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may have actually saved their House majority. Voters apparently perceived the Republicans had little else to offer in the way of concrete issues. But in the end, it was erosion among three groups that voted mostly Republican in the mid-presidential term election of 1994—white males, conservatives and middle-agers, 45-59—which fueled the Democratic resurgence.

By failing to pass tax cuts and giving in to Clinton on numerous spending issues, the GOP was unable to energize conservatives and members of the religious right as strongly as they had in the last two elections. While both groups voted strongly Republican, as expected, their turnout was down: a reduction from 17% in 1994 to 13% for the religious right, and a slip from 37 to 31% for conservatives.

Perhaps even more damaging, moderates turned out in greater numbers this time and voted Democratic, 54 to 43%. In 1994, moderates went 52% Republican.

The heavy white-male vote, which broke strongly Republican in 1994 and was credited with handing control of Congress to the GOP for the first time in 40 years, was partially picked off by the Democrats in 1998.

Exit polls in 1994 showed 63% of white males voted Republican in House races. In 1998, that figure fell to 57%.

Nicholson's explanation for the loss of white-male support is that the good economy has provided those men, many so-called blue-collar Democrats, with stable jobs and reason to vote for the status quo. The exit polls also showed that the Democrats were getting more credit for the good economy than

the Republicans. A post-election *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll showed the Republican Party has an image problem. It suggests that the GOP will need more unity, moderation, and effectiveness in its leadership to retain control of Congress and win back the White House in 2000.

A 43% plurality still believes policies proposed by the GOP would take the country in the right direction. But in November 1994, shortly after the Republicans took control of Congress, 55% said their policies were right for the country. Continued deterioration of that magnitude in public confidence could lead to a loss of House control in 2000.

“Big Government” Might Save the GOP

If there's anything to cheer up the GOP in approaching its winter of discontent, it should be the finding in an early December *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll that shows the American public still sees big government as a villain. Asked which would be the biggest threat to the country's future—big business, big labor or big government—64% said big government. That's no change from 1994, when the Republicans won congressional control. So their message to reduce the size of government still resonates. How they propose to do it remains the trick.

The 1998 elections were indeed about a lot of things. A lot of important things. And those who vote are paying attention. Politicians who ignore them or take them for granted do so at their own peril, as the results last November show.

So those who say these last elections were about nothing are clueless, to use another glib word of the day.

Outcome Doesn't Suggest a Need For GOP Policy Moderation

By Fred Steeper

Contrary to interpretations that last November was a disaster for Republicans, 1998 impressively continues an ideological polarization of the electorate that has produced a near stand-off in the partisan balance in the country—a development that has not been seen since the nineteenth century. The historic swing in the 1994 election has now been maintained for two successive elections.

At the core of this change in voting behavior is that conservative voters are voting overwhelmingly for Republican congressional candidates while liberal voters are voting overwhelmingly for Democratic congressional candidates. With conservative voters outnumbering liberal voters by roughly a 3 to 2 ratio, this new polarization has produced more electoral successes for the Republican party.¹ Behind the new polariza-

tion is the perceived willingness of the GOP to represent cultural as well as economic conservatism. Admonitions that the Republican party should moderate its policy proposals because of its small loss of congressional seats in 1998 are entirely contrary to the electoral changes from which it has benefited.

Misleading Congressional Expectations: No Surge, No Decline

The expectation of Republican gains for Congress in 1998 was a myopic reading of an historical pattern holding that the party controlling the White House loses an average of 27 House seats and four Senate seats in mid-term elections. That pattern presumes the party winning the White House wins a

surplus of House seats in the same election, and the next mid-term election acts as a correction on the over-performance. This is the “surge and decline” pattern that was once quite common in our national elections. For example, in 1964, the Democrats had a surge of 37 House seats as it reached its highest number (295) since 1936. Then, promptly, Democrats lost a net of 48 seats in 1966, more than making up for their 1964 gains. Similarly, 1980 Republicans had a 35-seat surge, producing a total of 192 seats—its peak number after 1956. The GOP then lost 27 seats in 1982.

