Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections*

by

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Abstract

Midterm loss is a virtual truism of American politics. The president's party has dropped seats (or seat share) in the House of Representatives in 39 of the last 42 midterm elections. There are three main explanations for the pattern: (1) withdrawn coattails, (2) a negative referendum on the president, and (3) balancing. In this paper we offer a new test using the many generic congressional polls conducted during midterm election years. We show that midterm elections are highly predictable from a combination of the generic polls during the campaign plus the party of the president. The midterm vote moves toward the out-party as the campaign progresses, consistent with voters increasingly taking the presidential party into account as they begin to focus on the election. This shift is not accompanied by any decline in presidential popularity or increased salience of the president's standing in the polls. This shift to the out-party over the course of the midterm year cannot be accounted for by withdrawn coattails or presidential performance but is consistent with the explanation that some segment of the electorate engages in ideological balancing.

One regularity of American politics is that the presidential party loses seats in the House of Representatives in midterm elections. The 2006 Democratic takeover provides a classic example, following the deviant cases of 2002 and 1998, when the presidential party gained slightly in the House. Prior to 1998, the regularity of midterm loss had been a nearly deterministic "law" of politics. From 1842 through 1994, the presidential party gained seats (as a proportion of the total) only once—in 1934 as the FDR-led Democrats' surged with a gain of nine seats. This was a spectacular run of 38 presidential party losses in 39 midterm elections. Clearly, forces are at work in American politics to diminish the electoral standing of the presidential party at midterm. In this context, the big Republican losses in 2006 come as little surprise.

The chief cause of midterm loss remains in contention. The requirement is not simply to identify a set of reasons why presidential parties tend to lose at midterm. Needed is an explanation for the nearly perfect record of the "law of midterm loss." The 1998 and 2002 exceptions were slight in-party gains explainable by a misfired impeachment effort (1998) and the response to 9/11 (2002). The earlier 1934 exception is regularly accounted for as a positive response to the New Deal. But what accounts for the regularity of midterm loss in the other 39 cases going back to 1842?

Two common explanations for midterm loss come under the headings of "coattails" and "negative referendum." The coattail explanation holds that the surge in support for the presidential winner ("coattails") artificially inflates support for the presidential winner's party in the presidential year, with the vote returning to normal at midterm (A. Campbell, 1966; Hinckley, 1981; J. Campbell, 1985; J. Campbell, 1991). The referendum theory posits abnormal conditions at midterm—that the political climate at midterm is almost always rocky

for the presidential party, causing it to suffer at the polls as the electorate gives its negative referendum verdict (Tufte, 1975). Both contain some plausibility. But presidential winners often lack the strong coattails necessary to generate a subsequent midterm loss. And many presidents are reasonably popular at midterm. Yet their party still loses seats.

These obvious anomalies however are consistent with a third explanation of midterm loss—in terms of "balance." Balance theory holds that the presidential party receives less than its normal allotment of votes at midterm, but independent of observable measures of the presidential party's fortunes. By this theory, the midterm electorate supports the out-party to achieve a greater balance of power between Congress and the president. Although the motivation to strive for a more even balance of party strength in government can arise for any number of reasons, the most common version in the literature is that the electorate seeks a balance in terms of ideology between the conservative Republican and the liberal Democrats. Alesina and Rosenthal (1995) present the classic elaboration of midterm balancing theory. (See also Erikson, 1988, 2002; Mebane, 2000; Mebane and Sekhon, 2002; and Fiorina, 1996, regarding balancing more generally). 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). With many voters seeing Republicans to their right and Democrats to their left, their motivation at midterm is to vote for the opposition to move policy toward the center.

Decomposing Midterm Loss

By definition, midterm loss is the presidential year vote minus the presidential party's vote at the subsequent midterm. The equations in Table 1 decompose midterm loss for the 16 post-WWII midterm election cycles. The midterm and in-term vote are measured as percent

Democratic minus 50 percent. The presidential party is measured as +1 if a Democratic president at midterm and -1 if a Republican president at midterm.

Equation 1 of Table 1 displays midterm loss as the -3.38 coefficient for the presidential party predicting the change in the Democratic vote from the presidential year to the midterm year. Thus, when a party wins the presidency, its net vote swing over the next two years is 6.76 fewer percentage points (twice the coefficient) than if it were to lose the presidency. Of course the presidential party starts out with a bonus in the presidential year. As equation 2 of Table 1 shows, winning the presidency (rather than losing) is worth an average (post-WWII) of 2.68 extra percentage points (2 times 1.34) of the Democratic vote in the House. Meanwhile, as equation 3 shows, the presidential party's penalty at midterm is an even larger -4.1 percentage points (2 times 2.05). Thus, the midterm vote is not a return to "normal." While winning the presidency comes with a slight initial benefit for the congressional party in the presidential election year, it comes with a greater cost at midterm.

The presidential year surge is a function of short-term coattails, possibly offset by some balancing behavior in advance by voters who anticipate the presidential winner. The more pronounced midterm slump is the focus of the present paper. We test the two main competing theories: (1) referendum theory that attributes midterm loss to adverse times for the presidential party; and (2) balance theory that posits that midterm voters move toward the out-party apart from the political circumstances of the presidential party in order to restore policy balance between the president and Congress.

Referendum versus Balancing

Tufte's (1975) "referendum theory" offers one way of explaining the presidential party's poor midterm showing. By this theory, the midterm presidency typically

suffers from a poor economy or other political circumstances that drive down the party's support. For this explanation to satisfy, the data need to pass a series of hurdles. The evidence would need to show (1) that the midterm vote depends on the presidential party's political circumstances, (2) that these circumstances are at least as dire at midterm as they are positive in the presidential victory year, and to account for the extreme regularity of midterm loss, that (3) presidential political adversity is nearly universal across midterm elections, not just a tendency.

Alesina and Rosenthal's (1994) balance theory does not require midterm loss to depend on an adverse political climate for the president, but rather posits a reason for the electorate to punish the presidential party regardless of the political circumstances. It holds that the midterm electorate tilts toward the out-party from a desire to restore ideological balance.[1] The idea is that the presidential winner is ideologically farther left (if Democrat) or right (if Republican) than most voters. The midterm electorate tilts the ideological scale back to the middle by putting its thumb on the scale in favor of the opposition party.

