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The 1998 Vote: Gauging Mid-Term Political Performances

By James A. Barnes

On April 21, a few days after the Easter Recess, National Republican Congressional Committee chairman John Linder, R-Ga., sent a letter to his colleagues warning that the party was “playing not to lose”—and thus in danger of “squandering” its chances to pick up House seats in the mid-term elections.

Linder’s apprehension proved prophetic: For the first time this century, the party out of power in the White House *lost* seats in the incumbent’s second mid-term election. The average loss in all post World War II mid-term contests was 28 seats; the Democrats gained 5.

Even though he expressed concerns in April, Linder didn’t actually expect them to be fulfilled. At a Capitol Hill luncheon one week before Election Day, he said that even under the most pessimistic conditions he could see the GOP doing no worse than an 8-seat *gain* in the House.

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The picture wasn’t much better in the Senate. Republicans who in September had talked of picking up 5 seats, enough to thwart a Democratic filibuster, were crestfallen when their 55-seat majority remained unchanged after the November 3 balloting.

Before exploring the reasons the results confounded expectations, I should note that the Republicans still did pretty well. They won a small plurality of the popular vote for the House of Representatives for the third time running. One has to go back to the 1920s to find such a string. They trailed by a narrow margin (900 thousand) in votes cast for senatorial candidates but led by a huge margin (4.7 million) in the gubernatorial vote.

“Prevent Defense” Again a Bad Call

Like the old line about the football team that plays “prevent defense”—it prevents you from winning—for almost the entire 1998 election cycle, Republicans adopted the

game plan that Linder feared, “playing not to lose.” Figuring that historical trends would combine with the general pro-incumbent environment and the financial advantages of their candidates, Republicans never built a distinctive and coherent political platform during their stewardship of the 105th Congress.

As the Voter News Service exit poll showed, the electorate favored Democrats on many issues. When voters were asked which of seven issues mattered most in how they decided to cast ballots in the House races, Democrats carried four—education, economy/jobs, Social Security, and health care—all by wide margins. Republicans only carried three: moral/ethical standards, taxes, and the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky matter. Two of those, morals and Lewinsky, had little to do with any GOP legislative record. On taxes, the GOP-led House only managed to pass an \$80 billion tax cut bill after months of internal party bickering—and it died in the Senate when Republican leaders declined to press the case.

Since early spring, GOP consultants quietly grouched that Republicans were letting this important issue slip away by their dithering on tax cuts. Last summer, Republican media consultant Mike Murphy pointedly compared the apparent success that the party’s governors in the East and Midwest were having touting tax cuts in

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their re-election campaigns with the GOP Congress's reluctance to embrace the issue. "If [Senate Majority Leader] Trent Lott [R-Ms.] came from a swing state we'd probably be for tax cuts more aggressively," jibed Murphy.

The Democrats' advantage on issues also figured in the close Senate races that Republicans lost. This pattern was a reversal from 1994, when the VNS exit poll found that a majority of the voters cited 5 out of 9 issues in the Republicans' favor in explaining which issues mattered most in casting their ballots.

Winning the Close Ones

With an advantage on the issues, Democrats won the close races in 1998, a far cry from the situation four years ago when they lost 52 seats and control of the House. That year, they lost 22 of the 31 open House seats they were defending. In 1998, they only lost 5 out of 17, while Republicans lost 6 out of 16. But even those statistics understate Democratic performance in close contests, where they carried the day. Respected congressional elections handicapper Charlie Cook, who writes for *National Journal*, calculated that of the true toss-up races, Democrats won 10 of the 13 seats they were defending, and Republicans only managed to hang on to 5 of their 13 toss-up seats.

In the Senate, the Democrats won 4 of their 5 seats rated as toss-ups by Cook, falling short only in Kentucky—and then by a hair. Meanwhile, they picked up two vulnerable Republican seats in New York and North Carolina. Among the governorships, the Democrats held on to 4 of their 5 toss-up contests and won three toss-up seats held by Republicans, including the top statehouse prize, California. The Democrats also snared Iowa's governorship, which Republicans had been expected to hold.

