americans remain skeptical about whether the budget is indeed balanced, this development can't help but benefit incumbents in the fall.

Fourth, after years of public derision about politicians which was triggered by countless negative stories such as the parade of scandals that included the House Bank and Post Office, the Keating Five, David Durenberger, Jim Wright, Tony Coelho, and Dan Rostenkowski, Congress has been significantly less controversial over the last two years. The reward has been the highest job approval ratings for the institution in modern times.

Finally, neither party is engaged in the self-destructive behavior the Democrats pursued in 1993 and 1994 and the Republicans, in 1995 and early 1996. To a large extent, Democrats are still licking their wounds from their catastrophic 1994 election losses. Four years ago, voters handed them the most significant defeat that either party has suffered in many years, losing 52 seats and control of the 435-member House, eight seats and their majority in the 100-member Senate, 10 governorships, and hundreds of lesser, "down ballot" offices. Voters were hostile toward Democrats that year; they were disappointed and angry over President Clinton and his administration's first two years when very public examples of ineptitude and serious political miscalculations occurred almost daily. Contributing to the voters' ire was the perception that the President, his administration, and the Democratic Congress were too liberal with the controversial health care and crime-fighting packages. Today most Democrats in Congress would at least privately concede that serious mistakes were made during their last two years in power and, as a result, they are acting in a much more deliberate fashion today.

Republicans too have felt the sting of the voters' whip. An impression among many voters is that Republicans "went too far" to the right after their 1994 victory and were too aggressive in their stated desire to dismantle or sharply reduce the size, spending, and functions of the federal government. A number of substantive items attempted by the new Republican-controlled Congress alienated voters, particularly moderate and swing voters. The attempt to repeal the ban on assault rifles and the blame for the "government shutdown" stand out. But it was the overheated Republican rhetoric in 1995 and early 1996 that came across as cold, mean-spirited, and narrow-minded to many swing voter groups.

Although a myriad of controversies continue to surround President Clinton, his job approval ratings remain strong, ranging from 57 to 68%, suggesting that at least for now, there is no guilt by association likely to plague Democrats this fall. Even Speaker Gingrich's job approval ratings have risen in recent months. In short, the American electorate seems more complacent than we've seen in a decade and 1998 shows all the signs of being very much a status quo election.

At the same time, a curious equilibrium has developed between the two parties, with each having substantial advantages in specific regions and states, but overall they are fairly evenly matched in strength nationwide. In this sense, the 1996 elections were inconclusive: Democrats won the presidency but Republicans gained two Senate seats thus building a 55-45 majority; the GOP in the House lost nine seats and nearly lost control; Republicans held their 32-18 majority among governorships although Democrats held an albeit narrow advantage in state legislative seats and in party identification among voters.¹ Indeed the popular vote for the House of Representatives of 48.9% for Republicans and 48.6% for Democrats was

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the closest and first time in modern history that neither party received a majority of the popular vote, a symbol that there is no longer a majority party in this country.

Little Movement in the House of Representatives

Although the current Republican majority (226-205, with

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four vacancies) is the narrowest since 1955, Democrats face an exceedingly uphill struggle in their efforts to recapture control of the House. In effect, the House is split 227-208 because one of the four vacant seats seems certain to remain in the GOP column while the other three are in solidly Democratic districts. While the 11-seat shift necessary for Republicans to lose their majority seems relatively minor, the lack of any political winds for either party and the remarkably symmetrical number of vulnerable seats for each party, both open and incumbent, suggest that gains and losses for each side will largely cancel out.

One major difference between the 1998 congressional elections and the previous four is the smaller number of competitive races. And, a smaller playing field results in less volatility. In the worst years for House incumbents, the re-election rate drops as low as 88%; the highest rates of 98 and 98.3% were recorded in 1986 and 1988 when six incumbents were defeated each year. This year the strong economy, high public optimism, record congressional job approval numbers, and what appears to be fewer strong challengers suggests that the re-election rate will be in the range of 97 or 98% or perhaps even higher.

While both parties have managed to recruit a number of strong challengers, neither side has succeeded in coming up with as many blue-chip prospects as in recent years. Potential challengers see the same dynamics at work as most analysts: this is not a good year to take on a sitting member of Congress. Hence, smaller numbers of high-quality challengers have stepped forward than either party would like.

Looking at the 227 Republican-held seats, there are only 26 incumbents and nine open seats that seem to be in varying degrees of jeopardy. At this point, three seats look likely to fall into the Democratic column, seven appear to be close races, and 25 are vulnerable but favor the GOP. The three likely to fall to the Republicans are all open seats:

California's first district, Nevada's first, and Wisconsin's second.

Among the 208 Democratic seats, 29 incumbents and nine open seats are in some danger. Of these 38 vulnerable Democratic seats, four currently seem

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likely to switch into the GOP column, seven are expected to be extremely close, and another 26 will be competitive but Democrats are expected to hang on. The four seats likely to switch to the GOP side are all open seats: California's third and 36th districts, North Carolina's third, and Pennsylvania's 15th.

With no identifiable political winds or tides likely to push many of these seats in any direction en masse, and with the rather symmetrical nature of the number of vulnerable seats, the view that this will be an election year of offsetting losses in the House is simply reinforced.