Some political scientists dismiss the notion that voters could seek ideological balance, maintaining that it requires too much of a cognitive hurdle for ordinary voters. But actually, balancing behavior is not particularly demanding. Indeed, it requires only the most basic political information—the general policy tendencies of the parties plus the party to which the current president happens to belong. Further, only a very small cross-section of the electorate needs to engage in this behavior for clear evidence of balancing to result. What is most

[1] See also Erikson, 1988, 2002; Mebane, 2000; Mebane and Sekhon, 2002. 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.

important when considering balancing is whether some segment of the electorate deliberately chooses to vote for the party not occupying the White House during midterm congressional elections. A central question then is whether the midterm punishment can be traced to a poor political climate for the president, as measured say by the president's approval rating. If yes, then referendum theory applies. If no, then balance theory is a likely winner.

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.

Generic Polls of the Congressional Vote

To sort out empirical claims for "referendum" and "balance" theories, this paper turns to the many congressional election polls conducted during midterm campaigns. At some point during the two-year run-up to the midterm election, the electorate moves toward the "out" party with its vote intentions. We ask, does this movement appear as early as the dawn of the midterm election year, or does it arise late in the campaign? Does it move in tandem with the president's political fortunes or independently of them?

Going back to 1946, pollsters (initially Gallup alone) have monitored the "generic vote" during midterm campaigns. The generic poll question asks respondents which party they plan to vote for in the upcoming congressional election. To the extent midterm loss is present in the earliest between-election polls, voters are ready to punish the presidential party even before the campaign begins. To the extent midterm loss kicks in late in the cycle, midterm loss must be traced to the midterm campaign. If true, it then becomes a matter of whether the time-patterned loss can be explained by adverse political circumstances for the president ("negative referendum") and their timing or is a regularity that occurs independently of objective indicators of the president's political health ("balancing"). This we test directly.

The advantage of measuring congressional party choices as early as February of the election year is that it provides a benchmark of measuring preferences that are not yet fully formed, with little consideration of the party of the president. As the election looms closer, survey respondents begin to take the presidential party into account when asked how they will vote. Since this shift is independent of presidential approval, we attribute it over the campaign to a growing disposition to balance the president's liberal (if Democratic) or conservative (if Republican) tendencies.

Generic trial-heat polls ask survey respondents which party they plan to vote for (or who they want to win) "if the election were being held today."[2] 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. They variously report the vote intentions of prospective voters in samples of adults, registered voters, and "likely" voters. For each of the 16 midterm elections from 1946 to 2006, we compute the percent Democratic of the major-party vote in the polls for various time intervals preceding the election: within 30 days of the election, between 31 and 60 days of the election, and intervals of 60 days thereafter, going back to 300 days before the election. This yields readings of the generic polls over six time intervals for the 16 midterm campaigns. Appendix A summarizes the data and provides details on processing.

[2] There actually is a good amount of variation in question wording. Some organizations use the wording "Looking ahead to the congressional elections in November." Other organizations 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).

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. We measure the party of the President as -1 for a Republican president and +1 for a Democratic president. We also perform a parallel analysis where we analyze the partisan division of seats rather than the national vote. The results of this analysis are reported in Appendix B.

Because the generic vote is reported variously as among "likely voters," "registered voters," or "adults," we can construct our measure in a variety of ways. 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.[3] For diagnostic purposes, we conduct parallel analyses using unadjusted polls and additional late poll readings reported by Moore and Saad (1997). Using these variations does not substantially affect the results. Appendix C presents the results with alternative specifications.

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.

[3] Appendix A details how.

Timing the Midterm Loss

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 within for each of 16 midterm years we pool the available poll readings as described in Appendix A.

Table 2 shows a set of regression equations predicting the Democratic party share of the generic polls at various intervals—plus the midterm vote itself—as a function of two variables: the lagged vote from the prior presidential election year plus the presidential party, -1 if a Republican, +1 if a Democrat. Our main interest is in the sign of the presidential party variable, which we expect to be negative due to midterm loss.

Focus first on the final column where the dependent variable is the Democratic vote in the midterm election. With the lagged vote controlled, the presidential-party coefficient is -3.16, a magnitude that almost fully accounts for the mean midterm vote loss over these sixteen elections. Now observe in Table 2 the presidential party coefficient as the dependent variable shifts from the actual vote to the earlier "vote" in the generic polls. The party coefficient comes into focus in generic polls only late in the campaign. For the first reading at 241-300 days (centered in February), the coefficient is small and not close to significant. With the presidential party making little difference in February (independent of the prior election's congressional vote), midterm loss must largely develop over the midterm campaign.

We see this progression from the remaining equations of Table 2. The regressions show the presidential party's midterm penalty gradually emerging from February to Election Day. To understand midterm loss, we must understand why the presidential party's vote support gradually sinks over the course of the midterm year.

Also notable from Table 2 is that the adjusted *R*-squareds are what might seem to be suspiciously small, in the range of only .14 to .35. With such limited ability to predict generic poll results from the lagged vote, one might think that the generic polls are poor measures of partisan sentiment. But as we will see, that is not right, as the generic vote does a good job *when together with the party control variable.*

Table 3 shows a series of regressions predicting the Democratic percent of the US House vote in midterm election years from 1946 to 2006 using presidential party and generic polls conducted at varying intervals of time before the election.[4] The first column shows results using polls from 241-300 days before Election Day. The last column shows results using polls from the last 30 days of the cycle. From Table 3, one sees immediately that the equations provide strong and stable fits with the data, explaining more than three quarters of the variance in the vote no matter when in the election cycle the generic polls are measured. This stability suggests that partisan preferences are firmly in place by the onset of the midterm year and captured by the generic polls.[5] The equations' intercepts are consistently small and nonsignificant, an indication that the generic polls contain no persistent partisan bias. The

[4] See Appendix C for these results with alternative methodologies for measuring the generic vote.

[5] 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.

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*.

