Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections*

by

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Abstract

One mystery of US politics is why the president's party regularly loses congressional

seats at midterm. Although presidential coattails and their withdrawal provide a partial

explanation, coattails cannot account for the fact that the presidential party typically

performs worse than normal at midterm. This paper addresses the midterm vote separate

from the presidential year vote, with evidence from generic congressional polls

conducted during midterm election years. Polls early in the midterm year project a

normal vote result in November. But as the campaign progresses, vote preferences

almost always move toward the out party. This shift cannot be construed as a negative

referendum on the president, as midterms do not show a pattern of declining presidential

popularity or increasing salience of the president's performance. The shift is in accord

with "balance" theory, where the midterm campaign motivates some to vote against the

party of the president in order to achieve policy moderation.

One running mystery about American politics is that the winning presidential party almost always loses congressional seats at the next midterm election. For a run of 15 straight midterm elections, 1938-1994, the presidential party suffered seat losses at midterm. In 1998, the president's Democratic party gained seats but did actually suffer a slight decline in its share of the national vote. Bush's Republicans triumphantly won both seats and vote share in 2002, but of course not in 2006. Measured in terms of the share of the two-party vote rather than seats, the longest run of midterm loss was an astounding 18 out of 18 trials, 1930-1998. (The famous exception of the Democratic seat gain of 1934 resulted even as the out-party Republicans gained in the national vote share.)

At one time the prevailing explanation for midterm loss was Angus Campbell's (1966) "surge-and- decline" theory. According to surge-and-decline, the winning presidential party's congressional support surges in response to "short-term partisan forces" in the "high-stimulus" presidential year. These waxing forces (or presidential "coattails" in common parlance) then wane in the following midterm election as the outcome returns to the "normal" (largely party-line) vote due to the "low-stimulus" status of the midterm campaign.[1]

Surge-and-decline could readily account for much of the regularity of midterm loss, if it were not that only some of its assumptions are factually correct. It is true, of course, that congressional parties perform better in presidential years when the party's presidential candidate does well. This is the coattail phenomenon. However the prediction of a persistent normal vote at midterm is clearly wrong, as we can see from the fact that the variance of the two-party vote for the House of Representatives is more than

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[1] James Campbell (1997) has a good accounting of traditional surge-and-decline and coattail theories.

twice as high in post-WWII midterms (13.6) than for post-WWII presidential years (6.5 percentage points).

Not only do midterm verdicts have a greater variance than those from "high stimulus" presidential elections; even the average midterm verdict does not display the partisan neutrality one would expect with a normal vote. Typically, the presidential party's vote sags at midterm more than it surged in the previous presidential year. Figure 1 presents the accounting for the 16 post-WWII midterm cycles. The first panel shows the pattern of vote change from presidential year to midterm year. The second and third panels show the two components. The second panel shows that in presidential years, each party typically gains 2.7 percentage points more of the vote when it wins the presidency. This is the yield from coattails or the first component of "surge-and-decline." The third panel shows that, for midterms, each party typically earns 4.1 more percentage points when it does *not* hold the president. (Both regularities pass the test of statistical significance.) Thus the on-year surge is typically offset by an even bigger off-year slump.

—Figure 1 about here—

Clearly, a full explanation for midterm loss must account for the midterm slump. Among congressional election scholars, considerable attention has focused on the circumstances at midterm, particularly the popularity of the president. Presidents decline in popularity from their initial honeymoon period, and the degree of popularity can matter at midterm (Tufte, 1975; Kernell, 1977; James Campbell, 1997; Jacobson, 2004.).[2] According to what is sometimes labeled "referendum theory," the slide in presidential

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[2] James Campbell (1997) offers a revised surge-and-decline theory to account for change in terms of the traditional presidential year surge but with a midterm vote that is not necessarily the party line "low stimulus election" result predicted by Angus Campbell's traditional surge-and-decline theory.

popularity helps to account for midterm loss. But referendum theory has one weak link if it is to explain the midterm slump. As detailed below, presidents' approval levels are *not* particularly low at midterm compared to other non-honeymoon periods. With majorities typically "approving" the president's performance at midterm, it is difficult to claim that the presidential party's typical poor showing in midterm elections is due to voter disillusionment with how the president is handling the job.

This leads to still a third way of accounting for midterm loss, so-called "balance" theory. In the formulation of Alesina and Rosenthal (1990, 1994), the electorate is inclined to boost the support for the out party at midterm from a desire for balance in terms of ideology or policy. Policy is seen as the result of the averaged party composition of Congress and the presidency. While congressional control is divisible by party, the Presidency is not. Thus, net policy must be right of the median voter during Republican administrations and to the left during Democratic administrations. Balancing at midterm offers the ideological correction. By putting their collective thumbs on the scale in favor of the out party when voting at midterm, voters move policy back toward the center.

"Balancing" theory has its own issues. Most obviously, the theory lost some luster when it failed to predict the gaining party in the 1998 and 2002 midterm elections. The theory must reckon with the corollary that voters might sometimes balance in advance—in presidential years when landslide victories are universally anticipated (Scheve and Toms, 1999). Anticipatory balancing could minimize midterm loss by offsetting coattail effects. Presumably voters who balance in a presidential year will persist in this behavior in the following midterm.

Some see ideological balancing as beyond the capability of the typical voter. This criticism may have bite when applied to "thick" balance theories, such as Mebane's (2000) complex model of the midterm vote as an *N*-person game involving voter coordination. A "thin" version of the theory requires only the presence of policy differences between the parties to motivate some voters. The cognitive requirement in this instance is that the voter have some perception of and interest in the parties' general policy differences plus know which party the president belongs to.

The present paper addresses that portion of midterm loss generated during the midterm year. Coattails and their withdrawal provide a partial explanation of midterm loss stemming from the previous presidential election. We seek to tell the rest of the story. We ask: do parties do better at midterm if out of power because of dissatisfaction with presidential performance (referendum theory) or from the policy gain increasing the legislative standing of the out party?[3] We examine the shift in the vote, as measured in public opinion polls, over the course of the midterm campaign. We do so by making use

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[3] Variations of these theories also deserve mention here. One is Jacobson and Kernell's (1983) "strategic politicians" theory. It says that congressional election outcomes are in large part generated by politicians anticipating the trends and capitalizing on them. For instance, if the midterm year is seen as a good year for the out party, the out party can draw strong challengers while the presidential party draws poor challengers. In the extreme, the politicians' beliefs about the political climate generate a self-fulfilling prophesy. However, strategic politicians theory is best seen as a complement to existing theories—as a reminder that electoral trends driven by referendum or balance processes can accelerate when the politicians believe them to be true.

Kernell (1977) also introduces a "negative voting" model. He posits that supporters of the president tend to stay home rather than vote at midterm, while those who disapprove the president are more motivated to vote. This sort of asymmetrical motivation to vote at midterm could complement either referendum theory or balance theory. By either scenario, abstentions by presidential supporters would produce an aggregate percentage-point result similar to that from voters generally shifting their votes toward the out party. A question would be why we would see this asymmetric motivation to vote at midterm but not on other electoral occasions.

This paper does not directly address either the "strategic politicians" or "negative voting" aspect of midterm loss, as these are supplemental to whether the underlying driving force is referendum behavior or balancing. A "strategic politicians" makes little sense unless politicians are assessing their campaign investments in response to an actual phenomenon of referendum or balancing behavior. A "negative voting" explanation in terms of differential turnout makes little sense unless nonvoting and vote choice respond to the same stimuli.

of a unique data set—the results of national polls predicting the congressional vote in midterm years using the "generic ballot" question, which asks respondents for which party (not candidate) they intend to vote. We have measured generic ballot responses for six separate time periods in the campaign calendar over all 15 midterm election years, 1946-2006. Our central question is whether generic ballot respondents increasingly take the party of the president into account over the course of midterm campaigns. Decisively, we find that they do. We then address whether the reason for increasing motivation to vote for the "out" party at midterm year is due to increasing dissatisfaction with the president's performance. We find that it is not. Thus our conclusion is as follows. As citizens focus more on their vote decision in the run-up to the election, their decision increasingly takes into account the president's party and that the regularity of this tendency is not attributable to perceptions of poor presidential performance.

