

## The Surprise of the Seats not Lost

John R. Petrocik  
University of Missouri-Columbia

A major feature of election commentary since Tuesday is the “surprising” GOP triumph over the midterm seat loss they *should* have suffered. That, in conjunction with gains in the Senate (where losses were also expected), and not very substantial losses in the gubernatorial races have been molded into a judgment that the GOP and George Bush soundly defeated the Democrats. I do not have a conclusion to offer about how soundly the Democrats were trounced. I want to comment on the “inevitable” 25 or so seat midterm loss that it seems many expected.

American politics has a lot of misleading or plainly wrong “street wisdom.” The inevitable midterm loss is one of my favorites, and not the only one.\* Most scholars of elections know it is wrong, but journalists, well-educated citizens, and even some political scientists sign on to it. The following few pages summarize the story I told my students Thursday after the election about midterm elections. It’s a political scientist’s story, full of dry structure, statistical regularities, and no issues of the moment. It is the story I would have told about Tuesday’s election if I had been forced to talk about it in July – months away from war resolutions, campaigning presidents, dead candidates, and all the other stuff that makes any election unique.

The story reduces campaigns to “sound and fury signifying nothing.” I don’t really mean that of course. Campaigns and campaigning move the vote intention and produce an outcome. But there are a couple of large influences on every election that *precede* the campaign. They produce boundaries within which the candidates and parties labor, influence who is going to run for office, how much money they will have to spend, and how energetically the campaigns will be fought. These influences are so important that they allow us to formulate a good idea how an election is going to come out before the visible campaigns ever kick-off.

### That Midterm Loss

It is misleading to state, as so many have before and since Tuesday, that the president’s party loses seats in the first midterm (or any midterm). They often do, sometimes they do not, and, in any case, since some midterms produce large losses while others produce minor bumps, we can learn a lot about the “midterm loss” by identifying what happened when the losses were large rather than small. The basic fact: Whether the president’s party loses seats depends heavily upon how many seats the president’s party won in the preceding presidential election. The general rule of thumb is: “Win a lot, lose a lot; win a little, lose a little.”

The relevant prediction from that rule for 2002 is that because the GOP did not win a lot of seats in 2000, there was no reason to believe they would lose a lot of seats in 2002. Political scientists have known about this for a long time under the rubric of “surge and decline.” We expect declines only when they are

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\* My other favorite is that high turnout rates benefit the Democrats.

preceded by surges, *ceteris paribus* (that is a big constant, but we also know how to handle it - mostly).

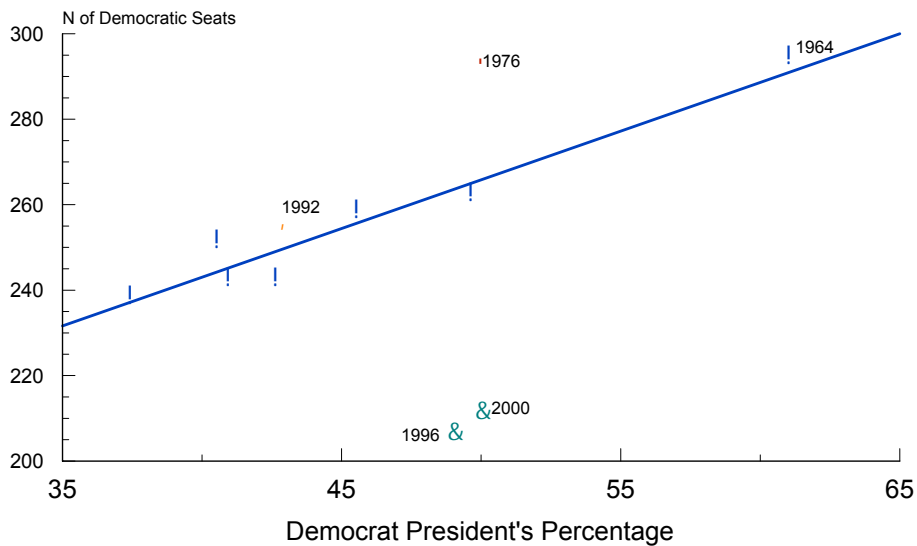
### Surge and Decline

This is the way surge and decline tells the story that explains November 5, 2002.