So far, we have ignored our variable of central interest—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. When using polls from the beginning of the election year (241-300 days out), the presidential party coefficient is highly significant, with a *t*-value over 5. The estimate of 2.65 indicates a swing of 5 percentage points in the vote over and above the generic poll prediction, based on which party is in the White House. The coefficient size drops in almost linear fashion as polls closer to the election are used. By the final increment of time, employing polls fielded within a month of the election, the coefficient is only -1.15 and barely statistically significant ($p = .04$).[6]

Figure 1 illustrates the regression equations graphically. It 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 Democratic and

[6] 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 campaign, the estimated effect of presidential party drops to -0.80, with a *p*-value of less than .10.

Republican presidents, with a gap of about five percentage points, as implied by Table 3, column 1. (The fit of the model is particularly striking if we set aside 2002 and, to a lesser extent, 1998.) 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.[7] (Appendix B replicates the results of Table 3 and Figure 1 using House seats instead of votes as the dependent variable.)

What do we make of these results? One possible explanation for the growing negativity toward the presidential party over the midterm campaign is that the electorate increasingly enforces party balance. At the beginning of the election year, so this argument goes, voters' opinions about the upcoming November election are unformed and 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.

The "Negative Referendum" Theory Revisited

What cannot be challenged is that midterm loss comes into focus over the course of the midterm election year. As the campaign progresses, the electorate's vote preference becomes more opposed to the presidential party. Our first interpretation has been that this comprises evidence of balancing behavior. The closer to the election, the more voters

[7] Predictably, the bivariate correlation between generic poll results and the vote increases over the course of the election year.

incorporate the presidential party into their thinking when asked about their midterm congressional vote.

Still, this does not seal the deal for balancing, as we must seriously consider the rival "negative referendum" explanation. As Tufte (1975) articulated in his influential article, this explanation holds that voters regularly punish the president's party at midterm due to a systematic pattern of negative administrative performance at midterm time. Let us examine the possible evidence for the referendum theory, given what we now know about the in-party's general decline in the polls during the midterm campaign.

For the generic poll data to fit referendum theory, the following conditions must occur. First, the size of the midterm loss must be predictable from political conditions for the presidential party. Secondly, one of two further conditions must be met in order to fit the steady decline in presidential party fortunes over the midterm campaign. Either the political environment must become persistently more adverse over the course of the midterm year or an already adverse environment must become increasingly salient to voters.

To test these ideas, we measure political conditions by the familiar variable, presidential approval. First, we ask, does approval matter? With approval in the vote equation, we measure the dependent variable as the vote for the presidential party rather than for the Democratic party. Table 4 presents the results. Equation 1 shows the in-party vote as a function of the lagged presidential party vote and the presidential party. Now with the presidential party vote as the dependent variable, the presidential party is no longer the measure of the presidential penalty. Instead we observe the midterm penalty in the form of the negative intercept, or constant term. Column 2 introduces the president's approval in October of the midterm year (minus 50 percent) as an independent variable. Clearly it is a

significant predictor of the electoral performance of the presidential party at midterm. The equation in column 3 clarifies further by eliminating the presidential party variable as an unnecessary control. With presidential approval held constant, the coefficient for the lagged vote is virtually 1.00. We see no regression to the mean from the lagged vote. Whatever vote the presidential party receives in the presidential year carries over to the midterm, modified only by the penalty for being the party in power and the president's popularity at midterm.

The intercepts of equations 2 and 3 are of special interest, because they estimate the residual effect of midterm loss when the other independent variables are at zero (where the lagged vote and approval are measured as deviations from 50 percent). Each intercept is highly significant as an indicator of the degree of midterm loss, but this is conditional on a somewhat low 50 percent presidential approval. We can now recalibrate the approval measure by shifting its zero point to the value that offsets the residual midterm loss.

This value, about 72 percent, represents the degree of presidential approval necessary for one to expect the absence of a penalty (or reward) for being the presidential party at midterm. Since the lagged vote has a coefficient near 1.0, its zero point is irrelevant as long as it is scaled with the same zero point as the dependent variable. This yields the further simplification:

Midterm presidential party vote (minus 50%) = 0.18 (October Pres. Approval minus 72%)
(0.04)

Adjusted *R*-squared = 0.55; N =16.

The relationship is shown graphically in Figure 2. Presidential approval on the eve of the election can explain slightly more than half the variance in the vote swing from the

presidential year to the midterm year. As long as the president's approval is in the low seventies or greater, the presidential party can expect to gain at midterm.[8]

We could elaborate on the referendum nature of midterm elections by incorporating economic variables in addition to the president's net approval. However, economic variables add little if anything to the analysis, especially with approval in the equation. Presidential approval captures the voters' evaluation of all facets of presidential competence, including handling of the economy. Appendix D shows the negligible contribution of the economy.

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 problem with the negative referendum explanation 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, for the 15 available comparisons (1946-2002), October approval in midterms averages 2.6 points *higher* than in October of the following year and 2.8 points *higher* than in October of the following presidential year (two years ahead). Even in the nine instances when the president seeks reelection two years later, the president's approval at midterm averages 1.7 points higher at midterm than later when seeking reelection (and winning six of nine times).

[8] Figure 1 shows the in-party suffering a net loss in votes in 1998 when Clinton's Democrats actually gained seats. This is correct. According to the official vote tallies reported by the Clerk of the House of Representatives, the Democrats gained seats in 1998 but lost vote share compared to 1996.

The question is not whether presidential approval is a marker for the degree of midterm loss. We have seen that it is. Here the relevant test is whether presidential approval is somehow responsible for the declining support for the president during the midterm campaign that we have been attributing to an increased voter awareness of the value of balancing. There are several possibilities.

From our discussion of Table 4, we have seen that as an expectation, the presidential party loses seats if approval is under 72 percent, which is a fairly lofty number. Thus an alternative interpretation of midterm loss might be that the electorate has a high threshold by which to judge the presidential party. If presidents routinely had approval numbers in the 70s or higher, they would not be in midterm jeopardy.

Can we distinguish between the idea that the electorate votes against the presidential party to achieve balance from the idea that the electorate is simply demanding of the presidential party at midterm? To begin with, consider that if the presidential party were generally subject to a high demand threshold, we would see it at other times besides midterm Election Days and the end-days of the midterm campaign. For instance, we would see the presidential party suffering in congressional elections held in presidential years. But they do not. In twelve of fifteen presidential years (1948-2004) the presidential party *gained* share in the congressional ballots. On average, the presidential party's congressional ticket gained 1.5 percent of the vote even though (as we have seen) presidents *lose* an average of 2.8 points of approval from October of the midterm year to October of the presidential year.