Many political operatives in Washington expected that the Republicans would be able to make better use of their financial advantages in close races. Operation Breakout, the national GOP advertising campaign that spent more than \$25 million on commercials, produced meager results. According to a *Hotline* analysis, those ads ran in 39 congressional districts where the seat was either open or held by a Democratic incumbent—but only six Republicans prevailed in those targeted contests. The NRCC spent some \$10 million on a "Hail Mary" ad blitz in the closing week of the campaign that sought to remind voters of the President's ethical problems. As such "pass" attempts often do, it fell incomplete.

In some states, increased black voter turnout certainly contributed to the close Democratic victories. For instance, in

two states where Democrats won some of their closest Senate victories, North and South Carolina, black turnout was above its 1992 levels. In North Carolina, blacks jumped from 15 to 20% of the voters and in South Carolina, black turnout rose from 21 to 25%. In both cases, North Carolina challenger, John Edwards, and South Carolina incumbent, Ernest F. Hollings, won better than 9 out of every 10 black votes cast.

Further, these Democrats also fared better among women voters and self-described independents than in 1992. That year, Hollings actually lost the vote of independents to Republican Thomas F. Hartnett, 49 to 51%. In 1998, he carried the independent vote, which increased from 24 to 27% of the electorate, by 52 to 44% over Republican Bob Inglis. Hollings' numbers among white women also improved slightly, from 39 to 42%, while his share among white men declined from 41 to 36%.

In the 1992 North Carolina Senate race, then-Republican challenger Lauch Faircloth ousted Democratic incumbent Terry Sanford and along the way carried white women, 58 to 42%, and only narrowly lost self-described independents to Sanford, 49 to 51%. This year, Democrat Edwards carried independents, 55 to 41%, and only narrowly lost white women, 48 to 50%.

Conversely, in Georgia, where black turnout soared from 18 to 29% of the electorate, and in Illinois, where it rose from

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14 to 17%, Republican candidates prevailed when the Democrats faltered among white women and independents. GOP incumbent Paul Coverdell saw his showing among white women increase from 54% in 1992 to 69% this year. His independent vote edged up from 49 to 51%. In Illinois, Republican challenger Peter Fitzgerald defeated Democratic incumbent Carol Mosely-Braun and won 57% of the vote of white women and 55% of the vote of independents. In 1992, Mosely-Braun had carried both of those groups with 51 and 58% of their votes, respectively.

The Monica Factor

The Lewinsky scandal had a roller coaster-like quality to

it. When it broke on the front page of *The Washington Post* on January 21, more than a few pundits predicted that the Clinton presidency was about to unravel. But less than a week later, with a well-received State of the Union speech and a powerful defense mounted by Hillary Rodham Clinton on NBC's *Today Show*, the President recovered.

Then there was the President's August 17 address to the nation hours after he had testified via closed circuit television to a grand jury in Washington probing the Lewinsky matter. It took only four minutes, but Clinton's dyspeptic tone and the negative reaction that followed had Democrats fearful that the election, now less than three months away, could be a disaster. But that was followed by public sentiment that the release of independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr's report on September 11, and the videotape of the President's grand jury testimony ten days later, were two X-rated salvos too many.

Throughout the controversy, there were warning signs that the GOP was not going to be able to cash in on the President's problems. Public opinion polls showed that the scandal had a clear partisan demarcation: Republicans generally supported Starr's investigation and wanted Clinton severely punished, while Democrats and independents thought the Starr probe was politically inspired and generally favored less drastic discipline for the President.

This put the GOP congressional leadership in a squeeze. Conservative Republican activists pushed the party to take a hard line against the President. Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson chided GOP leaders for "sitting in foxholes of political safety" and not calling for the President's ouster. In that climate mistakes were made, like the intemperate remarks by Clinton critic Representative Dan Burton, R-Ind., calling the President a "scumbag."

Many Republican political strategists felt that the better course was not to take the President on directly over the scandal, for fear of alienating swing voters. The tension between these two outlooks could be seen in House Speaker Newt Gingrich's comments. Not long after the Lewinsky matter erupted, Gingrich vowed that in every speech he gave he would bring up Clinton's ethical problems. Later he backed off and generally avoided discussing the scandal.