Balancing Theory and Midterm Electorates

Balancing in congressional midterm elections can be modeled to predict the behavior of an informed policy oriented electorate. See Alesina and Rosenthal (1994) for the basic statement. Their formal model assumes an electorate of rational, informed voters who achieve ideological balance by voting sufficiently against the presidential party in midterm congressional elections to restore an ideological balance between president and Congress. The value of this model for the empirical understanding of voters is not conditional on the assumption of a fully rational electorate. The value is that it offers plausible predictions about voting behavior and election outcomes that should be evident if the motivations of their model just affect some voters some of the time. In short the prediction is not the full restoration of ideological balance following every

midterm election. Rather, the value is in the prediction that the midterm electorate tilts

somewhat against the presidential party due to the behavior of some voters who are

balancing.[4]

As a general prediction applied to actual electorates, the conditions for the

balancing argument to hold are that some voters some of the time are motivated to move

policy closer to their desired policy position and that these voters hold beliefs about the

relevant policy positions that separate the parties. Given the usual choice between a

liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican, the president will have policy choices to

the left (if Democrat) or right (if Republican) than most voters. Congress, a blend of 535

individually elected representatives will on average be closer to national public opinion

than will the president. Thus, conditional on knowing the presidential party, the

electorate can push policy toward the center by voting for the opposition party.[5]

Figure 2 illustrates, using data from the CCES poll of the 2006 election and

congressional roll call data to scale voters and politicians on a common metric. President

Bush is to the right of most voters. Before the election, with Republicans also controlling

Congress, House members were slightly to the right of the median voter. Following the

election of a Democratic House, House members were slightly to the left of center.

—Figure 2 about here—

The 2006 election generated an ideological correction (consistent with balance

theory) but also a predictably modest one. If we imagine where voters saw actual policy

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[4] Note that Alesina and Rosenthal's balance theory is about voting for one office based on the national verdict in the other. It is not about split-ticket voting, as if voters choose from a menu of candidates for various offices based on ideological balance.

[5] Ample research shows that presidents' policy behavior provides voters motivation for balancing, as the party of the president is a powerful predictor of policy (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002; Wlezien, 2004; Poole and Rosenthal, 2007).

on the left-right scale before the election, it would be somewhere between the president's position and that of the Republican Congress, considerably to the right of the median voter. We then imagine a post-election shift to the left, but still somewhat to the right of the median.

Two factors restrict the dynamism of the model. First, obviously, we expect no more than a small subset of voters to decide by strategic balancing based on policy considerations. This is quite different from what the world would be like if everybody did it. (If all voters were strategic balancers in 2006 and capable of coordinating, the result could have been a Congress whose average member was perceived at least as far left from the median as Bush was to the right.)

Second, given the checks and balances of the US system, policy change occurs slowly, not instantaneously with the change of elected personnel. For instance, policy presumably moved farther right under six years of Republican control than it did in the two years of divided rule that followed the 2006 election. Even after the 2008 election brought a Democratic president and even stronger Democratic congressional majorities, policy would not immediately move as far to the left as it was to the right before the election. In other words, we assume that policy moves from the status quo toward the (weighted) midpoint between presidential and Congressional position, but only with a considerable lag. Thus the degree of imbalance at any one time is not just between the median voter and the average of positions, but between the median voter and the slower moving net policy, averaged across issues.[6]

An implication of these restrictions on the dynamism of the model is that balancing behavior can reflect not only the current party balance at midterm but also

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[6] For a discussion of why national policy responds slowly to public opinion, see Erikson et al., 2002.

party balance from the past. Thus, for instance, the 2010 midterm electorate will balance not only Obama's liberalism but also the conservative policies inherited from the Republican political dominance of the early 21st century. If there is also a Democratic president and Congress in place for the 2014 midterm, policy would reflect six years of Democratic dominance and policy shifting further left. The balancing imperative would be a stronger Republican tilt at the 2014 midterm. This would be a manifestation of the "six year itch" (Abramowitz, et al. 1986), the tendency of a party to lose more seats after six years in office than after only two.

Below we show how this theoretical argument has played out in past midterm campaigns. At the campaign outset (early in the midterm year), the generic congressional vote reflects party identification (the "normal vote") plus some mild tendency to vote against the presidential party of two (and four) years earlier, as if to overcome its ideological excesses. Then throughout the midterm campaign, congressional vote preferences shift modestly but inexorably—away from the current presidential party. In short, the campaign teaches the electorate to turn away from the president's party. The process presumably is much as we observe in presidential elections, where the campaign delivers the so-called fundamentals (Gelman and King, 1993). Because the political climate for the president does not as a rule suffer over the midterm year, this behavior is consistent with the balancing argument. The amount of movement is small but the statistical evidence for its existence is strong.

Generic Polls of the Congressional Vote

Going back to 1946, pollsters (initially Gallup alone) have monitored the "generic vote" during midterm campaigns. Generic trial-heat polls ask survey respondents which

party they plan to vote for (or who they want to win) in the upcoming congressional election.[7] We have gathered the record of 831 generic congressional polls in midterm elections years beginning in 1946, from Gallup and (more recently) many other houses, using the Roper Center and pollingreport.com as sources. We measure the generic vote at several intervals leading up to the midterm election date. The earliest feasible reading is for early in the midterm year—241 to 300 days before the election, centering on February of the midterm year. We also measure the generic vote during later intervals— 181 to 240 days, 121 to 180 days, 61-120 days, 31-60 days, and 1-30 days before the election. Based on the modal month for each interval, we can describe the interval midpoints as February, April, June, August, September, and October. For each interval in each of 16 midterm years we pool the available poll readings as described in the appendix.

We measure both the actual vote and the verdicts in the generic congressional polls as two-party percentages. To aid assessment of possible (partisan) poll bias, we measure the vote and the survey-based generic vote not on a 0-to-100 percentage scale but as a deviation from the equal division, 50% Democratic and 50% Republican. Pollsters variously report the generic vote as among "likely voters," "registered voters," or "adults." For the analysis, we adjust the observed poll results to project our best estimates of what the result would be if the poll were a "likely voter" poll.[8] For diagnostic purposes, we conduct parallel analyses using unadjusted polls and additional

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[7] There is a good amount of variation in question wording. Some organizations use the wording "If the election were being held today". Other organizations use "Looking ahead to the congressional elections in November." Still, others use "Thinking about the next election for US Congress." Given what we know about wording effects on presidential trial-heats (Lau, 1994), there is reason to think that the differences matter relatively little, though there may be circumstances where they are consequential (see, e.g., McDermott and Frankovic, 2003).

[8] The appendix details how.

late poll readings reported by Moore and Saad (1997). Using these variations does not substantially affect the results.

From the literature (Erikson and Sigelman, 1995; Moore and Saad, 1997), it is known that the answer to the question "how accurate are the generic polls?" must be nuanced. We know that they perform poorly as point estimates. For instance, a 10-point Democrat lead from early in an election year most likely will translate into a far smaller, approximately 5-point lead on Election Day. However, regression equations accounting for the vote in terms of the generic vote do predict well, as they properly discount the exaggerated sizes of the generic poll leads. In short, when properly interpreted, the generic polls are far better augers of congressional elections than their sometimes ragged reputation would have us believe.

To supplement the generic ballot readings for six time points, we also employ monthly readings of party identification (or "macropartisanship") and of presidential approval. Macropartisanship is a useful measure of underlying partisan sentiment. Similar to our generic vote measure, we measure party identification as the percent Democratic among Democratic and Republican identifiers, relative to the 50-50 baseline. Interestingly, unlike with the generic vote, there is no partisan advantage to being in or out of power at midterm. The mean October macropartisanship is exactly 58.3% Democratic in both the seven midterms with a Democratic president and the nine midterms with a Republican president. Presidential approval is useful for evaluating the hypothesis that midterm year vote trends are driven by evaluations of presidential performance rather than party balancing. We measure approval in the conventional way, using the percent who say they "approve" of the current president's performance. Both

party identification and presidential approval are measured for the exact designated

month rather than the larger time bands required to measure the generic vote at six

waves.[9]

Given that "monthly" data for generic polls, party identification, and presidential

approval are often drawn from the same surveys, there must be considerable overlap in

the respondents comprising the three aggregate measures. This is an advantage, not a

handicap. Overlapping respondents provides leverage; relationships among different

survey-based aggregate variables are more accurate if they are measured for the same

rather than different samples of respondents.

Ideological Balancing and the Midterm Campaign

It is widely agreed that the function of political campaigns is to bring the issues

of the campaign to the voters. In midterm election years, the presidential opposition

party tells voters that they should elect more of its members in order to restore partisan

balance in Washington. In this section we demonstrate that this strategy almost

universally works to change congressional vote preferences over the midterm year, which

contributes to the presidential party's midterm loss. Moreover we will see evidence that

the electoral movement toward the out party accounts for virtually all the shifts in voter

sentiment over the midterm year.