The House contests in 2000, however, appear likely to be much more interesting, with many of the Republicans first elected in 1994 having made self-imposed, three-term (six year) limitation pledges which they will either honor or break. Obviously the former creates a large number of open seats among the 52 previously held by the Democrats until 1994. The latter creates political problems for the incumbents as many ran with term limitations as the centerpiece of their original congressional campaigns. Furthermore, with the Republican Conference having adopted a three-term limit for committee chairmen in 1995, 17 standing com-

mittee chairmen will have to hand over their gavels in 2001, with the vast majority expected to simply retire instead. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer, for example, has already indicated his intention to retire in 2000. While most of the seats of these

chairmen are in solidly Republican districts—the notable exception being Jim Leach's Iowa district—this development doesn't increase the risk of Republicans losing the House, but it does create turnover, eat up campaign money, and foster the normal chaos created by large numbers of open seats.

GOP Likely to Gain Senate Seats

In the Senate, Republicans currently hold a 55- to 45-seat advantage and Democrats have more seats at risk in 1998. They have 18 up this year compared to 16 for the GOP. Like the House, there are fewer than normal retirements in the Senate, with only five senators voluntarily stepping down—three Democrats and two Republicans.

The big question for the 1998 Senate races is not whether Republicans will gain seats, but rather, how many? Behind closed doors top Democratic campaign officials acknowledge that their goal for the 1998 cycle is to break even in the Senate, which could leave them within range of regaining the majority in 2000. For this year, Republicans appear to have six Senate seats in varying degrees of jeopardy while Democrats have nine. Republicans have an open seat in Indiana, where incumbent

Dan Coats is not seeking re-election, that appears likely to fall into Democratic hands. Presumptive Democratic nominee, former Governor Evan Bayh, is the prohibitive favorite in the general election there.

The GOP's next most vulnerable seat, and the Republican incumbent most at-risk, is New York's Alfonse D'Amato. 1996 polls showed that he had the lowest job approval ratings of any member of the Senate. Having said that, D'Amato is a consummate politician and should not be underrated. Still, he will face a tough race, most likely from either former Representative (and 1984 vice-presidential nominee) Geraldine Ferraro or Representative Charles Schumer, the two main Democratic contenders.

The third most vulnerable Republican incumbent is Kit Bond of Missouri who faces a stiff challenge from state Attorney General Jay Nixon. Three other GOP incumbents face credible challengers but are considered favorites: Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, Paul Coverdell of Georgia, and Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina. Coverdell and Faircloth are facing wealthy Democrats who are spending heavily from their own financial resources. Upsets are possible, but all three Republicans remain favorites for now.

Democratic Senate worries start in Ohio where John Glenn is retiring and Governor George Voinovich is favored to win the seat for the GOP. While Democrats are fielding a very credible challenger in former Cuyahoga County Executive Mary Boyle, Voinovich be-

gins with a wide lead in the polls and a significantly larger war chest of campaign funds. Ethical clouds involving a former Voinovich chief of staff who was recently sentenced to prison and allegations of wrongdoing by Voinovich's brother and state contractors tempers some but not all of the governor's big advantages coming into this race.

The second and third most vulnerable seats for Democrats are open seats in Kentucky where Wendell Ford is retiring and in Arkansas where Dale Bumpers is stepping down. While both states have traditionally been Democratic strongholds, each also has become more competitive in recent years. At this point, they should be considered even-money contests, though primary elections must be held to ascertain the nominees for both parties in the two states. Of the two, Kentucky appears to be the greater risk for Democrats.

The fourth and fifth most vulnerable Democratic seats are both held by incumbents, Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois and Harry Reid of Nevada. A March 17 GOP primary picked Illinois state Senator Peter Fitzgerald, a wealthy conservative, as the Republican nominee over state Comptroller Loleta Didrickson, a moderate backed by the party establishment. While arguably Didrickson might have been the formidable opponent to Moseley-Braun, Fitzgerald and his personal war chest remain a very real threat.

In Nevada, Reid will face second-term Republican Representative John Ensign, whose congressional district is made up largely of Clark County (Las

Vegas), the most Democratic territory in the state. This provides the GOP challenger with an opportunity to eat into Reid's Democratic base while potentially carrying the balance of the state, which is heavily Republican. Polls show the race already close even though Ensign is relatively unknown outside of his district. Somewhat stronger but still at risk are Senators Barbara Boxer of California, Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, and Patty Murray of Washington state.

Taken together, Republicans look likely to score a net gain of a seat or two, giving them a strong majority but not close to the 60 seats necessary to shut off debate on a party line vote if Democrats seek to filibuster a measure. It also is far short of the 67 needed to override a presidential veto.

The Senate fight in 2000 is likely to be more challenging for Republicans when their whole 1994 freshman class of seats comes back up before the voters, and with the potential for a large number of retirements. Both scenarios create a wide range of possible outcomes.

While 1998 is unlikely to become a momentous election, it does feature a number of interesting and hotly contested individual races. Still, on a national level, the early maneuvers for the 2000 Democratic and Republican presidential nominations are likely to dominate national political coverage, making the upcoming elections more of a pro forma intermediate development than a watershed event.

Endnote:

¹The 18 non-Republican governorships are held by 17 Democrats and 1 Independent.



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