A high-threshold explanation would have to account for the absence of a presidential-

party penalty in the generic polls early in the campaign. But what causal mechanism could turn an electorate, with a persistent high threshold of performance, regularly negative toward the presidential party as the campaign progresses? There are two ways. Even though the president's popularity at midterm is no worse than average, it could be declining over the election year. If so, a demanding electorate would vote increasingly 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 increasingly salient. This 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, presidential approval declines a mere 3.4 percentage points from February to October. Could this be enough to make a meaningful difference in support for the presidential ticket?

Table 5 shows two regressions. The first column repeats the regression (from Table 3) predicting the Democratic vote from February polls and the president's party. The second column's regression 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).[9] This result directly refutes the idea that declining presidential approval

[9] The estimated effect of 0.04 times the mean change of 3.4 suggests that declining approval at most accounts for a tiny fraction (0.136) of a percentage point in the vote. Note that when approval is added to the equation, in the second column of Table 4, the *t*-value for the presidential party coefficient actually increases in absolute value.

over the midterm year generates the evolving pattern of midterm rejection of the presidential party.

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. By this notion, as the campaign progresses, voters maintain a high threshold for rewarding the presidential party, but do not punish the presidential party in the early going for the reason that they do not give much weight to presidential performance until Election Day approaches.

To test this idea, Table 6 shows equations predicting the vote responses to polls at various points in the midterm campaign by the lagged vote, the presidential party and the contemporary presidential approval reading.[10] It can readily be observed that presidential approval is a sizeable and stable factor in determining the electorate's vote preference throughout the campaign—about as strong in magnitude in February as in October. Thus, the electorate's collective poll response is equally influenced by presidential approval throughout the campaign. With the presidential-party vote as the dependent variable, the presidential-party effect is estimated from the constant term. The coefficient for the constant is the estimated effect of the presidential party when approval is at 50 percent. Clearly, this term grows over the campaign and becomes increasingly significant. Controlling for its evaluation of the president's performance, the midterm electorate becomes increasingly

[10] While the generic poll reading is for the wider time interval indicated in terms of days, the presidential approval readings are in terms of the narrower interval of the month indicated.

negative toward the presidential party with its vote decision. This indicates a source of growing negativity toward the presidential party independent of presidential approval.[11]

In summary, midterm electorates become increasingly negative toward the presidential party as the campaign progresses--seemingly for no reason. 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.

Table 7 summarizes this argument. For each of our usual temporal check points of the midterm campaign, it shows the threshold of approval at which the presidential party effect is neutralized. This threshold rises from 60.1 percentage points in February to 75.0 in August and then stabilizes at about seventy points for the final months of the campaign. This is important; after all, if there were no shift in the threshold from February to Election Day, there would be little talk of midterm loss. A threshold of 60.1 percent approval in February of the midterm year is a modest target that was exceeded in 6 of the 16 postwar midterms. In November elections, only Bush in 2002 approached the 72 percentage point threshold (from the analysis of Table 4), but even he was just a bit below, at 71.1 percent.

[11] Jacobson and Kernell (1981) argue that elections are driven by candidate expectations of the partisan trend as seen early in the election year. We considered whether approval from early in the election year explains the pattern of our results, and it clearly is not the case. As we saw in Table 6, approval is absorbed in the polls at the beginning of the election year. Additionally, separate analyses of the vote show that early approval adds nothing beyond what is already in the early polls, e.g., when February approval is substituted for October approval in equation 3 of Table 4, the coefficient is 0.03 with a standard error of 0.04.

To reiterate, these tests 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 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 shifting 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 election-year changes in the electorate's attitudes toward the president or perceptions of the economy. 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.

Discussion and Conclusions

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.

Suppose that instead of waiting until November, a snap midterm election were held in February of the midterm year—before voters were to begin thinking about their vote to be cast many months ahead. Using the generic polls as a guide, a snap election in February would result in little or no midterm loss. The presidential party's decline in the vote comes later—between February and November. Given this timing, we learn two things about two common explanations of midterm loss. First, one cannot blame the withdrawal of presidential

coattails in the prior presidential election for a decline in support for the presidential party that occurs during the midterm year. Second, with little midterm loss as of February there is no negative referendum against the presidential party that is evident early in the midterm year. The February-to-November decline must be due to voter responses that follow over the midterm campaign. As the campaign evolves, the electorate's preferences in generic polls shift increasingly away from the presidential party. But why?

One possibility is that the political climate regularly becomes more adverse for the president during the presidential year. But as we have seen there is little or no pattern of a decline in the president's political capital as measured by presidential approval or economic conditions. It might be the case that a demanding electorate increasingly takes into account the president's performance as the election approaches. But generic poll results are equally influenced by the president's approval level at all stages of the campaign. This is not to say that the midterm vote is unaffected by the president's level of support. The degree of presidential approval influences the size of the midterm loss. While a president with average support might win a hypothetical snap election in February, it takes an exceptionally popular president such as Bush in 2002 to find their party gaining votes in November when they hold the midterm election.

We are left with the fact that over the midterm election year, survey respondents increasingly weigh their vote choice with a heavy thumb on the scale in favor of the out party—apart from the president's level of popularity. Quite obviously, the president's party is an increasingly salient factor to voters as the election progresses—and one that drives people toward the out party with their presidential vote. In effect, the more focused (or "fully priced") the voting decision, the more voters punish the presidential party.

We attribute this caution to a desire to balance the policies of the parties. As usually interpreted, a Democratic president is reason for voting Republican in order to push policy in a more conservative direction; a Republican president is reason to vote Democratic in order to push policy in a more liberal direction. 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 are aware of the parties' policy tendencies and which party holds the presidency. There are limits to what we know about the process we observe. Some might suggest that it is turnout driven, whereby at midterm the president's supporters abstain from voting, handing the advantage to the out party. While this "negative voting" theory conceivably could explain the pattern we report, it would require a segment of presidential supporters to not only abstain on Election Day, but also tell pollsters in October of the election year of their intent to not vote. "Negative voting" has received a mixed verdict at best in the empirical literature (Kernell 1978, Lau, 1985, but see Hinkley 1981, Cover 1986, Born 1990).