The presidential party and generic ballot trial heats

We begin with the mapping of the generic congressional vote in February of the

midterm year, the earliest time point for which we can get readings for all 16 midterm

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[9] Where monthly data are missing, the monthly reading is interpolated from the readings for surrounding
months.

years of our analysis. By this time point of the campaign, we would expect any coattail effects from the previous presidential election to be withdrawn. From surge and decline theory, we expect a reversion to the "normal vote," a set of vote margins that follow closely from the national division of party identification at the time. We might also expect that, when survey respondents offer their partisan votes for Congress nine months before the election, they are not yet thinking strategically to take into account the presidential party and its policy implications.

—Table 1 about here—

As Table 1 shows, this is what we find but with one twist. The twist is that in February of the midterm year, survey respondents balance the incumbent president from the *previous* term, e.g., expressing more Democratic support in 2010 in response to the Bush presidency. We see this from equation 1, where party identification and the presidential party from the prior term account for almost 90 percent of the variance in the generic vote. The prediction is roughly that the Democratic lead in the vote division using the generic ballot will be about three quarters of the Democratic lead in party identification, modified a bit more than 2 added points either way to the party that was out of power the previous presidential term. In effect, the midterm penalty for being the party of the president two (and four) years earlier partially persists to the following midterm. The existence of this effect of the previous presidential party is difficult to challenge since even with only 16 cases it is statistically significant at the .001 level.

Also of interest from Table 1 is that other variables with obvious potential for predicting voter choice offer no contribution to predicting the generic vote once our two contributing variables are in the equation. Equation 2 shows that in February of the

midterm year, the current presidential party does not yet have an impact. Nor, as equations 3 and 4 show, do the lagged congressional vote or the vote for president from the previous presidential year. Equation 5 shows that these variables collectively do not matter. In effect, when knowing the current party identification of the electorate, prior electoral history does not matter. Importantly, the lack of a presidential vote effect suggests that all coattails from the previous election are withdrawn as of early in the next campaign. This makes sense. If it were the case that coattail votes persisted to the midterm rather than evaporate when the presidential race no longer shares the ticket, coattail withdrawal could not account for midterm loss.

The generic vote in February presents only the baseline starting point. In February, survey respondents are asked to reveal their hypothetical votes for Congress at a time when they have given little thought to the matter. We will see next that as the campaign progresses, the party of the president increasingly affects the generic vote. The equations are shown in Table 2.

—Table 2 about here—

Table 2's equation 6 simply repeats Table 1's equation 2, predicting the generic vote in February from party identification, the lagged presidential party, and the current presidential party. Equations 7-11 uses the same variables to predict the generic vote at later time points of the campaign. Here we can see that the monthly party identification reading throughout the election year predicts the generic vote similarly to what we observe in February. The previous presidential party continues to matter, although arguably fading somewhat in importance. The interesting news is that the current presidential party begins to affect elections, first emerging with a statistically significant

effect (.05) in August (equation 9). By September (equation 10) and again in October (equation 11), the current party coefficient is significant at the .001 level. Clearly, by Fall, voters begin to gravitate away from the presidential party when asked by pollsters.

The size of this "current presidential party" effect on the generic polls, while highly significant, may not seem like much in magnitude—just above 1.5 percent of the vote. With the presidential party dummy scaled as +1 (Democrat) or -1 (Republican), this translates into a net 3 point (or more) differential in terms of the difference between the president being a Democrat or a Republican. Equation 12 shows the estimated effect of the current presidential party to be 1.89 percentage points, for almost a 4-point differential when the votes are actually counted. The lagged presidential party continues to matter as well.

Our interpretation is that midterm voters respond negatively to the policy direction under the previous president and learn to respond negatively to the policy direction under the current president. If the current presidential party also held the presidency during the previous term, the two penalties add together. If the current president party has held the office for only two years, the lagged presidential penalty is subtracted from the current presidential penalty. The result is that when a president is freshly elected, his party's vote support declines over the midterm campaign from a slight advantage over what party identification alone would bring to a slight disadvantage on Election Day. When a presidential party has been in power for six years or longer, however, the party starts with a disadvantage that grows larger over the campaign. This helps explain the variation in midterm loss over time.

The presidential party, generic ballots, and the midterm election outcome

Table 3 returns to the February generic poll results, this time as an independent variable accounting for the actual November vote. The task is to predict the November vote from information available in February. Equation 13 shows the "best" equation with two variables accounting for almost eighty percent of the variance in the vote: the February generic ballot results plus the current presidential party. No other information matters—not February party identification, not the lagged congressional vote, not the lagged presidential vote, and not the lagged presidential party (which, like party identification, is incorporated in the February generic vote).

—Table 3 about here—

The table reveals the relevance of the generic ballot question for predicting midterm congressional elections even as early in February. With a coefficient of 0.44, the generic poll lead in February must be discounted by more than half when predicting the November vote. The intercept is non-significant, suggesting at most a small bias of about a percentage point.[10] Overall, the discounted generic vote lead in February (along with the party of the president) predicts the November vote far better than February polls predict presidential election outcomes.[11]

Of central interest from equation 13 is the highly significant (.001) coefficient for the current presidential party. It indicates that which party holds the presidency makes a difference of over five percentage points (-2.65 x 2) beyond the prediction from the generic polls in February. This differential represents the effect of the campaign between

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[10] When the generic polls are even, the expected vote is a 51-49 point Republican lead.
[11] Early polls in presidential elections are notoriously poor predictors. See Wlezien and Erikson, 2002 and Campbell, 2008.

February and November. Statistically, the predictive power of the presidential party is equivalent to that of the February generic polls when measured by the difference in *t*-values (-5.95 vs. 5.94) or the difference in standardarized "beta" coefficients (-0.73 vs 0.71). To predict the November vote in February, the party of the president is at least as important as the generic polls. And, as equations 14-17 show, to know only the president's party and generic poll results means that other indicators—including party identification and electoral history—are of little use.

Here we have a measure of the effect of the presidential party on the vote shift over the midterm year. One expects the out party to gain 5.3 percentage points (2.65 x 2) from February to November. Since on average a party is only 4.2 percentage points better off at midterm when it does not hold the presidency, our estimate overshoots the net out-party advantage. The gap is made up by the fact that in February the out party is *dis*advantaged by 1.2 percentage points. (This estimate is obtained by predicting the expected two-party vote based on February polls but subtracting out the -2.65 presidential party effect from equation 13.) The next task is to model the vote as a function of the presidential party plus the generic polls at various time points between February and November.

—Table 4 about here—

Table 4 takes this next step. Equations 18-23 predict the November congressional vote from the generic polls plus presidential party at each of the six measured mileposts of the campaign (with equation 18 repeating equation 13 from Table 3, using February polls). Equations 18-23 all present strong and stable fits with the data. No matter when in the campaign the generic ballot results are measured, more than three quarters of the

variance in the vote can be explained. This stability suggests that partisan preferences are firmly in place by the onset of the midterm year and captured by the generic polls.[12] The equations' intercepts are consistently small and non-significant, an indication that the generic polls contain no persistent partisan bias. The coefficients for the generic poll division do not change with the time of the poll—hovering in the very narrow range between 0.46 and 0.51. In effect, poll leads at any point in time are effectively halved by Election Day, *ceteris paribus*.

Our variable of central interest of course is the party of the president. The effect of the presidential party undergoes considerable change over the course of the campaign. Specifically, the coefficient weakens continuously as we use more and more updated polls. The coefficient, which stands as -2.65 in February (equation 18), drops in almost linear fashion over the campaign. By the final increment of time for October (equation 23), the coefficient is only -1.15 and barely statistically significant ($p = .04$).[13]

—Figure 3 about here—

We illustrate with a series of graphs. Figure 3 plots the Democratic vote share by the poll share at the different intervals of time for the 16 midterm election between 1946 and 2006. Using hollow dots to indicate elections under Republican presidents and solid dots to indicate elections under Democrats, we can literally see how balancing structures preferences over time. In the first frame, using polls from 241-300 days before the election, the poll results and the congressional vote align with parallel patterns for

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[12] If one inserts the lagged vote (the congressional vote from the prior presidential election year) as an additional variable on the right-hand side of these equations, its contribution is consistently insignificant. Past voting adds no predictive power once the polls and presidential party are taken into account.
[13] At the *very end* of the campaign*,* the presidential party effect appears to be totally absorbed by the generic vote. Controlling for the final poll in each election year, the estimated effect of presidential party drops to -0.80, with a *p*-value of less than .10.

Democratic and Republican presidents, with a gap of about five percentage points, as implied by equation 13. This gap narrows frame by frame as we use more proximate polling information. By the last 30 days of the campaign, only a small gap remains and the prediction lines for Democratic and Republican presidents approach convergence.