Where the Lewinsky affair seemed to have its most adverse affect on the

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Democrats was its domination of press coverage. This meant the Democrats were often unable to get much traction for their message in the media. One telling example came the day after the House adopted a Patients' Bill of Rights that Democrats thought was too weak. The Democrats' criticism of the legislation was barely heard because it came at the same time Starr had negotiated an immunity deal for Lewinsky's cooperation with his investigation. Out on the hustings, frustrated Democratic candidates found that reporters were more interested in their response to the latest turns in the scandal rather than in their stands on the issues.

Although Democrats didn't see their financial fortunes wracked by the Lewinsky controversy, it probably had a negative impact. In the summer, congressional Democrats and President Clinton agreed to a series of unity fundraising events that were supposed to raise \$18 million. In the end, the program only took in about \$13 million. The perception that the scandal would eventually hurt Democrats was particularly strong in Washington, and that damaged the party's ability to raise money among many of the Capital's elite, who are generally pragmatic contributors less swayed by ideology.

And while the President did attend party fundraisers, he was almost invisible in the fall. Except for appearances in strong Democratic states, Clinton mostly stayed off the political stump. White House aides asserted that this tactic was designed to conserve campaign funds that otherwise would have been used to pay the considerable expense of moving Clinton and his entourage on Air Force One. But that argument strained belief. With job approval ratings above 60% in most pre-election polls, it didn't make sense to keep a popular president who possesses enormous campaigning skills off the trail—particularly when Clinton had crisscrossed the country for Democratic candidates in the run-up to the 1994 midterm elections, when his popularity was languishing.

Evidence that the travel problem was political—and not financial—turned up in the *Field Poll* of California voters conducted September 27-October 3, right after the buoyant President had made a two-day trip to the state and attended several well-publicized fundraisers. The poll showed Clinton's job approval had declined. Moreover, the percentage of those who said he would not be an effective leader if he remained in office jumped to 38%, up from 30% in an August *Field* survey.

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Democratic strategists there also witnessed a similar disturbing decline in Clinton's standing in their own polls, sensing that the public was uncomfortable watching an ebullient President on the stump while he was professing shame over the Lewinsky matter. At the time, a California Democratic political consultant, who requested anonymity, noted this downturn and said voters want Clinton "staying contrite, not in a political guise. He is venturing somewhat close to the line of being seen as too cocky." He wondered if Clinton "can go anyplace" to rally the party faithful without alienating swing voters.

In any case, in the closing months, the President was largely missing in action from the campaign trail. But his absence was offset by the stepped-up travel schedule of Vice President Al Gore.

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Democrats Remain Relatively Unscathed By Clinton's Problems

At the end of the day, the controversy surrounding President Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky wasn't much of a drag on his party, which picked up 5 seats in the House. Voters had a more negative view of the President than the nation as a whole—the VNS exit poll put Clinton's job approval rating at 55%, compared to more than 60% in most pre- and post-election surveys—but voters did not support his impeachment or resignation.

Likewise, the exit poll found that 21% of those who cast ballots in House races said they did so to “express opposition to Bill Clinton,” while 18% of those responding said their votes were intended to “express support for Bill Clinton.” The overwhelming share of the voters, 60%, said “Clinton was not a factor” in their decision.

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year the national exit poll found majorities did not believe Clinton had told the truth about the Whitewater scandals (60%) and did not think he was honest and trustworthy (55%). Yet Democrats still managed to post a small gain in 10 House seats.

Indeed, Democrats contend that the Republicans' pursuit of the President backfired at the polls. While the exit polls provide no direct confirmation of this theory, indirectly it seems plausible that Democratic attacks on Republicans as zealous prosecutors of the President may have resonated with some voters.

Among those who approved of the way Clinton was handling his job as President, 74% said they voted for a Democratic House candidate. This level of presidential-party-line voting in mid-term elections was higher for Clinton than his two Republican predecessors. In 1986, the CBS News/*New York Times* exit poll found that 58% of the voters approved of the job Ronald Reagan was doing as president. Among those Reagan backers, some 61% said they voted for a Republican congressional candidate, and about 35% said they supported a Democrat. In 1990, the television network exit poll showed that George Bush also received a 58% approval rating, and some three out of five of those voters cast ballots for Republican candidates.