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 when it comes to survey analysis.[12]

We are left with the fact that with extreme regularity the electorate shifts its congressional preference during the midterm year. The more time that the electorate has to focus on the upcoming midterm election, the more it awakens to the implications of party control of the presidency. It does so by moving toward the "out" party, as if an ideological counterweight to balance the presidential party If the electorate is not balancing based on ideological differences between the parties, then it is balancing for some other purpose—conceivably some deep Madisonian consideration of checks and balances, voting for one party to offset the power of the other. Nonetheless, patterned midterm loss is clear and it comes into focus during the election year and is independent of referendum judgments of presidents. There is no escaping the conclusion that at least some significant segment of voters engages in party balancing at the midterm. While it is likely that the tendency reflects a desire to ideologically balance the president, we have not yet provided a smoking gun. As such, the puzzle of midterm loss remains a worthy subject of future research.

[12] To illustrate the limitations of survey data for the task at hand, let us employ ANES data to regress the midterm congressional vote 1954-1998 (1=Dem., 0=Rep.) on the party of the president (-1=Rep.,+1=Dem.). With an N of 8,674 respondents, the coefficient is -2.92, which actually is slightly larger than the -2.05 based on aggregate data (see Table 1). When properly clustered by year, the coefficient falls just shy of statistical significance (p=.06). (Note that when estimating the proper probit version of the same equation, the coefficient is slightly significant.) Sampling error explains the NES data's inferior statistical power.

Appendix A

The Generic Poll Data

Exactly 831 generic polls for the 16 midterm election years between 1946 and 2006 were collected from the Roper archives, Pollingreport.com and Moore and Saad (1997). 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	44[a]	78[b]
TOTAL	101	96	125	151	159	199

a. 3 of which are from Moore/Saad
b. 12 of which are from Moore/Saad

The polls collected from Moore and Saad (1997) were not used in the analysis in the paper but are included in some of the supplementary results in Appendix C. Moore and Saad list generic poll results among likely voters from the Gallup Organization. These polls are conducted in the last 45 days before the election in midterm election years from 1950 to 1994.

These data were not used in our main analysis because it is not always clear how their results match up with the polls reported by Roper. The results in Appendix C show that the one can draw the same inferences with or without the Moore and Saad data.

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.[13] 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

[13] Of course this does not take into account any differences among likely voter samples.

respondents in each sample type and combined to yield one estimate of the Democratic vote preference per midterm election year.

Appendix B.

Accounting for House Seats

Analysis of House seats in Table B1 reveals a similar pattern to what we saw for the vote. Here the dependent variable is the Democratic Percent of the US House seats.[14] Again, the generic polls provide strong and unbiased predictions. The intercept is insignificant in all equations. The generic poll coefficient does not vary appreciably with the time frame of the

Table B1. Predicting Midterm Congressional Seats (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Seat Division) at Different Time Intervals from the Generic Ballot Vote and Presidential Party

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Seat Division minus 50%						
	Dates of Generic Polls					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)
Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.99*** (0.15)	1.06*** (0.17)	1.01*** (0.20)	1.03*** (0.17)	1.03*** (0.15)	1.08*** (0.21)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-3.99*** (0.86)	-3.18** (0.90)	-2.71* (1.04)	-1.67 (.93)	-1.35 (0.83)	-0.76 (1.09)
Constant	-1.61 (1.40)	-1.24 (1.48)	-0.72 (1.69)	-0.75 (1.45)	0.58 (1.11)	1.53 (1.34)
Adj. R^2	0.78	0.75	0.66	0.74	0.79	0.67
Root MSE	3.31	3.57	4.13	3.64	3.22	4.08
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: Poll results and the seats are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party seat division minus 50 percent.						
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$						

[14] This analysis is done to confirm our analysis of the House vote, not to model the relationship between poll shares and seats, which is much more complex (see, e.g., Bafumi, et al., 2007).

polls—the estimates range between 0.99 and 1.08. Each percentage share in the generic vote is worth a bit more than one percent of the seats (translating to about four-and-one-half seats).

Just as for the analysis of the vote for the House, in terms of seats the coefficient for the presidential party declines as the polls' time frame approaches Election Day. Measuring the generic vote 241-300 days in advance, party shifts the seat share a striking four percentage points beyond what we predict based on the polls alone. (This is a swing of 8 percent, or more than 32 seats, based on the presidential party.). This "effect" declines monotonically over the intervals studied. Controlling for generic poll readings at the end of the campaign, presidential party makes virtually no difference. As for the congressional vote, party still matters for seats on Election Day—there is midterm loss—but by that point in time it has become part of voters' preferences and is clear in the polls.