When looking at Figure 3 frame by frame, in effect the generic poll results move laterally to increasingly reflect party balance. Figure 4 shows this. Starting with February readings as the "zero" base, it shows for each of the sixteen midterms the shift in the Democratic vote in the generic polls from February to November. If the president is a Republican, the Democrats gain votes. If the president is a Democrat, the Democrats lose votes. By itself, the presidential party can account for over half of the variance in the February to October shift in the generic vote.[14]

The growing negativity toward the presidential party over the midterm year is consistent with the interpretation that the campaign increasingly influences voters to see a need to enforce party balance. At the beginning of the election year, voters' opinions about the upcoming November election are unformed and, as we have seen, do not reflect much consideration of the party of the president. Over time, voters consider their candidate options and collect information, and increasingly take into account the party of the president into their preferences. The generic polls incorporate the tendency among some voters to balance, and so the presidential party indicator loses strength as the election cycle evolves. That is, the effect of the presidential party is increasingly absorbed by the polls.

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[14] The presidential party coefficient predicting the February to October change in the generic polls from the presidential party is -3.10 (standard error = 0.75; p=.001. The adjusted R squared is .52. The intercept is also significant and negative (-3.59) suggesting that, *ceteris peribus*, the shift in preferences over the midterm campaign tends to favor the Republicans.

—Figure 4 about here—

Before we leave Table 4 and the accompanying figures, one remarkable aspect deserves special discussion. No matter which month the generic polls are measured, the adjusted *R*-squared stays about the same. As the campaign progresses, updating from the latest generic polls (along with the president's party) does not increase one's ability to predict the vote. The degree of predictability, while high, is static. This is as if the campaign brings no new information to the electorate beyond what is in the equations. The equations change as a function of the presidential party effect (which increasingly is absorbed into the generic vote). The conclusion must be that not only do midterm campaigns deliver the message that voting for the out party is desirable; this seems to be the *only* appreciable effect of the campaign on the national vote.[15] If other events affect the national electoral verdict between February and November, over the campaign one would see an increasing ability to predict the election from the latest polls.[16] That this does not happen suggests the absence of unaccounted-for events that affect the vote.

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[15] The corollary argument is that apart from the growing effect of the presidential party, the month to month variation in Figures 1 and 2 represents mainly measurement (sampling) error. Indeed, we have further side-evidence to indicate the variation is mostly sampling error. For both Democratic and Republican presidencies, we can compare the over-time correlations for the generic vote by varying the time gap between readings from one to eight months. A declining correlation between poll readings as the time gap increased would be evidence of real change in the generic vote. Instead, the over-time correlations hold steady in the .90 range regardless of the time gap between readings, consistent with the result that would obtain if the departures from perfect correlation are due to sampling error.

[16] A useful comparison is the ability to predict the vote at various stages of the presidential campaign. As can be seen from Table 4, the estimated standard deviation of the unexplained midterm vote, or root mean squared error (RMSE), is essentially unchanged—for instance 1.83 in April and 1.84 in October. By comparison, if one predicts *presidential* elections by the trial heat polls in April using the eventual presidential candidates, the RMSE is well over 4 points. If one predicts the presidential vote from trial heat polls from the final week of the campaign, the RMSE is 1.94, which is slightly larger than the prediction error from the midterm generic vote. (This might not be a fair comparison, since the presidential readings include the error-filled 1948 observation. From 1952 onward, the final weeks' polls predict the vote with considerable precision. The RMSE is a mere 1.37 based on a .95 adjusted *R*- squared.) These results for presidential elections are based on an analysis of data compiled by the authors.

Party Identification, the Presidential Party, and the Vote

Table 5 completes the basic set of regression equations depicting the evolution of the vote over the midterm campaign. Equations 24-29 predict the November vote from party identification at each of our six measured months, along with dummies for the current and past presidential party. Here, the generic ballot is omitted. Table 5 reveals that the timing of the measurement of party identification does not matter in terms of explained variance in the November vote: the *R*-squared predicting the vote is always about .80, not increasing as party identification is read closer to the election. Note also that these equations predict the vote about as well as do the counterpart equations from Table 4 using the generic ballot results but not party identification or prior presidential party on the right hand side. This suggests that apart from the effect of party identification and the two presidential party variables, there is little else that the generic vote captures other than sampling error.

—Table 5 about here—

When party identification is measured in February (equation 24), the presidential party coefficient is -2.54, about the same as when (equation 18) the control variable is the generic ballot vote. Unlike with the generic vote in the equation, the presidential party coefficient declines only slightly as party identification is measured from readings closer to the election. This is expected, since we do not expect monthly readings of party identification to absorb presidential party effects the same way that successive readings of the generic ballot results do. With the October reading (equation 29, repeating equation 12), the presidential party coefficient is -1.89, a decline of almost 25 percent from the value with the February party identification reading. This suggests that party

identification may absorb some of the presidential party effect—the out party gains slightly in party identification as the election approaches. The reason could be that party identification is absorbing some unmeasured causes of midterm loss over the campaign. It is also plausible that party identification changes slightly as a response to the intended vote. As people become increasingly motivated to vote for the out party, they may also tend to shift their reported party allegiance.

Summary

This section has analyzed the generic congressional election poll results and the electorate's net party identification over 16 midterm election years. At our first measurement in February we find no evidence of electoral balancing. The presidential and opposition parties are at roughly even standing with the electorate. As the campaign progresses, the out party gains an advantage in the polls and ultimately at the ballot box. This change involves only a small percent of the electorate, but it is nearly universal across the sixteen elections. Moreover, the evidence suggests that apart from this growing attraction to the out party, there is little else to cause changes in the national vote.

Our interpretation is that, at the beginning of the election year, voters' opinions about the upcoming November election are unformed and do not reflect much consideration of the party of the president. Over time, as voters begin to focus on the upcoming election, they increasingly take into account the party of the president. Their increasing attraction to the out party is the change generated by the midterm campaign. We attribute this shift in voter sentiment to a growing consideration of the presidential

party and the fact that policy balance can be restored toward the center by electing more members of the opposition party to Congress.

The "Negative Referendum" Theory Revisited

As the midterm campaign progresses, the electorate's vote preference becomes more opposed to the presidential party. While our interpretation has been that this comprises evidence of balancing behavior, the deal is not yet sealed. As an alternative to our account that the electorate learns to vote for the opposition party in order to restore ideological balance, the rival "negative referendum" explanation deserves our consideration. As Tufte (1975) first showed, the midterm vote is influenced by the president's degree of popularity. Does electoral support for the presidential party sag over the midterm year because voters consider the policy implications of the presidential party, as we suggest? Or is the declining support for the presidential party at midterm simply due to voters become disillusioned with the presidential party's performance at governing, as referendum theory suggests? If the presidential degree of support can account for the slide in the presidential party vote, then it is the public reaction to the presidential performance rather than the president's party affiliation that is the cause.

Presidential Approval and Midterm Loss

To test the applicability of referendum theory, we measure political conditions by the president's approval rating in the Gallup Poll. We wish to understand the effect of approval on the vote independent of the trail heat polls. First, we ask, does approval matter? Equations 30-32 in Table 6 model the midterm vote with presidential approval on the right-hand side. Approval is measured as the deviation from 50 percent multiplied by the presidential party dummy variable (+1 if Democrat, -1 if Republican). Choosing

50 percent as the benchmark provides no loss of generality regarding the approval coefficient, which is a statistically significant 0.16.[17] Note, however, that the size of the presidential party coefficient now becomes conditional on approval at 50 percent.[18]

—Table 6 about here—

We can manipulate the presidential party coefficient to become larger or smaller by moving the benchmark up or down from 50 percent. If we move it up to 65.6 percent, we make the presidential approval effect disappear. This is shown in equation 31, which is algebraically equivalent to equation 30. The value 65.6 is the crude estimate of the threshold of approval at which the president must obtain for his party to not be disadvantaged at midterm. If it were the case that presidents typically average about 66 percent approval, there would be no advantage for being the out party in terms of the size of its midterm vote. Since presidents are almost always below 66 percent approval at midterm, the general rule is that a party is better off at midterm when it does not hold the presidency.[19]

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[17] Unlike presidential approval, economic performance has no clear effect on the midterm vote. We tried two economic measures: (1) the October reading of the well-known consumer sentiment index measured by the Survey of Consumer Finance at the University of Michigan; and (2) growth in per capita disposable income as measured by the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Neither variable (multiplied by presidential party) is significant when added to our models, with or without approval in the equation.