Congressional elections are held in the shadow of presidential elections. The shadow has a direct influence during the presidential election year; it has a second order effect in the succeeding midterm.

Presidential elections influence congressional elections because presidents have “coattail” effects on congressional candidates and virtually all downballot races. Congressional candidates of the winning presidential party do better in rough proportion to the success of the presidential candidate. The coattail effect seems to be weaker and less consistent than it was a half-century or more ago, but it is still felt by congressional candidates. The following figure documents the connection by plotting the number of seats won in the House by the Democrats against the Democratic presidential candidate’s share of the vote between 1960 and 2000.\* The 1976 result is a bit off the regression, but otherwise the relationship is quite strong.

### Democratic Presidential Percentage and Congressional Seats, 1960 - 2000



The 1996 and 2000 elections also seem to fit poorly, but the problem is more apparent that real. These elections represent a different period of party balance in the House. They actually conform quite nicely. From the end of WWII until 1994, Democrats average about 263 seats in each Congress, sometimes

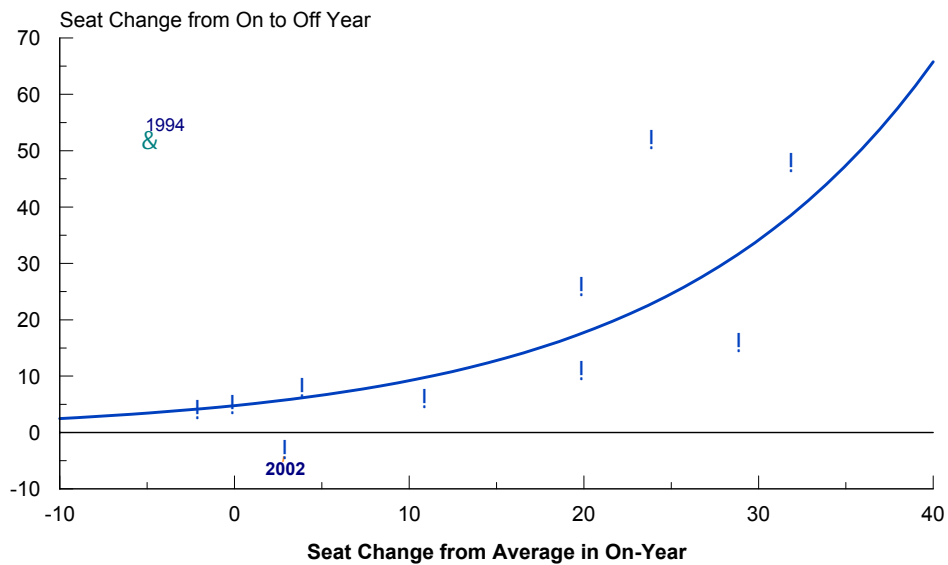
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\* I could have reproduced the same effect with a data series that stretches back to 1832. But the four decades in the figure constitute a sensible political period that is not confounded by major shifts in the party system. Also, most of us are interested in what patterns marks American politics today.

they won more – at other times less – but overall, they could expect to win 263 seats. Since 1994, the Democratic caucus in the House has averaged 209 seats. The big drop in the figure reflects this change in the party periods. To use some statistical terminology, think of it as a change in the intercept for the post-1994 elections. The intercept shift did not change the pattern. Coattail dynamics are apparent in the number of seats won by the Democrats in 1996 and 2000. Note that Gore’s share of the vote in 2000 exceeded Clinton’s 1996 vote and Democratic congressional candidate’s benefited proportionally – with the Democrats winning 212 seats in 2000 but only 207 in 1996.