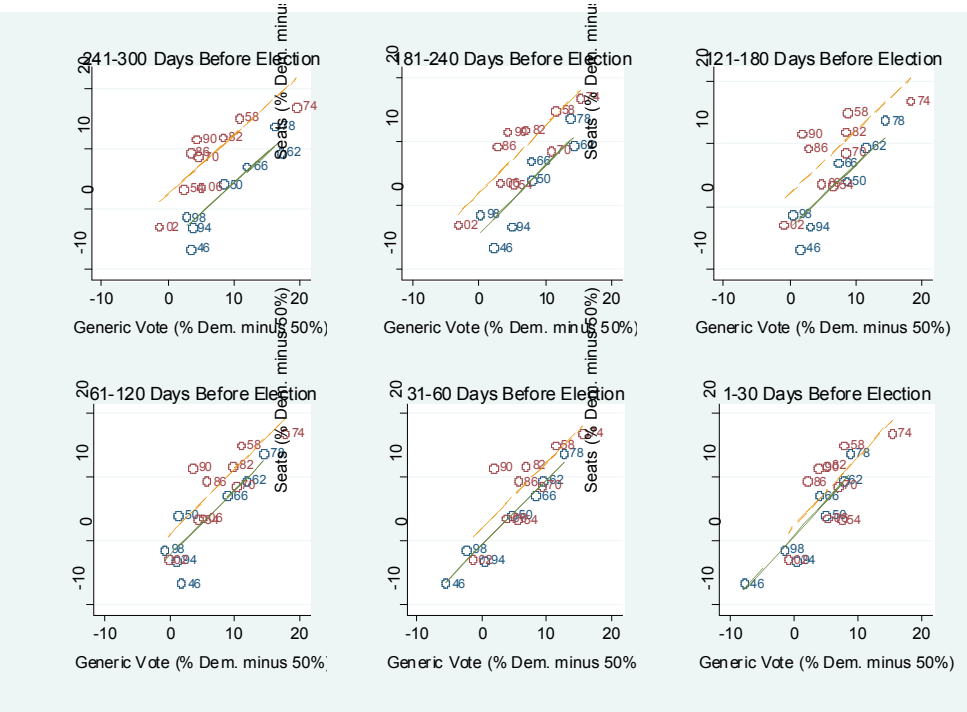

Figure B1. House Seats by the Generic Vote in the Polls at the Different Time Intervals. *Elections with Democratic Presidents are Represented by Solid Dots and Solid Prediction Lines. Elections with Republican Presidents are Represented by Hollow Dots and Dashed Prediction Lines.*

Figure B1 illustrates, plotting the Democratic seat share by the poll share at different intervals of time, again using hollow diamonds to indicate elections under Republican presidents and solid dots to indicate elections under Democrats. Early in the campaign (241-300 days out), the seat share-generic poll relationship lines up as parallel tracks for Democratic and Republican administrations. The gap is a sizable eight percentage points. Just as for the vote, the gap narrows frame by frame as we use more proximate polling information. By the end of the campaign, little gap remains and poll results and the two sets of seat predictions line up almost perfectly. The presidential party indicator loses its explanatory power as sentiments toward balancing are captured in the polls.

Appendix C

Replications of Table 3 using Alternative Methodologies for Measuring the Generic Vote

Table C1. Results with Moore and Saad (1997) Data and with Likely Voter Adjustment. Predicting Midterm Congressional Vote (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote) from the Generic Ballot Vote at Different Time Intervals and Presidential Party

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50%						
	Dates of Generic Polls					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)
Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.44 (0.08)	0.48 (0.09)	0.48 (0.09)	0.47 (0.09)	0.46 (0.08)	0.59 (0.15)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-2.65 (0.45)	-2.29 (0.46)	-2.07 (0.48)	-1.60 (0.46)	-1.31 (0.45)	-1.45 (0.58)
Constant	-1.26 (0.72)	-1.10 (0.75)	-1.00 (0.78)	-0.91 (0.71)	0.09 (0.56)	0.74 (0.67)
Adj. R^2	0.78	0.76	0.74	0.76	0.78	0.64
Root MSE	1.72	1.82	1.89	1.80	1.73	2.24
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: Poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent.						

Table C2. Results with Moore and Saad (1997) Data and No Likely Voter Adjustment. Predicting Midterm Congressional Vote (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote) from the Generic Ballot Vote at Different Time Intervals and Presidential Party

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50%						
	Dates of Generic Polls					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)
Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.45 (0.08)	0.50 (0.10)	0.49 (0.10)	0.49 (0.09)	0.51 (0.08)	0.66 (0.15)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-2.62 (0.45)	-2.10 (0.47)	-2.02 (0.48)	-1.50 (0.46)	-1.13 (0.43)	-1.05 (0.57)
Constant	-1.37 (0.75)	-1.76 (0.88)	-1.26 (0.83)	-1.22 (0.74)	-0.71 (0.60)	-0.36 (0.76)
Adj. R^2	0.78	0.75	0.73	0.77	0.81	0.69
Root MSE	1.74	1.87	1.91	1.77	1.60	2.06
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: Poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent.						

Table C3. Results without Moore and Saad (1997) Data and No Likely Voter Adjustment. Predicting Midterm Congressional Vote (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote) from the Generic Ballot Vote at Different Time Intervals and Presidential Party

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50%						
	Date of Generic Polls					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)
Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)	0.45 (0.08)	0.50 (0.10)	0.49 (0.10)	0.49 (0.09)	0.51 (0.07)	0.56 (0.10)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-2.62 (0.45)	-2.10 (0.47)	-2.02 (0.48)	-1.50 (0.46)	-1.23 (0.40)	-0.97 (0.48)
Constant	-1.37 (0.75)	-1.76 (0.88)	-1.26 (0.83)	-1.22 (0.74)	-0.91 (0.59)	-0.46 (0.64)
Adj. R^2	0.78	0.75	0.73	0.77	0.83	0.77
Root MSE	1.74	1.87	1.91	1.77	1.53	1.77
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: Poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent.						

Appendix D

Results including the Economy

The analysis of this paper relies solely on the president's approval rating as the measure of the voters' perception of presidential performance. Missing is any measure of the economy or perceptions of the economy. This may seem odd because economic conditions are often thought to drive elections. However, this accepted wisdom is not correct in the context of midterm congressional elections. At best, economic indicators are wobbly and nonsignificant as predictors of the midterm vote. With presidential approval in the equation, economic variables decidedly do not contribute further to predict the midterm vote. In other words, whatever small effect the economy puts on the midterm vote is absorbed by presidential approval.

The irrelevance of the economy may surprise some. But consider that the two major outliers in terms of vote shifts—the 1994 out-party surge and the 2002 in-party gain. Not only was neither attributed to the economy; by any standard, the economy was doing better at the time of the 1994 deluge than in 2002. For us, the insignificance of the economy is a convenience in that it simplifies our main analysis. To the extent the economy matters in the context of our paper, it is already controlled for by incorporating presidential approval. Below we present some further statistical analysis of the vote with economic conditions taken into account.

Table D1 replicates Table 4's analysis predicting the presidential party House vote from the lagged vote, the presidential party (captured in the constant), and presidential approval. In Table D1 economic measures are used to either substitute for or complement approval in the presidential party vote equation. We use 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;[15] and (2) a measure of the objective economy via February to October growth in per capita disposable income as measured by the Bureau of Economic Analysis.[16] The economic variables are added first by themselves and then together with presidential approval, measured concurrently with the economic variables.