[18] In effect the variable created by the product of presidential approval (minus 50 percent) and the presidential party dummy is an interaction term. The coefficient and standard error are unaffected by the choice of 50 percent as the reference point. We could subtract any amount from the percent approval and obtain the same result. The choice of reference point does, however, affect the coefficients for the additive component, the presidential party. This is why we chose 50 percent since it is a useful, seemingly neutral, reference point. Note that we do not include presidential approval in the equation as an additive term. This is because we assume that the effect of approval is identical for Republican and Democratic presidents. This omission saves a precious degree of freedom. The equations of Table 6 are algebraically equivalent to an alternative equation format where the vote variables are measured as the presidential party vote rather than the Democratic vote where the congressional vote is a function of the lagged vote, the presidential party, and presidential approval.   With the alternative format, our usual presidential party effect would be represented by the equation intercept (constant) while our usual intercept (with its trivial value) would be represented by the presidential party coefficient.

[19] Only George W. Bush (2002) and Bill Clinton (1998) bested the 65.6 approval benchmark in October of the midterm year. While his rough estimate of 65.6 percent presidential approval is the value that would neutralize the midterm disadvantage for the presidential party, it does not take into account midterm loss

Equation 32 adds party identification to the variables of equation 30. With this

control, the approval coefficient plunges to 0.08, half its original value. The control for

party identification depresses the estimate of the direct approval effect of approval apart

from its impact on party identification. Evidently, to the extent approval affects the

midterm vote, it is also absorbed by the party identification indicator, which in turn

predicts the vote. Since party identification has been central to our modeling all along, its

absorbing of approval effects constrains the possibilities of further dynamics involving

the president's approval level.[20]

Although we have documented that the midterm verdict is in part a referendum

on the president, it does not follow that this verdict is persistently negative. The

elemental problem with the negative referendum explanation for midterm loss is that as

measured by presidential approval, presidents are *not* unusually unpopular during

midterm campaigns. If presidents always wallow at, say, an abnormally low 30 percent

approval at midterm, the negative referendum explanation would have bite as the

underlying cause for midterm loss. The average presidential approval in October of

midterm years is 54.1%, virtually identical to the long-term average for all months, 1946-

2006 (54.7%). Moreover, October approval in midterms averages 3.1 points *higher* than

in October of the following year and 2.1 points *higher* than in October of the following

presidential year (two years ahead). Even in the nine instances when the president sought

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from the presidential election. Using equations 30 or 31 as a guide, presidents would need on average
around 76 percent approval to overcome both the party's disadvantage at midterm plus the loss of coattails
from the presidential year.

[20] The estimate of the approval effect on party identification is 0.21, with a standard error of 0.11,
controlling for the president's party. Thus, our rough accounting of the approval effect on the vote is as
follows: a "direct effect" of 0.08 plus an indirect effect of 0.21 X 0.35 equals (taking into account rounding
error) the net effect estimate of 0.16.

reelection two years later, the president's approval averages 1.7 points higher at midterm than later when seeking reelection (and winning six of nine times).

Presidential Approval and Midterm Year Electoral Change

Even though as a rule the electorate is not particularly dissatisfied with the president at midterm, one might still argue that the electorate tends to punish the president's party at midterm because (for some reason) it sets the performance bar unusually high at midterm. Thus an alternative interpretation of midterm loss might be that the electorate is passing judgment on the presidential performance and does so while imposing a high standard that usually cannot be met. The obvious challenge to the high-threshold explanation is that it must account for the fact that the electorate is not inclined to punish the presidential party at the start of the midterm year. Could dissatisfaction with the president account for the persistent decline in support for the president's congressional party over the midterm year? There are two possible mechanisms.

Most obviously, even though the president's popularity at midterm is no worse than average, it could be declining from an earlier high at the start of the midterm year—perhaps the residual from the initial honeymoon. If so, a demanding electorate could be satisfied early in the midterm year but then turn against the presidential party as the midterm campaign progresses. Or, even if the president's perceived performance does not decline over the election year, it could become an increasingly relevant factor because it becomes increasingly salient. In other words, just as the campaign could teach the electorate to consider the policy implications of voting for or against the presidential party, it could teach the electorate to consider the president's performance when voting for Congress. A growing focus on presidential performance during the midterm

campaign would dispose a demanding electorate to become increasingly inclined to vote against the president.

First, let us consider the evidence regarding the change in presidential approval from February (when the poll evidence shows no tendency to punish the presidential party) to October (when midterm loss is almost fully incorporated in the polls). Over sixteen midterms, approval declined in nine cases but increases in the other seven. On average over our sixteen midterms, presidential approval declines a modest 3.4 percentage points from February to October. Could this be enough to make a meaningful difference in support for the presidential ticket?[21]

—Table 7 about here—

Table 7 shows some relevant regressions. Equation 33 sets the benchmark, repeating equation 13 (from Table 3) which predicts the Democratic vote from February polls and the president's party. Equation 34 adds the February to October shift in presidential approval times presidential party (+1=Dem, -1=Rep). The coefficient of 0.04 for approval change is small and non-significant, and it hardly detracts from the presidential party effect (coefficients of -2.65 versus -2.55). Clearly, knowing in February the upcoming trend in presidential approval would not help one predict the November election. This result directly refutes the idea that declining presidential approval over the midterm year generates the evolving pattern of midterm rejection of the presidential party.[22]

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[21] We can also examine the change in the economy over the midterm year. Over 15 observations of change from quarter 1 to quarter 3 of midterm years, per capita real income growth rose in 11 years and fell in four. Of 14 observations of change in consumer sentiment from quarter 1 to quarter 3, sentiment rose in 3 but fell in 11 instances. The mean change, however, was a trivial 3 out of 200 points. Economic indicators are far poorer indicators of congressional election success than presidential approval. Also see note 16

[22] It might seem that a useful test would be to regress change in the generic vote on change in presidential approval. A problem arises, however, with the two change variables measured for the same time interval;

Still, a possible "out" for the high-threshold explanation is that, just as with the "balancing" explanation, the electorate does not incorporate thinking about the president's job performance until late in the campaign. If this were the case, we would see the electorate moving away from the early generic polls in response to presidential approval. To test this idea, equations 35 regresses the November vote on February generic polls, the presidential party, and February approval. The test is whether approval's entry in the equation diminishes the presidential party effect. Clearly it does not. Knowing the president's standing with public opinion in February has no bearing on the midterm election year trajectory of the vote beyond what the equation's other variables reveal; the presidential party effect holds firm with February approval controlled. Equation 36 substitutes October approval for February approval. Again the coefficient is not significant (t-value =1.80) and there is no impact on the other terms of the equation. Knowing in advance in February of the midterm year how the president will stand with the public in October has little bearing on the trajectory of preferences over the campaign. As before, the key predictor is the party of the president.[23]

given that thee two measures share some of the same respondents, they share sampling error. (E.g., an unusually Republican sample at time 2 would have an artificially pro-Republican generic vote and an artificially pro-Republican approval score.) Comparing October to February readings, the regression of change in the generic vote on the change in approval is 0.24, with a significant .01 *p*-values. However, this correlation suffers from the correlated errors problem mentioned above. A better test is to relate change in the generic vote from April to October on change in approval from February to August. Here, the two measures are from different sets of time points, thus not sharing sampling error. The regression coefficient now drops to 0.06, with a .*p*-value of .43.

[23] As a further test, we can predict the "vote" in generic polls, February to October, and observe whether the coefficient for approval changes. When the equations of Table 2 are replicated with the addition of either current or lagged (one month) presidential approval, the coefficients are always small and not significant. The implication is that the effects of presidential approval on current preferences are largely absorbed by current party identification. The approval coefficients do not increase with time. If anything the coefficients decline over time. For instance, using current approval, the trivial coefficients are 0.06 for February and -0.03 for October. When party identification is omitted from these equations, the coefficient for current approval declines from a significant 0.19 in February to a nonsignificant 0.13 in October. Using lagged approval the decline is from 0.22 (February) to 0.10 (October). Clearly there is no evidence that generic poll respondents increasingly take their evaluations of the president into account when casting their

The remarkable aspect of equation 36 is that the effect of presidential approval as measured in October is already mainly absorbed by polls as measured in February. The president's standing in the polls does not change much over the midterm year and when it does change it is not clear that it matters much since the vote, apart from the impact of the presidential party, is fairly well set by February. The one change in every midterm campaign is the growing negative impact of the president's party.