To be sure, Clinton also inspires more negative feelings than his predecessors. Among the 43% of those surveyed by the exit poll who disapproved of the job the President was doing, 83% voted for a GOP congressional candidate; only 14% supported a Democrat. In 1986, those who gave Reagan a negative job rating voted Democratic by about a 78 to 18% ratio. In 1990, those who rated Bush negatively went Democratic by some 72 to 28%. An extraordinary 60% of 1998 voters told exit pollsters that they disapproved of Clinton as a person.

Conservatives Stayed Home

For the Republican Right, the election was doubly disappointing. Not only did the rest of the electorate not share their zeal on the President's ethical problems, but the distraction of Lewinsky scandal probably helped contribute to the GOP's inability to focus on its own policy programs.

“There was no clear conservative agenda articulated by national conservative leaders in Washington,” said Randy Tate, executive director of the Christian Coalition on the day after the election “Republicans tried to campaign solely based on the anti-Clinton sentiment. Democrats had an agenda, albeit a liberal agenda,” said Tate. “They talked about a liberal

approach to solving Social Security, health care and education; but some agenda will beat no agenda every time.” Moreover, Tate warned: “Conservatives in Washington are not going to glide to victory by taking our votes for granted.”

That lack of a clear and compelling conservative message may have contributed to the fall-off in voters describing themselves as conservatives in the VNS exit poll. In 1994, the Republican Revolution saw 37% of the voters in House races calling themselves conservatives. In 1996, that percentage dipped to 34%. In 1998, the share fell to 31%. That was even a tad lower than the 33% mark registered in the 1990 mid-term elections, when then-President George Bush committed heresy with the right by agreeing with Democrats to raise taxes in that year’s budget deal. These numbers may not completely or accurately state either the fall-off or the real share of conservative voters in the 1998 elections. For instance, it’s possible that some voters who called themselves conservative in 1994, when the term was in vogue, may have simply described themselves as moderates in 1998.

Still, there are other polling data suggesting some kind of drop in turnout among conservative voters this year. Cable News Network polling director Keating Holland noted that in the final 1998 pre-election poll conducted by the Gallup Organization, the percentage of self-described conservatives was 40%. In 1996, that pre-election figure was 36%, and in 1994, 35%. Comparing the pre-election percentage of conservatives to the exit poll percentage, Holland concluded that “some greater number of self-identified conservatives stayed at home in ’98, than in either ’94 or ’96.”

Although this decline in conservative voting didn’t help Republican candidates, it wasn’t necessarily the sole cause of their defeats. For instance, the

two GOP senate incumbents who lost their re-election bids saw a decline in their share of moderate voters that was greater than any fall-off in their conservative support. In New York, Alfonse D’Amato carried conservatives, who made up 26% of the electorate, by a ratio of 76 to 22% over Democratic challenger Charles E. Schumer. Six years ago, the share of conservative voters in the New York Senate race was 25%, and D’Amato carried conservatives by 80 to 20%. But among self-described moderates, who accounted for 51% of the New

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York electorate this year, D’Amato won only 42%, to Schumer’s 58%. In 1992, D’Amato split the moderate vote, 52% of the electorate, 50-50 with Democratic challenger Robert Abrams. Schumer was simply a stronger candidate than Abrams.

Likewise, in the North Carolina Senate race, conservatives made up 38% of the electorate in 1992 and 1998. Faircloth carried conservatives 76 to 24% in 1992, but increased his ratio in 1998 to 82 to 18%. His problem came among moderates, 46% of the Tarheel voters in 1998 compared to 47% in 1992. That year, then-Democratic incumbent Sanford won moderates 54 to 46% over Faircloth. This year, the Democratic challenger swept the moderate vote, by 65 to 32%.

Republicans can afford to lose the moderate vote, but only when they offset that deficit by carrying independents or some other key swing constituency. In 10 Senate races in 1998, where the

victor won with less than 55% of the overall vote, Democrats won all six contests where they carried both moderates and independents. In the other four races where the Republican Senate candidate won with less than 55%, each lost moderates, but carried independents.

