

The 2002 Midterm Election: A Typical or an Atypical Midterm?

James E. Campbell, *University at Buffalo, SUNY*

It had been an inevitability rivaling death and taxes. The president's party would lose seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in almost every midterm election. The president's party had lost House seats in 32 of the 33 midterms from 1866 to 1994. The sole exception was a gain of nine seats for Democrats in the 1934 midterm election during FDR's first term and in the throes of the New Deal realignment. Then came the 1998 and the 2002 midterms. With a strong economy and the pending impeachment vote against President Clinton, Democrats gained four seats in 1998. This past November, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorism and with a president with strong approval ratings, Republicans also broke from the traditional pattern of in-party midterm losses and gained five seats in the House and two in the Senate, regaining their control of the Senate that they had lost when Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords renounced his Republican affiliation in 2001.¹

The results of the 2002 midterm raise a number of questions. To what extent was the midterm (and the 1998 midterm) an aberration? Why were Republicans as the in-party able to gain seats? What explains 2002 and what might the 2002 (and the 1998) results indicate about various theories of inter-election seat change?

Explaining 2002

While midterm seat gains for any in-party are certainly atypical, from several

other perspectives the results of 2002 are not unusual at all. The election ran true to form in five respects. First, the small magnitude of seat changes in both 1998 and 2002 reflect the overall decline in district competition and are typical of the constrained electoral change that has marked elections generally since the late 1960s. Second, the 2002 results reflect the nearly equal balance of the parties nationally and the continued partisan sorting out of districts in the later stages of the staggered partisan realignment that had deepened to congressional elections in the early 1990s. Third, some portion of the Republican 2002 gain reflected the reapportionment and redistricting that generally favored Republicans. Fourth, the effects of surge and decline anticipated small in-party gains. The surge in 2000 was a small negative surge for the party winning the White House. Gore, not Bush, received a narrow popular vote plurality. Following a small negative on-year surge should come a small negative midterm decline (a small in-party midterm seat gain). Finally, with the president's approval ratings in the mid-60% range, signaling an electorate largely supportive of President Bush's leadership to this point, the midterm as a referendum on the in-party should have provided a pro-Republican tilt.

The Politics of Small Change

The increased advantage of incumbency and the resulting decline in congressional competition has been thoroughly documented now for several decades (Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974; Ferejohn 1977). However, the consequence of these developments for aggregate electoral change has not been so widely appreciated. Seat changes are not nearly as large as they used to be. The absolute magnitudes of seat changes for or against a party have been substantially smaller in recent decades (Campbell 1996, 158; Campbell and Jurek 2003). With fewer competitive districts in play,

national tides swing fewer districts from one party to the other and the districts in which local forces (candidates, campaign spending) are decisive may make more of a difference to the seat swing bottom-line of the election.