Summary

This section has tested the rival hypothesis that the negative trajectory is the result of voters reacting negatively to the president's performance at midterm. While the national vote margin for the presidential party is affected by the president's approval rating, presidents are not unusually unpopular at midterm. And the pattern of decline in presidential popularity over the midterm year is too small and ragged to account for the negative shift. Moreover, there is no evidence that the president's popularity becomes a more salient factor to the electorate over the midterm campaign. In short, we find no empirical support for the idea that the midterm sag in electoral fortunes of congressional candidates of the presidential party is the product of a negative referendum on presidential performance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The pattern of midterm loss for the presidential party is a function of an advantage for the winning party in the presidential election followed by an advantage for the losing party at the subsequent midterm. While much attention has focused on the former

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hypothetical congressional ballots.

phenomon, the latter is actually of greater importance, as parties typically gain more at midterm by having lost the presidential election than they gained when they won the presidency. This paper has focused on the vote at midterm, concentrating on the trends in partisan vote preference over the sixteen most recent midterm years. We do not challenge the presence of a presidential year surge or the introduction of coattails and their withdrawal as part of the explanation. Our search has been for the component of midterm loss that results from the behavior of voters in the midterm year.

The main contribution of this paper to the discussion of midterm loss derives from our exploitation of a valuable data source—the many "generic ballot" polls regarding the upcoming congressional vote that are conducted throughout the midterm campaign. Throughout the midterm campaign, the generic polls help to predict the vote along with the party of the president. Our analysis of this data provides clues supporting the "balance" explanation for midterm loss.

The compelling fact is that with near uniformity, preferences in the generic ballot polls shift toward the out party over the midterm year; in February one can predict the midterm vote better by knowing the president's party than knowing the generic poll results. Early in the campaign, voters tell pollsters their party choice without much thought beyond the immediate political environment. The electorate's vote trajectory over the campaign is toward the out-party, as if the value of balance becomes clear once the voters focus on their November decision.[24]

Our results do not mean that the midterm vote is unaffected by the president's popularity, as we have shown that it is. They do mean that the effects are already largely

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[24] The results are at least as strong if not stronger if we substitute the two-party division of House seats for the two-party vote in the various equations. The results also hold for the partisan division of Senate seats up for election.

absorbed in the generic polls as of February of the election year, however. Between

February and Election Day, the presidential party's vote strength almost always declines,

and the degree of decline is unrelated to the public's evaluation of the president. Clearly,

during the midterm election year, the electorate shifts away from the presidential party in

its vote choice for reasons that have nothing to do with the electorate's attitudes toward

the president. By default, this is balancing: the electorate votes against the presidential

party to give more power to the other party, but does not incorporate this motivation in its

thinking until Election Day approaches.

     The alternative interpretation of our findings is that midterm voters simply turn

negative against the incumbent president as if for no reason although this bias against the

sitting president is absent at other times, not even in the Spring of the midterm year. We

prefer a purpose-driven explanation: a desire to balance the policies of the parties. We

often find resistance to this idea on the grounds that it taxes the cognitive capability of

ordinary voters. But all that is required is that some voters know and care about the

parties' policy tendencies and also know which party holds the presidency.[25]

     We end up with two separate but compatible explanations for midterm loss. In

presidential years, the winning presidential party is advantaged in the congressional

elections, due to the surge/coattails phenomenon. As we have examined here, at

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[25] Some will say that our theory of a policy-driven motivation requires testing with survey respondents as opposed to mere aggregates of actual voters. What this test should be is not clear, as the independent variable known as the president's party is common knowledge to all. One might pursue whether voting against the presidential party is most frequent among certain types of voters more than others. These could be respondents who tell pollsters they prefer some form of balance, although being influenced by the presidential party does not require consciousness of the motivation to balance. Or they could be respondents who appear more politically knowledgeable, a group more likely to take policy considerations into accounts. The value of survey analysis is limited, however, by the fact that the presidential penalty at midterm is only a few percentage points. While a differential of this size appears large in the context of aggregate analysis, searching for a difference of a few percentage points is like looking for a needle in a haystack at the individual level.

midterm the presidential party is disadvantaged, as the electorate shifts its preferences to

the out party. Together these two components generate the regularity of midterm loss.

Appendix: The Generic Poll Data

Exactly 816 generic polls for the 16 midterm election years between 1946 and 2006 were collected from the Roper archives, Pollingreport.com The polls measure congressional vote choice preferences among likely voters, registered voters or national adult samples. Where survey organizations report multiple results for the same polling dates, reflecting different sampling universes, the most exclusive sample was retained for the analysis. For example, where a survey house reports poll results for both an adult sample and a registered voter sample, we use data from the latter. Where a survey house reports poll results for both registered voters and a sample of likely voters, we use data for the latter. The number of polls conducted among each sample type per interval studied is shown in Table A1 below.

Table A1. The Generic Poll Data by Time Interval

	241-300 Days Out	181-240 Days Out	121-180 Days Out	61-120 Days Out	31-60 Days Out	1-30 Days Out
National Adult Population	46	49	59	66	53	58
Registered Voters	37	32	48	70	62	63
Likely Voters	18	15	18	15	41	66
TOTAL	101	96	125	151	159	199

When we merge multiple polls over a given time interval, it is desirable to weight the polls by their sample sizes. To do this, we calculate the number of respondents who said they would vote Democratic and the number of respondents who said they would vote Republican for each poll. Some generic polls did not have a record of their sample size. We impute this figure based on predictions from regressing sample size on year, universe and polling organization indicators. We sum the number of Democratic and Republican voters within each sample type

and midterm election year. We then calculate the valid percent of Democratic voters as the number of Democratic voters over the total number of major party voters.

By this point, we have units of analysis that vary according to midterm election year and sample type. The challenge is to collapse disparate sample types. In the regression results studied in this paper, an adjustment was made to the vote preference of registered voters and national adults, which tend to be more Democratic than likely voters. The adjustment is calculated by predicting the percent saying they are voting Democratic by indicators for the survey sample type and for the election year. Likely voters are the excluded or base category in the set of indicators for sample type. Therefore, the coefficients for registered voters and national adults indicate the extent to which those samples deviate from the likely voter samples in their reported vote preference. The adjustment was made by subtracting the value of the relevant coefficient from the vote preferences of registered voters and adult samples. Then, the poll results are reweighted according to the number of respondents in each sample type and combined to yield one estimate of the Democratic vote preference per midterm election year.

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Table 1. FEBRUARY POLLS. Predicting the Generic Vote in February Polls, 16 Midterm Years 1946-2006

Dependent Variable = February Generic Poll Results
(% Dem. minus 50%)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Party Identification in February (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.72 (0.08)***	0.71 (0.08)***	0.66 (0.09)***	0.72 (0.08)***	0.66 (0.11)***
Lagged Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	-2.31 (0.53)***	-2.35 (0.54)***	-2.14 (0.52)**	-2.49 (0.59)***	-2.14 (0.77)*
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)		0.27 (0.57)			-0.24 (1.08)
Lagged Congressional Vote (% Dem. minus 50%)			0.33 (0.25)		0.36 (0.34)
Lagged Presidential Vote (% Dem. minus 50%)				0.07 (0.10)	0.02 (0.21)
Intercept	0.74 (0.88)	0.88 (0.95)	0.50 (0.88)	0.80 (0.91)	0.38 (1.08)
Adjusted R squared	.88	.87	.89	.87	.87
RMSE	2.08	2.15	2.03	2.13	2.21

Note: "February" polls actually represent polls from 241 to 300 days in advance of the election. Generic poll results and all vote variables are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent. Party identification is measured as the Democratic percent of Democratic or Republican partisans, minus 50 percent.
$* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001$

Table 2. THE GENERIC VOTE AT VARIOUS STAGES OF THE CAMPAIGN. Predicting Generic Ballot Poll Results at Different Time Intervals from Party Identification and the Presidential Party, 16 midterm elections, 1946-2006.

