

By Rhodes Cook

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Fit To Be Tied

The battle to control Congress in 2002

One of the working assumptions about this year’s midterm elections is that whatever changes take place on Capitol Hill will be incremental in number. But even if that turns out to be the case, the 2002 congressional elections will be much more than a pit stop between presidential campaigns.

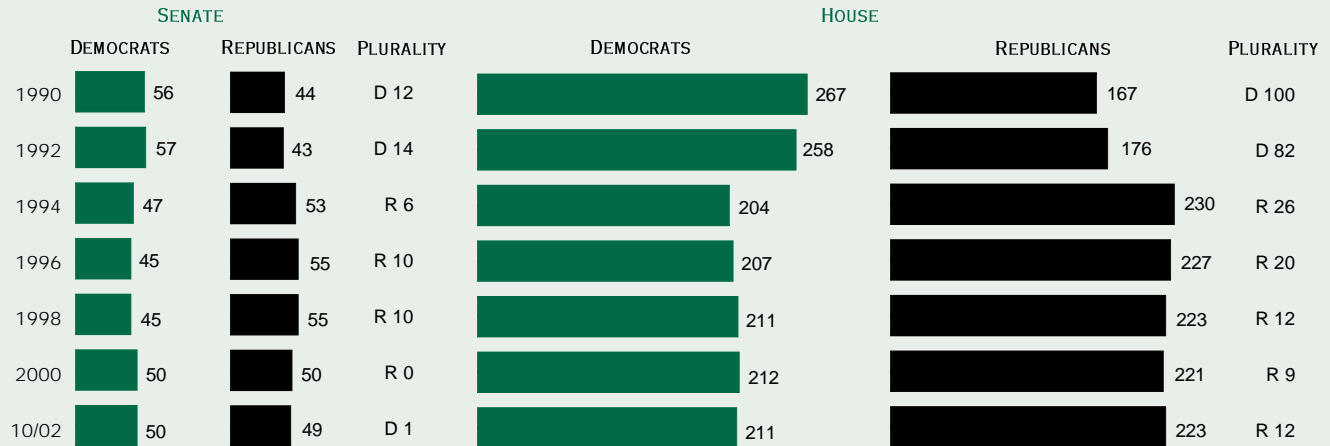
When the partisan balance is as close as it is now—a Republican majority of five seats in the House, a Democratic edge of one seat in the Senate—it does not take much of a change to have major ramifications.

And there are significant forces at play this year that could alter the composition of Congress not just by a little, but by a lot—a result that might push one party, or the other, into clear control on Capitol Hill and possibly move the nation into a new political era.

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Figure 1
The Evolution of a Tie

Since 1990, the Democrats have controlled Congress for a few years, followed by the Republicans for a few years. Since mid-2001, Democrats have run the Senate and Republicans the House of Representatives. What's next?



Note: Totals reflect the results of each election with the exception of the election eve figures from early October 2002. In that set of House totals, vacant seats are assigned to the party that last held them. Republicans had control of the Senate after the 2000 election, with GOP vice president Dick Cheney available to cast tie-breaking votes. Democrats gained control of the Senate in the spring of 2001 when Republican Jim Jeffords of Vermont became an independent.
Source: *Vital Statistics on Congress 1999-2000.*

For much of the twentieth century, change in Washington's partisan dynamic moved at a plodding pace. For most of the first third of the century, the Republicans controlled both the White House and Congress. For most of the second third, the Democrats controlled both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. And for the quarter century that followed, from 1969 through 1992, the nation's capital frequently boasted "divided government," with a Republican president and a Democratic Congress.

Yet the back and forth of national politics has accelerated over the past decade, with neither party able to gain a firm grip on either the White House or Congress. The result, since 1992, has been five different combinations running the federal government: a Republican president (George Bush) and a Democratic Congress; a Democratic president (Bill Clinton) and a Democratic Congress; a Democratic president (Clinton) and a Republican Congress; a Republican

president (George W. Bush) and a Republican Congress; and most recently, a Republican president, a Republican House and a Democratic Senate (see Figure 1).