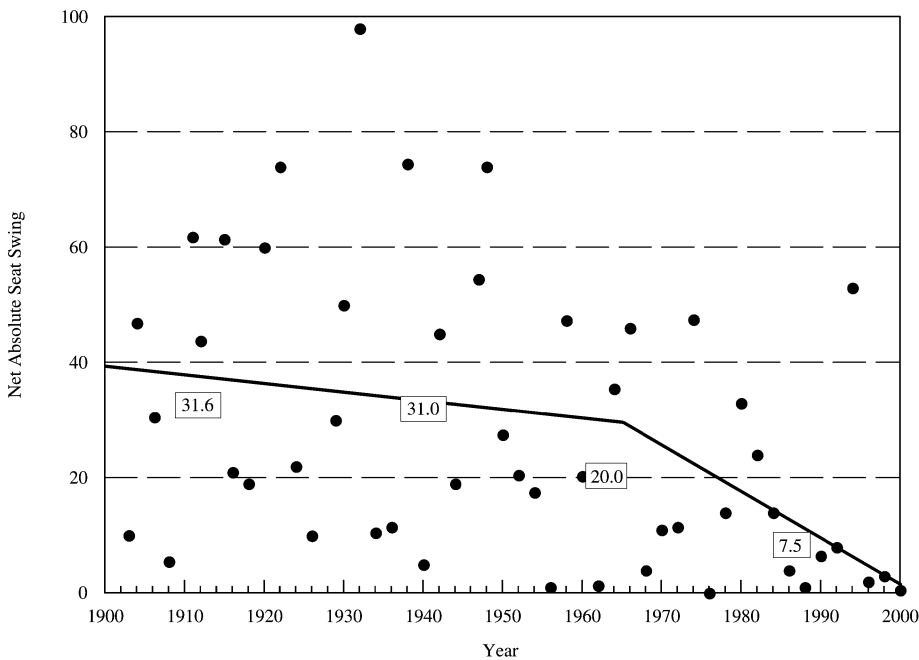
Figure 1 plots the absolute amount of net partisan seat change for elections in the twentieth century, with median absolute seat changes indicated in boxes for each quarter of the century. In the first half of the century, the median election shifted 31 or 32 seats from one party to the other. In the century's third quarter, the median absolute seat change dropped to 20 seats. Since 1976, the typical election shifted a mere seven or eight seats from one party to the other, about a quarter of what the typical change was in the first half of the century. Whereas there were nine elections (35%) with seat changes greater than 50 seats in the first half of the century, only one election since 1950 has produced a 50-plus seat change. That was the Republican breakthrough election in 1994. In fact, in the last nine national elections (from 1986 to 2002), 1994 is the only election in which a party has gained or lost *more than 10 seats*. With the decline in competition and the compression of electoral change, whichever party gained or lost in 2002 was likely to gain or lose only a few seats. The small number of Republican seat gains in 2002 is consistent with this general narrowing of seat changes in recent decades.²

Sorting Out Party Districts

The slim Republican congressional majorities resulting from the 2002 election also are consistent with the realignment that has produced polarized parties of nearly equal strength nationally (Ladd 1985, 1995; Bullock 1988; Petrocik 1987; Frymer 1996; Campbell 1996, 1997). The staggered party realignment that developed from a switch in the parties' relative positions on racial issues in the early 1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989) generated a change in presidential

James E. Campbell is a professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He is the author of *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (Texas A&M, 2000), *Cheap Seats: The Democratic Party's Advantage in U.S. House Elections* (Ohio State, 1996), and *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections* (Kentucky, 1997) and the co-editor of *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Sage, 2000). His research on American electoral politics has also been published in numerous scholarly journals and books. He can be reached at jcampbel@acsu.buffalo.edu.

Figure 1
Absolute Number of House Seats Gained or Lost by the Major Parties from One Election to the Next, 1902–2000



Note: The numbers in the boxes are median values for each quarter of the century. For comparability, seats won by third-party and independent candidates are divided equally between the major parties. The numbers have been adjusted to a constant House size of 435 seats.

voting in the 1960s and 1970s, in closing the party identification gap in the 1980s (Bartels 2000; Campbell 2000; Miller 1991), and in congressional elections from the 1990s until the present (Abramowitz 1995; Campbell 1997). This realignment produced a sorting out of districts, a trend toward more partisan-consistent election results, and fewer split-result districts (Jacobson 2000). This trend continued in 2002. In the 1984 election, 191 districts (44%) were carried by one party's presidential candidate while the district elected a representative from the opposite party. The number of split-result districts, using the 1984 presidential vote, was even a bit greater (199) in 1986. In

1988 the number had declined to 148 (34%) and declined to between 100 and 110 (23% to 25%) split-result districts from 1992 to 1998. In 2000, the number of split-result districts dropped to 85 (20%) and in 2002 it dropped again to just 62 (14%), the fewest split-result districts since at least the 1940s (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1996).