Dependent Variable = Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)

	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	241-300 Days Out	181-240 Days Out	121-180 Days Out	61-120 Days Out	31-60 Days Out	1-30 Days Out	Election Day Vote
	(Feb.)	(April)	(June)	(August)	(Sept.)	(Oct.)	(Nov.)
Party Identification (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.71 (0.08)***	0.77 (0.12)***	0.91 (0.09)***	0.86 (0.10)***	0.83 (0.06)***	0.73 (0.06)***	0.39 (0.07)***
Lagged Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R)	-2.35 (0.54)***	-1.15 (0.66)	-0.93 (0.47)	-1.78 (0.53)**	-2.25 (0.37)***	-1.57 (0.36)***	-1.25 (0.40)**
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	0.27 (0.57)	-0.07 (0.66)	-0.64 (0.48)	-1.62 (0.55)*	-1.90 (0.38)***	-1.56 (0.36)***	-1.89 (0.40)***
Intercept	-2.35 (0.54)***	0.55 (1.16)	-0.46 (0.86)	-0.84 (1.02)	-1.59 (0.64)*	-1.04 (0.70)	-1.04 (0.70)
Adj. R^2	.87	.77	.88	.85	.93	.93	.82
Root MSE	2.15	2.56	1.86	2.12	1.49	1.43	1.59

Note: Generic poll results are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent. Party identification is measured as the Democratic percent of Democratic or Republican partisans, minus 50 percent. Party identification is measured for the indicated month except that for predicting the actual vote, party i.d. in October (rather than November) is used.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3. FROM FEBRUARY TO ELECTION DAY. Predicting the Midterm Congressional Vote from Generic Vote in February Polls plus other Variables, 16 midterm Years 1946-2006

		Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Actual Two–Party Vote in November, minus 50%			
	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)
February Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.44 (0.08)***	0.37 (0.15)*	0.41 (0.10)***	0.42 (0.09)***	0.42 (0.09)***
Party Identification in February (% Dem. minus 50%)		0.08 (0.13)			
Lagged Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)				-0.28 (0.50)	
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	-2.65 (0.45)***	-2.70 (0.46)***	-2.80 (0.54)***	-2.58 (0.47)***	-2.83 (0.83)*
Lagged Congressional Vote (% Dem. minus 50%)			0.15 (0.27)		
Lagged Presidential Vote (% Dem. minus 50%)					-0.07 (0.14)
Intercept	-1.26 (0.72)	-1.42 (0.79)	-1.39 (0.78)	-1.05 (1.62)	-1.13 (0.80)
Adjusted R squared	.78	.77	.77	.77	.77
RMSE	1.72	1.77	1.77	1.77	1.77

Note: "February" polls actually represent polls from 241 to 300 days in advance of the election. Generic poll results and all vote variables are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent. Party identification is measured as the Democratic percent of Democratic or Republican partisans, minus 50 percent. *p<.05.**p<.01,***p<.001.

***Table 4. CAMPAIGN DYNAMICS OVER VARYING TIME INTERVALS. Predicting
Midterm Congressional Vote from the Generic Ballot Poll Results at different times
plus Presidential Party, 16 midterm elections 1946-2006***

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Actual Two–Party Vote in
November, minus 50%

	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)
	241-300 Days Out	181-240 Days Out	121-180 Days Out	61-120 Days Out	31-60 Days Out	1-30 Days Out
	(Feb.)	(April)	(June)	(August)	(Sept.)	(Oct.)
Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.44*** (0.08)	0.48*** (0.09)	0.48*** (0.09)	0.47*** (0.09)	0.47*** (0.07)	0.52*** (0.10)
Current Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-2.65*** (0.45)	-2.29*** (0.46)	-2.07*** (0.48)	-1.60** (0.46)	-1.45** (0.42)	-1.15* (0.49)
Intercept	-1.26 (0.72)	-1.10 (0.75)	-1.00 (0.78)	-0.91 (0.71)	-0.31 (0.56)	0.05 (0.61)
Adj. R^2	.78	.76	.74	.76	.81	.75
Root MSE	1.72	1.82	1.89	1.80	1.61	1.84

Note: Generic poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the
two-party vote minus 50 percent.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5. CAMPAIGN DYNAMICS OVER VARYING TIME INTERVALS. Predicting Midterm Congressional Vote from the Party Identification at different times plus Presidential Party, 16 midterm elections 1946-2006

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50% (November)

	(24)	(25)	(26)	(27)	(28)	(29)
	241-300 Days Out	181-240 Days Out	121-180 Days Out	61-120 Days Out	31-60 Days Out	1-30 Days Out
	(Feb.)	(April)	(June)	(August)	(Sept.)	(Oct.)
Party Identification (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.33 (0.06)***	0.38 (0.09)***	0.43 (0.08)	0.42 (0.08)***	0.37 (0.07)***	0.39 (0.07)***
Lagged Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R)	-1.26 (0.41)**	-0.94 (0.48)	-1.08 (0.42)*	-1.26 (0.43)*	-1.48 (0.42)**	-1.25 (0.40)**
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	-2.54 (0.43)***	-2.24 (0.48)***	-2.30 (0.43)***	-2.32 (0.44)***	-2.27 (0.43)***	-1.89 (0.40)***
Intercept	-1.05 (0.72)	-0.94 (0.84)	-1.22 (0.77)	-1.38 (0.83)	-0.87 (0.71)	-1.04 (0.70)
Adj. R^2	.81	.75	.80	.79	.80	.82
Root MSE	1.63	1.85	1.67	1.71	1.66	1.59

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 6. PREDICTING THE MIDTERM CONGRESSIONAL VOTE FROM OCTOBER PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL, 16 midterm elections 1946-2006

|	Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50% (November)		
	(30)	(31)	(32)
October Presidential Approval (minus 50%) X Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	0.16 (0.07)*		0.08 (0.05)
October Presidential Approval (minus 65.6%) X Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)		0.16 (0.07)*	
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	-2.46 (0.73)**	0.00 (0.73)	-2.27 (0.51)***
Party Identification (% Dem. minus 50%)			0.35 (0.09)
Intercept	2.73 (0.76)**	2.73 (0.76)**	-0.45 (0.98)
Adj. R^2	.43	.43	.72
Root MSE	2.80	2.80	1.95

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

**Table 7. PREDICTING THE VOTE FROM PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL, 16 midterm elections 1946-2006**

| | Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50% (November) | | | |
	(33)	(34)	(35)	(36)
February Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.44 (0.08)***	0.49 (0.10)***	0.40 (0.10)***	0.40 (0.07)***
Change in Approval (Feb. to Oct.). X Pres. Party		0.04 (0.06)		
February Presidential Approval (minus 50) X Pres. Party (1=D, -1=R.)			0.03 (0.04)	
October Presidential Approval (minus 50) X Pres. Party (1=D, -1=R.)				0.08 (0.04)
Current Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R.)	-2.65 (0.45)***	-2.56 (-.47)***	-2.76 (0.48)***	-2.79 (0.42)***
Intercept	-1.26 (0.72)	-1.47 (0.79)	-0.91 (0.88)	0.61 (0.76)
Adjusted R squared	.78	.78	.78	.82
RMSE	1.72	1.75	1.75	1.59

*Note*: Poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent.