But the linkage of congressional and presidential elections is not confined to the on-year contest. The shadow of the presidential election covers the succeeding congressional election. Specifically, the midterm congressional results are dependent on how many seats were won by the party that won the presidency (and we know from the first figure that the stronger the presidential win, the bigger a congressional majority the winner pulls into Congress with him).

### Surge and Decline House Loss Projections



Note: The average Democrat seat majority is calculated as 263 prior to 1994 and 209 after that election.

The preceding figure illustrates this as simply as possible. It plots a relationship between the number of congressional seats lost by the president’s party in the midterm election against the number of seats they won in the presidential election. More accurately, since I had to account for the post-1994 decline in Democratic congressional strength (that intercept shift I mentioned above), the variable on the horizontal axis is the number of seats won in the presidential year *minus* the number of seats the party normally won during the period. This adjustment of the “seats won” count for the presidential year makes it easier to display the results in graphical form. It does not affect the relationship at all. It allows a graphic examination of the basic proposition, which is: the magnitude of the midterm loss is proportional to the “excess” congressional election victories attributable to the success of the winning presidential candidate in the pre-

ceding presidential election. The figure uses numbers for the Democrats, but in a two party system that is immaterial. Either party's number tells the same story. This dependence of the midterm result on the party's congressional fortunes in the presidential election is obvious. The relationship is not as strong as the coattail effect because (clearly) other factors are also at work in the election (more below), but the link between the two congressional elections is displayed by the line in the figure. Seat losses in the subsequent midterm are greatest when the seat gains in the presidential election were greatest. When the presidential election did not yield a "surplus" of congressional wins, the succeeding midterm did not produce a big loss for the president.

If the statistical estimate (represented by the positively ascending curve in the graph) can be fully credited there seems to be some inherent bias against the president's party in the midterm. Even when there were no extra seats won in the on-year election, the president's party can expect to lose 4 or 5 seats in the subsequent midterm. I have some ideas about that (you might too), but that is an additional matter. The key fact is that there is no equilibrium tendency of the electorate to defeat 25 or so of the members of Congress from the president's party. If the curve can be fully credited, the midterm will cost the president's party 25 seats if the president's party won about 25 or so more seats than it normally wins.

The GOP might have been expected to lose 5 seats in 2002 if the election only responded to the basic mechanics of the historical pattern. In the event, however, they did better than expected. The GOP picked up 6 seats. In NFL language, the GOP beat the point spread by 11 seats, giving them a relative and absolute seat gain.

### **In July Could We Have Predicted the GOP House Gains?**

The surge and decline model would lead a disinterested person to have predicted in July 2002 that the GOP probably would do okay in November, assuming the redistricting of 2001 produced the typical outcome (of GOP gerrymanders in some states, Democratic gerrymanders in others, bipartisan incumbent-protection gerrymanders in the remainder – and neither party getting away with much overall). But is there anything in the research that would have led a reasonable person to conjecture that the GOP might actually more than hold its own in November (again, barring some last minute cataclysm)?

The issue environment shaped by the campaigns and a lot of other campaign-related events from August to November could have had an effect on the election. But one important thing had already been decided months before – who the candidates would be – and the process of candidate selection for the 2002 elections probably also benefited the Republicans. Consider another widely accepted model of congressional elections – the "strategic politician."

### **Strategic Politicians**

Ambitious politicians, always mindful of their next promotion, must calculate how long to stay in their current office (where factors associated with their incumbent status virtually assure continued reelection) and when to run for the next office up the hierarchy – something that is usually more risky than staying put. One rule they use to make a decision is how good they *expect* the political environment to be for their candidacy. The data that political scientists have collected on this look pretty solid. When the political environment seems to favor the Republicans, the GOP has the better crop of candidates, and they seem

to be well financed. The Democrats have the better candidates (also well financed) when the political environment favors the Democrats. We have, in short, found that a party's best candidates run for that higher level office when they expect the environment to be positive. If it looks like the political environment will help the other party, the ambitious politician tends to remain where s/he is and await a more promising year.

The underlying propositions in the strategic politician model are straightforward.