In short, the virtual tie that exists now has been building over the past decade, to the point that if one adds together the nationwide House vote for the five elections conducted since the last round of congressional redistricting in 1992, the result is a virtual dead heat. A total of 203.9 million votes were cast for Republican House candidates and 202.5 million for Democrats, resulting in a GOP plurality of just 1.4 million votes out of more than 400 million cast in national elections from 1992 through 2000.

But if the past decade tells us anything, it is that the political dynamic is always in motion, always changing. And each party has some significant advantages this fall as it seeks to break the partisan balance on Capitol Hill in its favor.

An arrow in the Democrats' quiver is the simple matter of history. The president's party in Congress almost always loses ground in midterm elections, an average of 25 seats in the House and four seats in the Senate each time since the end of World War II.

If the focus is only on postwar Republican presidents at their first midterm—Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954, Richard Nixon in 1970, Ronald Reagan in 1982, and George Bush in 1990—the average GOP loss is reduced to 16 seats in the House and none in the Senate. Yet even a replication of those numbers this fall would not be good enough for congressional Republicans either to hold the House or regain the Senate.

Still, it is an open question how much history still applies in midterm elections. In the last such vote in 1998, when President Clinton's impending impeachment was the focus of attention, Democrats actually gained five seats in the House and held their

Figure 2

Popular President, Party Benefits

Generally, the higher a president's job approval rating during the midterm election year, the better his party does in November. The figure below indicates job approval ratings for postwar presidents on election eve, and the change in congressional seats for the president's party.

	APPROVAL RATING	CHANGE IN SEATS FOR PRESIDENT'S PARTY		
		ELECTION	SENATE	HOUSE
PRESIDENTS WITH HIGH APPROVAL RATINGS				
Bill Clinton (D)	66%	1998	0	+5
Ronald Reagan (R)	63%	1986	-8	-5
John F. Kennedy (D)	61%	1962	+3	-4
Dwight D. Eisenhower (R)	61%	1954	-1	-18
PRESIDENTS WITH MODERATE APPROVAL RATINGS				
George Bush (R)	58%	1990	-1	-8
Richard M. Nixon (R)	58%	1970	+2	-12
Dwight D. Eisenhower (R)	57%	1958	-13	-48
Gerald R. Ford (R)	54%	1974	-5	-48
PRESIDENTS WITH LOW APPROVAL RATINGS				
Jimmy Carter (D)	49%	1978	-3	-15
Bill Clinton (D)	46%	1994	-8	-52
Lyndon B. Johnson (D)	44%	1966	-4	-47
Ronald Reagan (R)	42%	1982	+1	-26
Harry S. Truman (D)	39%	1950	-6	-29
Harry S. Truman (D)	33%	1946	-12	-45

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization. Congressional data are from *Vital Statistics on Congress 1999-2000*.

ground in the Senate. It marked the first time since the New Deal election of 1934 that the president's party had not lost House seats in midterm voting, and was only the fourth time since 1934 that the president's party had not lost Senate seats in a midterm election.

Clinton's name was not on the ballot in 1998. But ironically, throughout the year the beleaguered president enjoyed some of the highest job approval numbers of his administration. On the eve

of the 1998 balloting, the Gallup poll registered two-thirds of Americans approving of his presidency (if not his personal behavior). And by and large, the higher a president's approval numbers, the better his party's showing in the midterm voting (see Figure 2).

This year, Bush's high approval ratings should be an asset to congressional Republicans. He began the year at 84% in the Gallup poll, the highest opening mark for any president in a

midterm election since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942. Although Bush's popularity slipped a little throughout the spring and summer, it has remained high. And regardless of where he stands in the eyes of the voters come Election Day, he has already proved a mighty boon for Republicans at the cash register, raising tens of millions of dollars for GOP candidates.

One of the most compelling questions to be answered by this November's vote is whether the unusual strength shown by the president's party in 1998 was an aberration or is the new norm for midterm elections.