Looking to Election 2000

While Republicans clashed over the interpretation of the election—conservatives argued the party wavered on its philosophy while moderates said the

GOP had to turn further toward the center—there was plenty of Election Night revelry at Al Gore’s house as more than 30 of the Vice President’s close friends and political allies gathered to watch the mid-term returns. The Gore group even broke out in cheers as the television sets spread around the Vice President’s residence reported each Democratic victory. At the same time, an upbeat Gore was busy juggling phone calls that his staff placed to dozens of winning Democratic candidates for whom the Vice President had campaigned.

“We were all there celebrating,” said one long-time Gore confidant. “He had a big investment in these candidates in the time that he spent campaigning with them, the money that his PAC contributed.”

Indeed, Gore had plenty of reasons to be pleased with the results. The congressional wing of the party avoided a bad night which would have set off a nasty round of finger-pointing at the

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White House for the party's woes. That inevitably would have tarred Gore and emboldened would-be opponents for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000.

But there was one return that didn't draw any toasts—the result from the national exit poll pitting Gore against Texas Republican Governor George W. Bush in a 2000 general election trial heat. Asked who they would vote for, the survey's respondents said Bush, by a whopping 52 to 38% margin. In the exit poll two years earlier, Gore bested then-vice presidential nominee Republican Jack Kemp in a hypothetical 2000 contest, 43 to 40%.

Gore's advisers brushed off the discordant finding. "It's completely meaningless," said Gore media strategist Robert Squier. Still, the breadth of Bush's strength was hard to dismiss. He led Gore in all regions of the country, among men and women, and among self-identified independents—51 to 35%—and moderates—by 46 to 42%. Bush thumped the Vice President among white voters by more than 20 percentage points, and tied him among Hispanics. By a comfortable margin, 52 to 37%, Bush carried voters who described the condition of the nation's economy as "good," roughly two-thirds of the electorate. He even won backing from a quarter of the voters who gave Clinton a positive job approval rating.

"I think it says that both Gore and

the party as a whole still have a lot of work to do," said Democratic pollster Geoffrey Garin. "Democrats truly had a great night, but it's obvious that we're still dealing with a very competitive situation in 2000."

It remains Gore's nomination to lose, but these general election numbers make him look a little less invincible. Former New Jersey Democratic Senator Bill Bradley provides Gore with at least one credible challenger.

Despite winning a remarkable 69% in his re-election bid and his image as a Republican who could compete for the center, Bush also found his automatic nod for 2000 in question. The early frontrunner for the GOP nomination "has done well in Texas," said conservative activist Gary L. Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, who's poised to enter the Republican fray in 2000. But "it remains to be seen" how Bush fares outside of the Lone Star state, Bauer added. "There's a long ways to go," cautioned Bush pollster Fred Steeper. "We need to understand the components of his [Bush's] strength and whether they can endure for two years."

Indeed, it's hard for would-be rivals to accept George W. Bush as a sure-to-win candidate when he has yet to prove himself in the national spotlight. His opponents hope that much of the governor's strong standing in the polls is attributable to the positive sentiment towards his father, especially in light of

President Clinton's ethical woes, and thus vulnerable if the former president's son doesn't measure up to expectations once he becomes an active candidate. "Most people who say they support him have not laid eyes on him or really heard what he has to say," cautioned Jeffrey Bell, a Bauer strategist who also heads up his political action committee.

Public opinion polls indicate that Bush's appeal among Republicans for their party's nomination and as a general election candidate has soared in the wake of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. In April 1997, a poll conducted for NBC News and *The Wall Street Journal* found Bush the first choice of 24% of Republicans for their 2000 nomination. In January 1998, the proportion was 26%. But by December 1998, Bush had won the support of 52% of the Republicans surveyed in the NBC/*Journal* poll.

Even so, Bush faces a field of tough opponents that's been fortified by the experience of a national campaign: two veterans of the 1996 nominating contest, Lamar Alexander and Steve Forbes, and Dan Quayle, who was vice president and twice on the Republican ticket. "They are not going to sit around and let someone roll over them," said a senior strategist for a likely Bush rival.

Looking to Election 2000, Bush and his advisers would do well not to let their optimism get ahead of them as congressional Republicans did in the election just passed.