- ✓ Many to most politicians in contemporary America are professional, life-long office-seekers. Four or so years of "public service" and back to the farm, law office, or insurance business is relatively uncommon except for the most low-level offices.
- ✓ Most political careers are planned movements up the hierarchy of offices (city council or prosecutor, to state legislature, to the House, to governor, to the Senate, topping out at the presidency). Every politician does not follow the same route, and all don't continue to climb, but there is a clear path on which pols-in-training learn their craft. Every now and again a Ronald Reagan, Jesse Ventura, or Jon Corzine moves laterally from the movies, "sports," or business to high office – but only rarely.
- ✓ Losing does little or nothing to promote a successful political career. A core rule requires the career politician to always win reelection and *carefully calculate when to seek that next office up the ladder.*

The key to understanding why the strategic politician model might have expected GOP gains in 2002 is the second part of the core rule, above: *calculate carefully when to seek that next office up the ladder.* The expected political environment is calculated a year or more before the election. Final decisions to run – to begin planning a campaign, identifying key staff and consultants, touching base with key supporters, laying the foundation for raising the necessary money, and so forth – happens a year or more before the election.

In November and December of 2001, when ambitious politicians who wanted to move-up to the House had to make a decision, the assault on the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan was having great success (and producing rousing media coverage). George Bush's personal appeal and job approval ratings were extraordinarily high. Any reasonable estimate of the political climate would have concluded that the Republicans were likely to enjoy a supportive election environment in September and October of 2002.

If the 2002 election conformed to the basic pattern, therefore, we would have observed a more talented group of Republicans than Democrats running in the competitive districts. Open districts should have stronger Republican than Democrats. Putatively vulnerable Democratic incumbents should have expected a more formidable than usual Republican challenger. GOP incumbents thought to be vulnerable would have drawn a slightly less formidable than average Democratic challenger. Since, at the margin, candidate characteristics matter to voters, the Republicans entered the 2002 congressional races with a better crop of candidates when it mattered and, therefore, had a better than even chance to win more of the competitive districts.

### **So What's the Surprise in 2002?**

The surge and decline and strategic politician models explain the results of most congressional election outcomes very well. How well do they explain the 2002 outcome?

We have the answer for the surge and decline model because we have the data. Since the 1994 shift in the party balance in the House, the GOP has won an average of 225 seats. The narrow Bush win in 2000 was accompanied by a Republican House delegation of 223, two seats **below** the average win. There was no *a priori* reason to think that, absent a surge in 2000, we should expect a decline – much less a 25 seat decline in 2002.

We do not have data yet for the differential level of candidate quality in 2002, although political scientists are certainly collecting it. But if 2002 is similar to other congressional contests and my characterization of the November/December 2001 political environment as essentially pro-Republican is accurate, we should expect the GOP to have had a better group of candidates where it mattered in the competitive districts. If they did (and I suspect they did), some Republican pickup of seats seemed reasonable to expect.

Ergo: If I was forced to speak plainly in July of 2002 I would have had the preceding thoughts and said: “It’s probably going to be a wash. The Republicans might gain a few seats.”

### **The Senate, Governorships, and other Offices.**

I don’t have much to say about them right now. I’m not sure what the data show on a lot of these races. I think the strategic politician model may have something to offer by way of understanding the unanticipated Republican success in the Senate races. The key there may be twofold. First, quite simply, Republicans pondering a Senate run might have calculated the same positive environment observed by their colleagues who decided to run for the House. Second, and this may be more relevant, is the widely reported role of the White House and national-level GOP figures in recruiting stronger than average candidates. As with the House, *ceteris paribus*, strong candidates do better than not-so-strong candidates. George Bush’s campaigning also probably helped, but how is a story that can be told another time.

What should be clear at this point, is that the next time pundits of various stripes starting confidently predicting “*the* midterm decline” you keep in mind what political scientists have long known about how congressional elections produce midterm declines under *some* conditions. They do not always happen. The decline conditions were absent in 2002, and so was the decline.