Table 1 presents the joint distribution of presidential and congressional voting in the 2000 and 2002 elections. In the 2000 election, congressional Democrats won 167 (81%) of the 207 districts that Al Gore carried and congressional Republicans won 181 (80%) of the 226 districts that George W. Bush carried. Democrats won 45 districts with Repub-

lican presidential pluralities and Republicans won 40 districts with Democratic presidential pluralities. These numbers of split-result districts were low in comparison to elections since the 1940s, but dropped even lower in 2002. If presidential voting in a competitive election can be taken as a common metric of partisan turf, both parties gained more of their natural ground in the 2002 midterm. The number of districts that Bush carried (or would have carried in the newly drawn districts) that were won by congressional Democrats dropped from 45 in 2000 to 35 in 2002.³ Similarly, the number of Gore districts won by House Republicans dropped from 40 in 2000 to 27 in 2002. With a small and declining number of exceptions, the outcomes of congressional and presidential elections in districts are now aligned.

The prevalence of split-result districts in earlier decades largely reflected southern politics and the slow development of a viable Republican Party in the region long after southerners had moved toward voting for Republicans in presidential elections. It was not unusual for Republican presidential candidates to carry southern districts by wide margins and have no Republican congressional candidate at all on the ticket (Campbell 1997, 202–5). Republican congressional gains in the South, and the resulting decline in split-result districts there, caused some to characterize the realignment as largely a southern phenomenon.

Republican gains in 2002, however, were not centered in the South, but in the Midwest. Table 2 presents where the parties registered gains and losses by region. Republicans gained five seats in Midwestern states while Democrats lost those and an additional seven to reapportionment. The parties fought to a draw elsewhere. While Republican gains in the Midwest may reflect a variety of factors, from greater support for President Bush in the “war on terror” to reapportionment effects to the continued sorting out

Table 1
Party-consistent and Split-result Districts, 2000 and 2002

Presidential Vote Plurality	Party of Winning House Candidate					
	2000 Election			2002 Election		
	Republican	Democrat	Total	Republican	Democrat	Total
Bush	181 (80%)	45 (20%)	226 (100%)	202 (85%)	35 (15%)	237 (100%)
Gore	40 (19%)	167 (81%)	207 (100%)	27 (14%)	170 (86%)	197 (100%)

Note: Districts won by minor party candidates are excluded. The total number of districts carried by Bush and Gore are different in 2000 and 2002 because of redistricting. The districts carried by the presidential candidate for the 2002 midterm is based on the 2000 presidential vote calculated for the newly drawn districts.

Table 2
Party Seat Gains or Losses by Region, 2002

Region	2000		2002		Change		Republican Percentage in 2002
	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	
Mountain West	18	6	21	7	+3	+1	75
Midwest	63	54	68	42	+5	-12	62
South	71	53	76	55	+5	+2	58
Border	21	12	18	14	-3	+2	56
Pacific West	25	44	25	45	0	+1	36
Northeast	23	43	21	42	-2	-1	33
Total	221	212	229	205	+8	-7	53

Note: Because of reapportionment, one party's loss in a region does not necessarily translate into the other party's gain. The figures are based on the number of seats won as a result of the 2000 and 2002 elections and do not reflect special elections held in the interim to fill vacancies. The designation of states to regions is the same as that in Bullock (1988) and Bullock, Gaddie, and Hoffman (2000) except that their "North Central" states are designated as "Midwest" and Pennsylvania is included as a midwestern rather than northeastern state. Republicans gained one seat in Pennsylvania and Democrats lost an additional two seats to reapportionment in the state. If Pennsylvania were coded as a northeastern state the summary change would have been: -1 Republican and -4 Democrats in the Northeast and +4 Republican and -9 Democrats in the Midwest.

of districts by partisanship, it certainly indicates that Republicans are registering gains beyond the South and that American political battles may be evolving toward a heartland Republican base pitted against a bicoastal Democratic base.