In 1998, there was no prior presidential year surge in House seats to correct. In 1996, the Democrats gained only three seats over their 1994 showing, or ten seats if one counts the two vacancies and five seats the Republicans lost in special elections after 1994. Either way, this was not the presidential year surge of former years that would be corrected by the next mid-term election.

The absence of other macro factors made a large loss for the party controlling the White House unrealistic. There was no recession as in 1958 (a 47-seat loss for Republicans) or 1982 (a 27-seat loss for Republicans), and no war as in 1966 (a 48-seat loss for Democrats). Two of those mid-term losses significantly raised the “average” loss to 27, which falsely became the marker for 1998.

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Absent recession or war, 1998 was supposed to be a “scandal year” akin to 1974 and Watergate when the party in the White House lost 48 seats. But President Clinton’s 60%+ approval rating (Nixon’s was in the 20% range) made it clear, to those willing to accept it, that there was no macro scandal in 1998 that would produce large losses for the White House party.²

Lost in the recriminations over the five-seat loss for the GOP is the fact that the Republicans won the national popular vote for the US House and did so (barely) for the third straight election. This basic measure of national partisan strength had not seen the GOP on top since 1952 and had not seen a consistent GOP run on top for three national elections since the 1920s.

Still to consider, however, is the rare gain of seats for the White House party in a mid-term election, which got so much attention. It may come as little solace for the GOP to point out that the expectation for 1998—given no surge, no recession, no

war, and, even, no scandal—should have been one of minimal change. And, minimal change from a macro perspective could be a loss of five seats as well as a gain of five seats. The focus on the really “random” result of a five-seat loss misdirected the post-election commentary away from the real meaning of 1998: the historic swing in the 1994 election had been maintained for two successive elections. It was a watershed election in 1994, effecting a new party balance in governorships and state legislatures as well as in Congress.

Strong State Performances

Post-election commentary noted the successes of the Republican governors and came to the hasty conclusion that they were successful because of their “pragmatic” or “moderate” approaches. Indeed, some of the elected governors promoted this idea themselves. However, the presence of 30 or more Republican governors has its roots in 1994. 1998 is not the unique year; rather, it is the span 1994 through 1998 that is unique. Before 1994, the number of Republican governors ranged from a low of 13 to a high of only 24 (going back to 1971). One has to return to 1970 to find 30 Republican governors. The number of GOP governors jumped to 30 in 1994 and has held at 31 to 32 since then.

A new plateau of Republican successes can also be seen in state legislatures. Before 1994, Republican legislative houses ranged from a low of 17 to a high of 36 (going back to 1975). In 1994, Republicans gained control of 50 of the 98 partisan state chambers. This number has eroded to 47 (1995 and 1996) and now to 45 from the 1998 elections. But 45 to 50 state legislatures in Republican control is still markedly different than the 17 to 36 range that existed before it.

From a broad historical perspective, the 1998 election takes on a different meaning than most of the next-day verdicts would seem to lend it. Along with the 1996 election, it confirms that 1994 was no fluke. Something has fundamentally changed in American voting behavior that has produced a different partisan balance in our country. The years 1994 to 1998 should be a concern for the Democratic party. It has clearly lost its majority status. The Republican party, by focusing only on the disappointments of 1998, is in danger of fixing supposed problems that could undo the historic gains it has made after wandering in the minority wilderness for over half a century. Both parties now face the challenge of breaking the stalemate.

The New Polarization Produces A Political Stalemate

The historic change in the popular vote for the US House, a good measure of the basic, partisan balance of the two parties, has come about because of a new ideological polarization of the American electorate. Before 1994, 30 to 36% of the voters who identified themselves as conservatives in exit polls were averaging 66% support for Republican congressional candi-

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dates.³ In the last three elections, GOP support among conservatives has jumped to 80%. Depending on turnout, this 80% represents a shift of four to nine percentage points of conservative support from the Democratic column to the Republican column.