Certainly, it seems, congressional politics has been in a "dead ball" era. Gone is the old quality of ebb and flow, with scores of House members pulled into office on the coattails of a popular president, only to be defeated in the succeeding midterm election when he is not on the ballot.

What ebb and flow there has been in recent elections has had a nickel and dime quality to it, with the con-

spicuous exception of the political tsunami in 1994 that swept the Republicans into power on both sides of Capitol Hill. With easy targets on the decline and the cost of campaigns on the rise, the parties hotly contest fewer and fewer districts.

That is the case again this year, although redistricting adds an element of unpredictability to the House elections. Except in the seven states with a single representa-

tive, all House members must run this fall in districts that have been at least slightly altered to reflect population changes over the past decade.

That roils the normally settled waters at least a bit for House incumbents and could put a few more at risk than would normally be the case. In each of the past two decades, more incumbents were defeated in the post-redistricting years (1982 and 1992) than in any other election (when combining both primary and general election defeats).

If there is similar volatility this year, either party could emerge as the prime beneficiary. In 1982, the “out” party (the Democrats) gained House seats. In 1992, it was the president’s party (the Republicans) that gained seats.

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On the Senate side, the conventional wisdom this year is that the terrain favors the Republicans. The GOP has more seats to defend—20 to the Democrats’ 14. But 23 of the 34 seats will be contested in states won by Bush in 2000, only 11 in states won by Democratic nominee Al Gore.

Yet the correlation between Senate and presidential voting is far from perfect. Two loyally Republican states at the presidential level, North and South Dakota, have four Democratic senators between them, led by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota. Meanwhile, Maine and Pennsylvania, which voted twice for Clinton

and once for Gore, each have a pair of Republican senators.

Altogether, more than two-thirds of the Senate seats that switched party hands in the past three midterm elections (11 of 15) were in states that were carried by the other party’s presidential candidate in the previous election. That includes six seats the Republicans picked up in 1994 in states that had been won by Clinton two years earlier. Without those half dozen seats, Republicans would not have won a Senate majority in 1994.

The outcome of the 2002 elections will be heavily influenced by whether either party can win the “issues” debate. Democrats are expected to run best if the spotlight is on domestic issues, from the fate of Social Security and prescription drug

benefits to corporate wrongdoing and the nation’s struggling economy.

In the past quarter-century, the two biggest Democratic years came when Republican administrations were thrown on the defensive by the perception of recession. In 1982, the Democrats gained 26 House seats, the most for the party in any election since the Watergate year of 1974. In 1992, the Democrats won the White House for the first time since 1976.

But Republicans hope that international security will be on voters’ minds come November. Bush’s forceful response to the September 11 terrorist attacks has defined his presidency, in

much the same way that the Cuban missile crisis raised the stature of the young Democratic president, John F. Kennedy, in the fall of 1962.

The events of that October 40 years ago also dramatically affected the year’s elections, as the Democrats made the best midterm showing of any presidential party between 1934 and 1998. Altogether, the Democrats lost only four seats in the House, while gaining three in the Senate. If the Republicans could post similar numbers in November, they would hold the House and regain the Senate.

Ultimately, though, who wins depends on who votes, and the turnout for a midterm election is often little more than two-thirds as large as a presidential election. The rule of thumb is that participation in midterm elections is disproportionately skewed to older, more affluent, and better educated voters. Yet the electorate also shows a growing number of independents—swing voters, if you will—who are not closely identified with either party.

It does not take a big swing to have a dramatic effect on the composition of Congress. When the GOP made its historic breakthrough in 1994, there was a swing of just 6 percentage points in the congressional vote from two years earlier, when the Democrats firmly controlled Congress. The Democratic share of the nationwide House vote declined from 51% in 1992 to 45% in 1994, while the Republicans’ share rose a similar amount.

It was not a large swing, but enough to end one political era on Capitol Hill and launch another.

It would require a much smaller swing than that this year to break the tie in favor of one party or the other. Anything like the 6 percentage-point swing of 1994 would likely usher in a new political era where ties are not allowed. ●