Redistricting

The 2002 midterm was also the first after reapportionment and this may also have affected the results. Whether through redistricting within states or, more likely, reapportionment across states (as districts were lost from northeastern Democratic leaning states and gained by southern Republican leaning states), Republicans gained from the decennial redrawing of districts. The distribution of the 2000 presidential vote in the old and new districts reveals that redrawing district lines produced more Republican leaning districts. Under the old lines, Bush carried 227 districts to 208 for Gore. If the 2000 election had been conducted with the 2002 redrawn lines, Bush would have carried an additional 10 districts. To the extent that the presidential vote provides for cross-district comparisons, Democrats had a more hospitable set of lines in 2000 (most probably reflecting the malapportionment that had developed over the 1990s) and Republicans had relatively more favorable districts in place for 2002.

A Slight Negative Surge, A Slight Negative Decline

The driving force behind midterm losses historically has been the presi-

dential surge in the prior on-year election (A. Campbell 1960; J. Campbell 1991, 1997). The party winning the presidency in the prior election rides to victory on a "high stimulus" surge of favorable short-term forces (e.g., issues and candidates) and this carries a number of candidates below the winning

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president into office. The stronger the short-term forces, the bigger the presidential victory and the more representatives of the president's party are brought into office. Partisans of the winning president's party tend to be more enthusiastic and more likely to turn out. Some partisans of the losing presidential candidate are disaffected and stay home (Campbell 1997, 172-81). The independents swing to the more popular, winning candidate. As we know from NES, about 70 to 80%

of presidential voters report voting for the same party's congressional candidate. The arithmetic is inescapable: a party's typical House candidate gains four to six votes on his or her opponent from every 10 votes brought to the polls to vote for the party's presidential candidate. For some, this is the margin of difference. However, the benefits of the presidential surge are short-lived. Two years later, without the assistance of strong short-term forces systematically favoring the candidates of the in-party, some number of representatives of the president's party go down to defeat. As with the effects of the on-year surge, the effects of the midterm decline are proportional to the prior short-term forces. Small on-year surges (e.g., 1960) lead to small midterm declines (e.g., 1962) and big on-year surges (e.g., 1964, 1972) auger big midterm declines (e.g., 1966, 1974).

The 2002 midterm results are much as might be expected by the theory of surge and decline.⁴ The narrow popular presidential vote margin favoring Al Gore in 2000 suggests that short-term forces favored Democrats very slightly that year. The slight Democratic advantage in short-term forces in the 2000 on-year set the stage for slight Republican gains in the 2002 midterm. This is exactly what happened.⁵

Presidential Approval

As Edward Tufte (1975, 1978) noted many years ago, midterm elections are also referenda on the administration's performance. When the public is

supportive of the job the president is doing, they are inclined to keep more representatives of the president's party in office. On the other hand, if they disapprove for any reason of the way that the president is handling his job, that disapproval can be registered by returning fewer representatives of the president's party to office.

The presidential approval rating used by Gallup over the years has proven to be an effective yardstick of the referendum component of the midterm verdict. These midterm approval ratings have varied quite a

bit. Truman was very unpopular in 1946 (32% approval) and in 1950 (43%) as was Reagan in 1982 (42%) and Clinton in 1994 (43%). Other presidents have had very positive midterm assessments. Following the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy had a 67% approval rating. The median presidential approval rating since 1946 has been 56%.

President Bush's approval rating going into the 2002 midterm stood at 63%, above average and about where Reagan stood in 1986 and only a couple of points lower than Clinton's rating in 1998. While approval numbers in this range normally have not led to in-party midterm gains in the past (though they did in 1998), in conjunction with the lack of a prior on-year surge and with the general compression of change of any sort, the generally favorable assessment of the administration provided Republicans with a context that made it possible for them to gain a few seats.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine how much of a difference the partisan sorting out of districts, redistricting, the negative

surge, and presidential approval made to the election results of 2002, each of these factors is consistent with the small seat gains for Republicans. This is not the case for other considerations.