Midterm Vote *Change* = − **Presidential Year Vote** + **Midterm Year Vote**
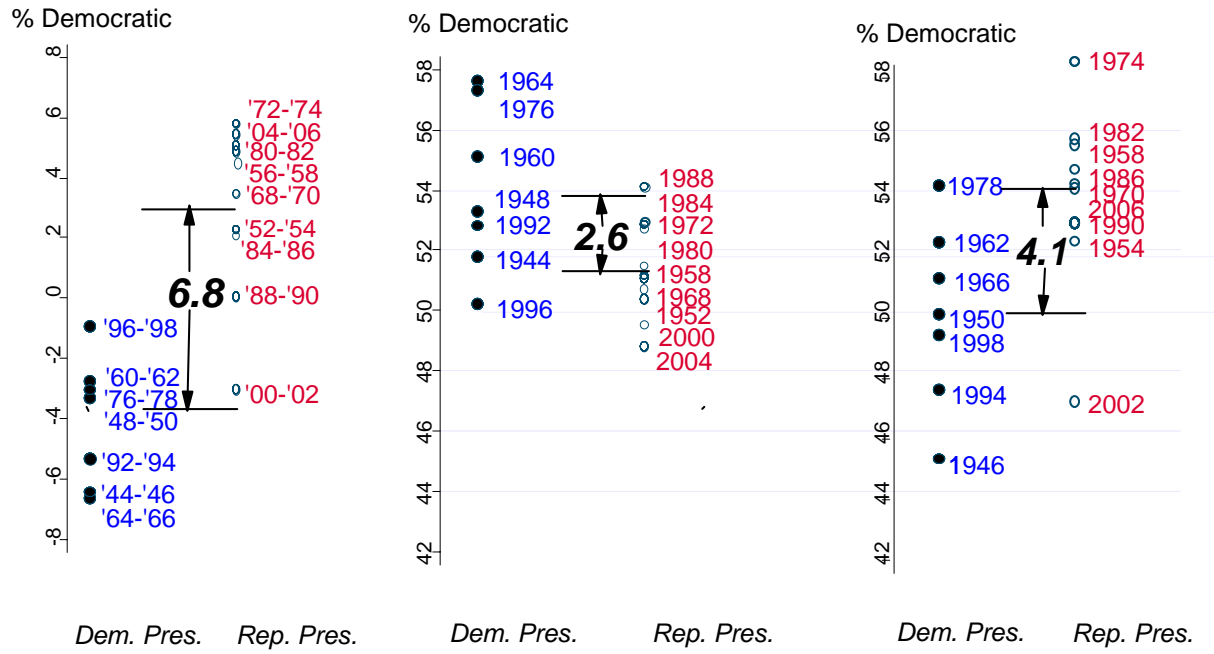
Figure 1. Midterm Loss as the Subtraction of the Presidential Year Vote from the Midterm Year Vote, 1944-46—2004-06.
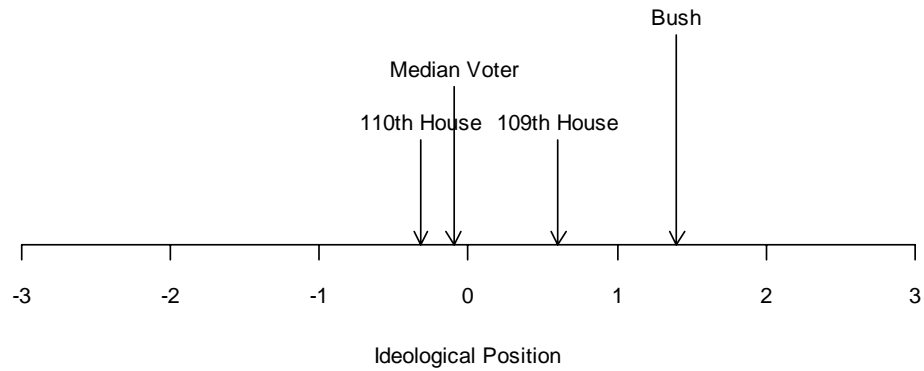
**Figure 2. The Ideological Positions of the House, President and Voters on a
Common Scale.** Ideal points based on roll call data and CCES survey interviews. House
ideal points represent the median member. Source: Adopted from Bafumi and Herron,
"Preference Aggregation, Representation, and Elected American Political Institutions."
Unpublished Manuscript.
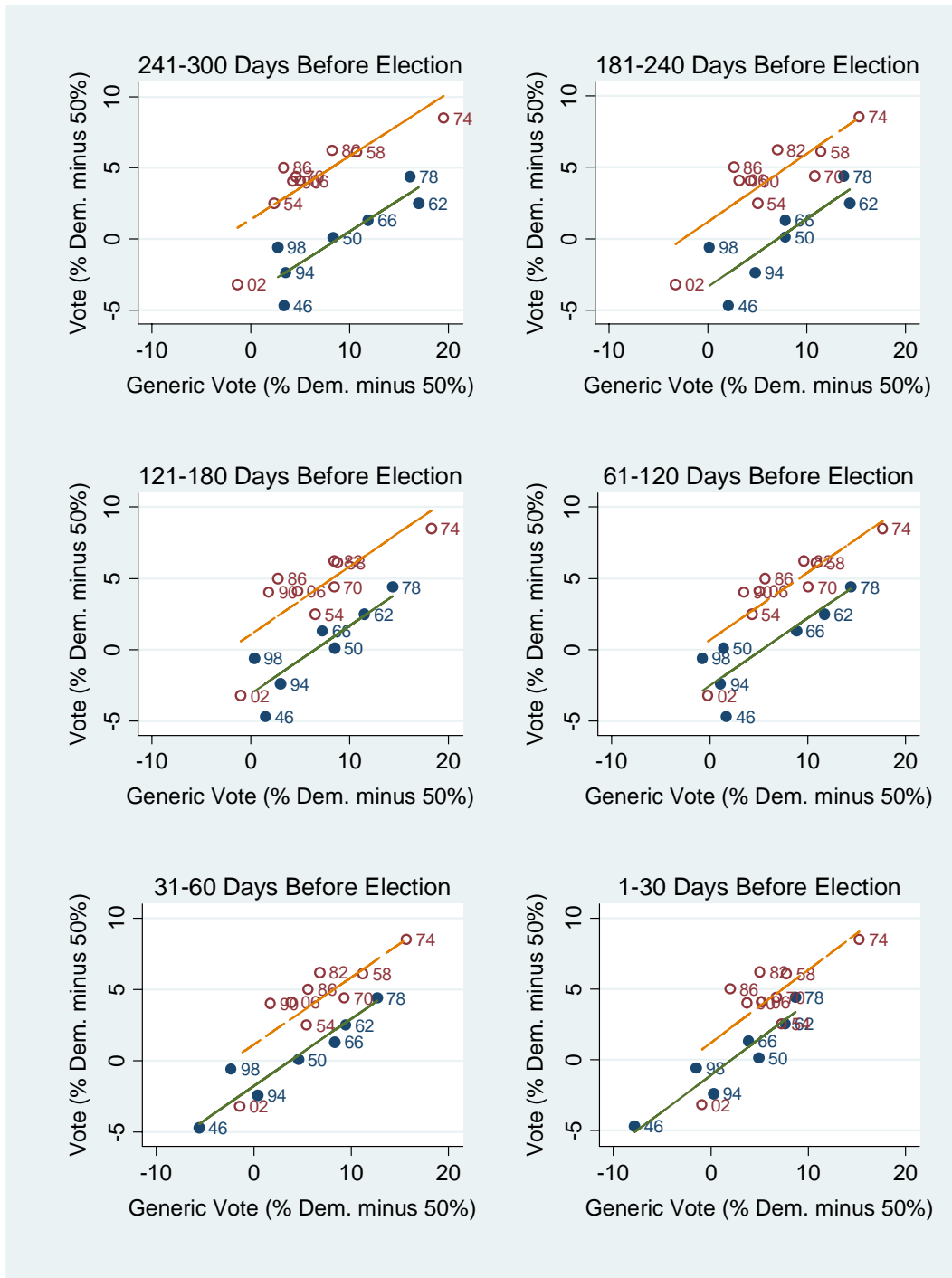
Figure 3. Midterm Congressional Vote by the Generic Vote in the Polls at the Different Time Intervals. *Elections with Democratic Presidents in office are represented by solid dots and solid prediction lines. Elections with Republican presidents in office are represented by hollow dots and dashed prediction lines.*
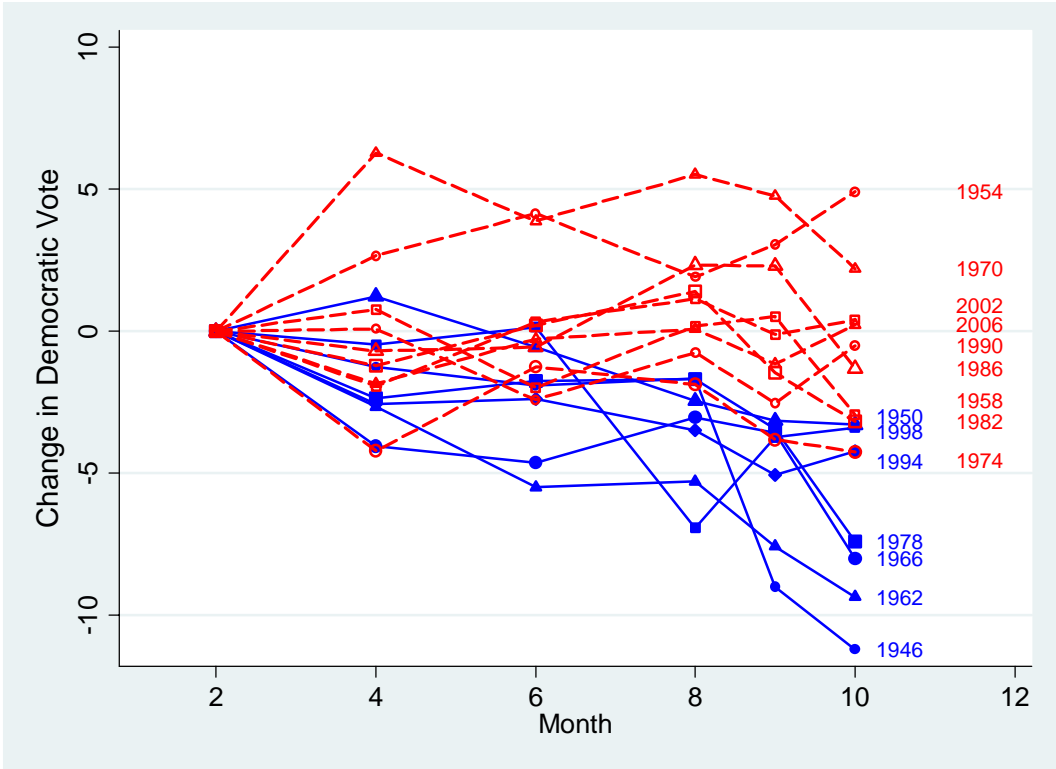
Figure 4. Net Change in the generic congressional vote (Percent Democratic), February to October, relative to February as the starting point.