Similarly, liberal support for Democrats has reached a historic high. Before 1994, the 17 to 21% of the voters identifying themselves as liberals in the exit polls were averaging 76% support for Democratic congressional candidates. In the last three elections, liberal Democratic support has averaged 83%.

While our congressional elections have often been characterized by ideological polarization, the above results demonstrate that the last three elections have been particularly stark in this regard. In 1998, Republican congressional candidates carried conservative voters by 80 to 17% while Democratic congressional candidates carried liberal voters by 81 to 16%.

As these numbers show, the new polarization has been to the advantage of the Republican party. Both liberals and conservatives are voting more along partisan lines than before, but now Republicans are benefiting from a percentage from conservatives comparable to that which the Democrats receive from liberals. To reach this new polarization, conservative voters had to move the most over the past eight years.

Behind the new polarization is the perceived willingness of the Republican party to represent positions that are culturally and economically conservative. When the Republican party represented only economic conservatism, it was mired in the status of the nation's minority party—the “banker party,” as it were. When the Republicans added stronger conservative positions on welfare reform, crime, and moral standards, in general they attracted additional conservative voters who were lukewarm about the party's fiscal conservatism.

In Fact, It Was a GOP Victory— But the Party Is At Risk in 2000

By George C. Edwards III

If asked a year ago to predict the results of the 1998 House elections, the most reasonable answer would have been, “the Republicans will pick up a few seats.” The strong economy, the small number of competitive seats, and the absence of substantial Democratic gains in the 1996 presidential election indicated that there would not be many vulnerable Democratic seats. Meanwhile, the weight of history and Republican advantages in fundraising pointed toward some losses for the president's party.

History took a holiday, however, as the Republicans lost five seats. In the storm of recrimination and fratricide that followed election night, Republicans bemoaned their unex-

pected “defeat” while Democrats basked in the euphoria of beating the odds and moving closer to winning back the House. But, as is often the case, the extensive public commentary on the election was uninformed. What was especially striking was the absence of rigorous analysis of the election returns and exit polls provided by the Voter News Service. Important questions to ask are, just how bad was the Republicans' performance, and what do the results portend for the future?

Parts of the Republican party's perceived cultural conservatism cross-pressure some of its past supporters, but many more voters have shifted to the Republican party than have been lost—a basic calculation that seems to be overlooked in admonitions that the GOP has become too conservative. Also not appreciated is the fact that the GOP's cultural conservatism reinforces the support of far more voters than are cross-pressured by it, and, therefore, helps motivate these voters to turn out. Indeed, the largest part of the national Republican coalition is made up of voters who are *both* economic and cultural conservatives.⁴

Endnotes:

This article continues a commentary by the author entitled, “This Swing Is Different: An Analysis of 1994 Election Exit Polls” (January 9, 1995/revised March 14, 1995).

¹ This is the average ratio of conservatives to liberals in the exit polls from 1976 to 1998. Survey measures of voter ideology often show a larger ratio of conservatives to liberals depending on the various question wordings.

² Writing from hindsight is always easy. While the national polls did not indicate the Democrats were in trouble, one could still believe that, ultimately, the Lewinsky scandal would cost the Democrats dearly. On this one, the national polls had it right. The surprise was in our minds, not in the poll numbers.

³ The cited averages before 1994 are for the six elections from 1980 to 1990. The transition year was 1992, which was when the polarization began to take shape. In 1992, conservative support for Republican congressional candidates increased to 72% and liberal support for Democratic congressional candidates rose to 81%.

⁴ Based on the author's analysis of the ideological dimensions in each partisan coalition done in 1995 and 1996.

The GOP Won in 1998

The figures do not support the view of a Republican disaster. First, and most important, the Republicans won the