Table D1. Replicating Table 1 Regressions of the Presidential Party Vote with Economic Variables Included: Congressional Vote Regressions including Income Growth and Consumer Sentiment

	Dependent Variable = % Presidential Party Vote (minus 50%)			
Lagged Pres Party's House Votes (% Pres. Party minus 50%)	0.83** (0.23)	0.95*** (0.21)	1.10*** (0.16)	1.18*** (0.16)
October % Approval (minus 50 %)			0.24** (0.06)	0.19** (0.05)
October Consumer Sentiment (minus 100)	0.01 (0.07)		-0.04 (0.05)	
Per Capita Disposable Income Growth (Feb to Oct)		-0.64 (0.60)		-0.74 (0.42)
Constant	-2.86 (1.47)	-2.46* (0.85)	-5.05** (1.05)	-3.44*** (0.61)
Adj. R^2	.51	.57	.81	.80
RMSE	2.75	2.53	1.72	1.70
N	14	15	14	15
Note: Dependent variable is the presidential party's percent of the two-party vote, minus 50 percent.				
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$				

[15] Consumer sentiment is measured from 1954 on. Monthly measurement of consumer sentiment began in 1978. For earlier years, starting in 1953, consumer sentiment was measured quarterly, with surveys in February, May, August, and November. For these earlier years, we interpolated the October readings.

[16] Income growth is measured quarterly starting in 1949 and monthly starting in 1959. Thus we lack a 1946 reading. For 1950, 1954, and 1958 we interpolate October readings from the quarterly data.

The results in the first column of Table D1 indicate that the level of consumer sentiment in October is not a significant predictor of the midterm vote. From the second column it is clear that income growth also shows no promise as a predictor. Including approval along with these economic measures makes little difference. Both economic measures are insignificant.[17]

Advocates of economic effects might point out that consumer sentiment declines by an average of three points from February to October of election year. However this mean decline is trivial. And including the February to October shift in consumer sentiment in the analysis of Table 4 (with or without presidential approval included) shows a nonsignificant effect with the "wrong" sign.

[17] It follows from the nonsignificant economic coefficients that the intercepts in Table D1 are similar to those for *the same years* with the economic variables excluded. In other words, the economy has no effect on the size of the presidential party's midterm penalty.

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Tables

Table 1. Decomposing Midterm Loss, 1946-2006			
	Dependent Variable =		
	Change in House Democratic Vote: Midterm minus Presidential Year	House Democratic Vote in Presidential Year (% Dem. minus 50%)	House Democratic Vote in Midterm Year (% Dem. minus 50%)
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-3.38*** (0.66)	1.34* (0.55)	-2.05* (0.80)
Intercept	0.44 (0.66)	2.58*** (0.55)	2.13 (0.80)
Adjusted *R*-squared	.631	.242	.272
RMSE	2.90	2.20	3.16
N=16. ***=Significant at .001, **=Significant at .01, *=Significant at .05			

Table 2. Predicting Midterm Generic Polls (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote) at Different Time Intervals from the Lagged Vote and Presidential Party

	Dependent Variable = Generic Poll Results (% Dem. minus 50%)						Dep. Var. = % Dem (minus 50%). in November Election
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)	
Lagged House Vote (% Dem. minus 50%)	1.67* (0.61)	1.40* (0.57)	1.25 (0.59)	1.60* (0.55)	1.70** (0.56)	1.20* (0.55)	0.83* (0.32)
Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R)	-0.87 (1.50)	-1.37 (1.42)	-1.61 (1.46)	-3.09* (1.35)	-3.54* (1.40)	-3.35* (1.35)	-3.16** (0.80)
Constant	3.35 (2.01)	3.17 (1.90)	3.37 (1.95)	2.32 (1.81)	0.81 (1.87)	0.96 (1.81)	0.01 (1.07)
Adj. R^2	.31	.21	.14	.33	.35	.26	.48
Root MSE	5.00	4.74	4.86	4.51	4.66	4.51	2.67
N	16	16	16	16	16	16	16

Note: 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 3. Predicting the Midterm Congressional Vote (Democratic Share of the Two-Party Vote) at Different Time Intervals from the Generic Ballot Vote and Presidential Party

Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50%						
	Dates of Generic Polls					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (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)
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)
Constant	-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	0.78	0.76	0.74	0.76	0.81	0.75
Root MSE	1.72	1.82	1.89	1.80	1.61	1.84
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: 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 4. Midterm Congressional Vote Regressions including Lagged Vote and October Presidential Approval

	Dependent Variable = % Presidential Party Vote (minus 50%)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Lagged Pres. Party's House Votes (% Pres. Party minus 50%)	0.83* (0.32)	0.97*** (0.22)	1.05*** (0.15)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=+1)	-0.01 (1.07)	0.36 (0.74)	
October % Approval (minus 50 %)		0.19** (.05)	0.19*** (.05)
Constant	-3.16** (0.80)	-3.84*** (0.57)	-3.96*** (0.50)
Adj. R^2	.48	.76	.78
RMSE	2.67	1.83	1.78
N	16	16	16

Table 5. Predicting the Midterm Vote from February Generic Polls, Presidential Party, and February-to-October Change in Presidential Approval		
	Dependent Variable = Democratic. % of Two-Party Vote	
Generic Polls (% Dem.minus 50%) 241-300 days out (February)	0.44*** (0.08)	0.49*** (0.10)
Presidential Party (R=-1, D=1)	-2.65*** (0.45)	-2.55*** (0.47)
Δ % Approval x Pres. Party		0.04 (0.06)
Constant	-1.26 (0.72)	-1.47 (0.79)
Adj. R^2	.78	.78
RMSE	1.72	1.75
N	16	16
Note: Poll results and the vote are measured as the Democratic percent of the two-party vote minus 50 percent. Change in approval is calculated as the October reading minus the February reading in each midterm election year. With the Democratic vote as the dependent variable, each is multiplied by –1 if the president is a Republican.		
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$		