Non-Explanations of 2002

While several factors and theories help to explain the in-party gains in the 2002 midterm, other potential electoral forces would appear to be inconsistent. Though the 2002 results are those of only a single election and though no

theory can reasonably be expected to explain all variation in seat changes, the 2002 results are a piece of evidence that fits some theories much better than others.

With the long record of divided governments

since the 1960s (probably mostly due to the staggered realignment and the close division of the parties nationally), several theories proposed that a decisive number of voters intentionally choose divided government either out of a preference to have different parties control the different institutions (Jacobson 1990a) or out of a desire to achieve more moderate policies by having the parties counterbalance each other (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989, 1995; Fiorina 1996). While the large percentage of straight-ticket voters and the strong positive correlations between presidential and congressional voting had previously raised doubts about the plausibility of substantial policy-balancing and intentionally divided government, the 2002 results would seem to substantiate further doubts. Knowing that the Republicans controlled the presidency and with the government already divided, the voters in 2002 elected more rather

than fewer partisans of the president's party thus creating a unified government rather than a divided government.

The results of the 2002 election also appear inconsistent with the idea that there is some generalized or across-the-board midterm penalty for the president's party (Erikson 1988) or that midterm elections are strongly dependent on the state of the economy. The extent of independent economic effects on congressional elections has been a disputed issue (Erikson 1990; Jacobson 1990). The 2002 experience would seem to support the view that the economy is at most a minor consideration in congressional voting. While there were some signs that the economy going into the 2002 midterm was not as weak as many believed, it was clearly a liability for the administration and hardly the basis for midterm seat gains for the in-party.

Finally, the implications of the 2002 election are unclear for one theory of electoral change. The exposure thesis suggests that midterm elections involve a reversion to an equilibrium or an average seat holding for a party (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986; Waterman, Oppenheimer, and Stimson 1991). A party having more seats than its equilibrium—a normal seat analogue to the concept of the normal vote (Converse 1966)—is overexposed and likely to lose seats in the next election. A party holding fewer than its normal number is underexposed and likely to gain seats. While the equilibrium number of seats for Democrats and Republicans in the realigned party system may still be unknown, Republican gains in 2002 could only be explained by the exposure thesis if Republicans held fewer seats than their expected equilibrium. That is, the exposure thesis suggests the Republican equilibrium is greater than the 221 Republicans elected in 2000 and that a Republican House majority is now normal politics. Only future elections will allow us to determine whether this is plausible.

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Notes

1. The five seat gain was the gain over the number of seats that Republicans had going into the 2002 midterm. The change from the 2000 to 2002 elections represented an eight seat gain. The difference is the result of special elections held to fill vacancies between the 2000 and 2002 elections.

2. Republican seat gains may also have been constrained by the electoral system advantage that Democrats have in winning low turnout districts (Campbell 1996). Although the official vote counts are not available at this writing, it

appears that Republicans received between 52 and 53% of the national House vote and 52.8% of House seats. Assuming no electoral system bias, this would put the swing-ratio at about one, well below its historical value (and suggesting that the assumption of no bias is incorrect). By comparison, when Democrats had a similar sized vote majority in the 1992 election, they won 59.4% of the seats (258 seats for Democrats in 1992 compared to 229 for Republicans in 2002).

3. I would like to thank Bill Steiner and the

rest of the Republican National Committee's staff for providing me with the presidential vote percentages for the newly drawn congressional districts.

4. Republican Senate seat gains in 2002 also fit the surge and decline theory. With six-year Senate terms, the relevant presidential surge for the 2002 midterm decline was in the presidential election of 1996 (Campbell 1997, 193). The 1996 presidential election in which Clinton defeated Dole should have helped a number of Democratic Senate candidates. Running without

that help in 2002, some should have suffered defeat, as was the case.

5. The compression of seat changes, the re-

alignment, and the reapportionment after 2000, complicated making a precise expectation of surge and decline effects. Prior to the election,

and without taking the pro-Republican reapportionment effects into account, I expected very slight Democratic gains.

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