Table 6. Predicting Midterm Generic Polls (Presidential Party Share of Two-Party Vote) at Different Time Intervals from the Lagged Vote, Presidential Party and Presidential Approval						
	Dependent Variable = Presidential Party Share of the Two-Party "Vote" in the Generic Polls, minus 50%					
	241-300 Days Out (Feb.)	181-240 Days Out (April)	121-180 Days Out (June)	61-120 Days Out (August)	31-60 Days Out (Sept.)	1-30 Days Out (Oct.)
Lagged Pres. Party House Vote (% Pres. Party minus 50%)	1.73*** (0.39)	1.50** (0.49)	1.38** (0.45)	1.89** (0.55)	1.92** (0.51)	1.35* (0.49)
Presidential Party (1=D, -1=R)	3.41* (1.29)	3.06 (1.61)	3.50* (1.50)	2.39* (1.71)	1.36 (1.67)	1.40 (1.62)
Presidential Approval (minus 50%)	0.23*** (0.05)	0.17* (0.07)	0.22** (0.07)	0.16 (0.10)	0.22* (0.10)	0.22 (0.10)
Constant	-2.44* (1.02)	-2.23 (1.25)	-2.27 (1.14)	-4.17* (1.45)	-4.51** (1.31)	-4.13** (1.26)
Adj. R^2	.89	.79	.81	.33	.72	.61
Root MSE	3.21	4.00	3.73	4.51	4.11	4.01
N	16	16	16	16	16	16
Note: Poll results and the lagged vote are measured as the presidential party's percent of the two-party vote minus 50%.						
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$						

Table 7. Estimating the Level of Presidential Approval that Offsets the Presidential Party Effect in Generic Polls, by Month

	Feb.	April	June	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.
Mean Approval	56.5	54.5	52.5	55.2	53.7	53.1
Approval regression coefficient (from Table 5)	0.23	0.17	0.22	0.16	0.22	0.22
Presidential Party regression coefficient (from Table 2)	-0.87	-1.37	-1.61	-3.09*	-3.54*	-3.35*
Added approval points to offset midterm effect (row 3 divided by row 2) times (–1)	3.8	8.1	7.3	19.3	16.1	15.2
Approval threshold for offsetting presidential party effect (row 1 + row 4)	60.2	62.6	59.8	74.5	69.8	68.3

Figures

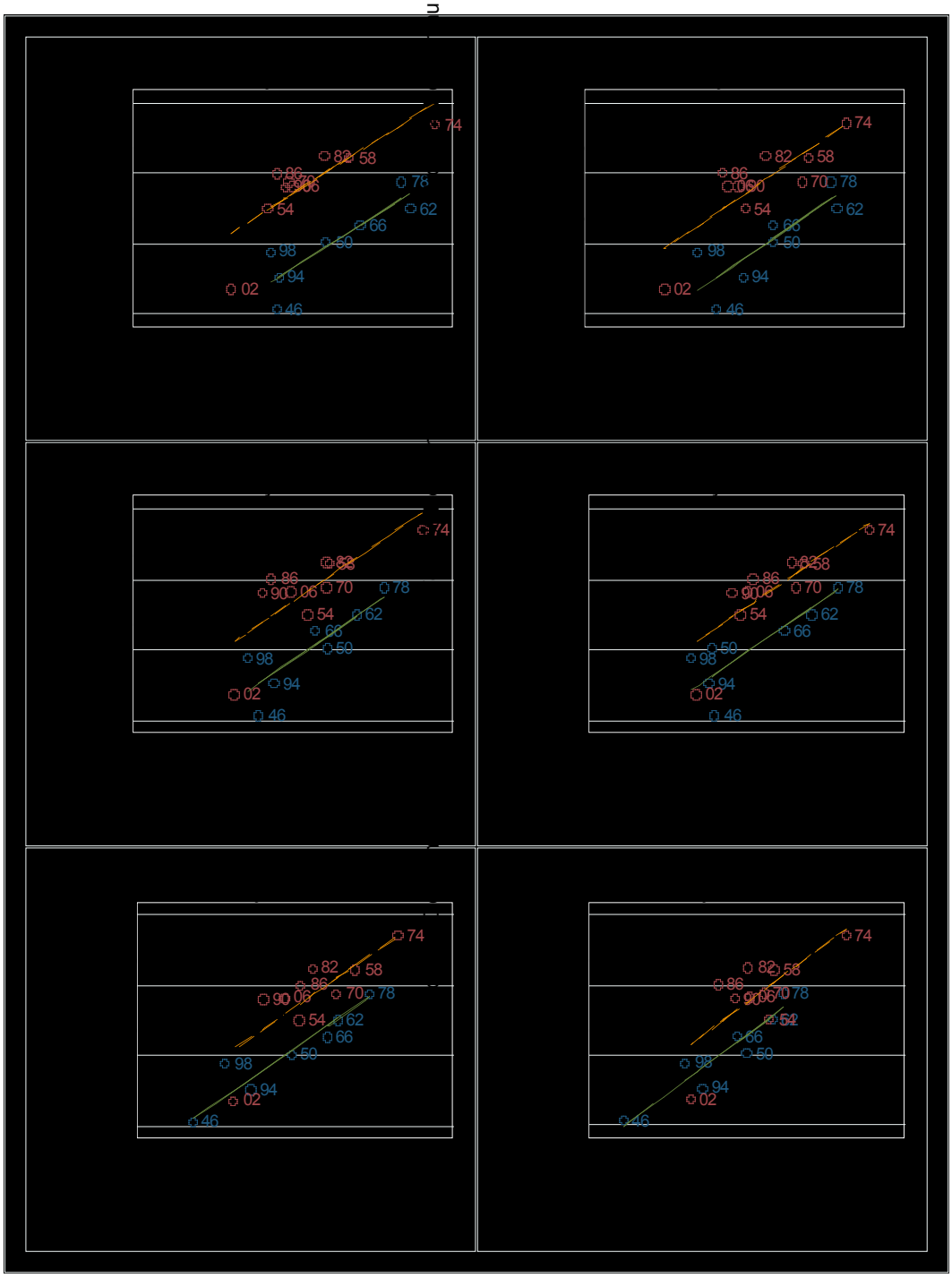

Figure 1. Midterm Congressional Vote by the Generic Vote in the Polls at the Different Time Intervals. *Elections with Democratic Presidents in office are represented by solid dots and solid prediction lines. Elections with Republican presidents in office are represented by hollow dots and dashed prediction lines.*

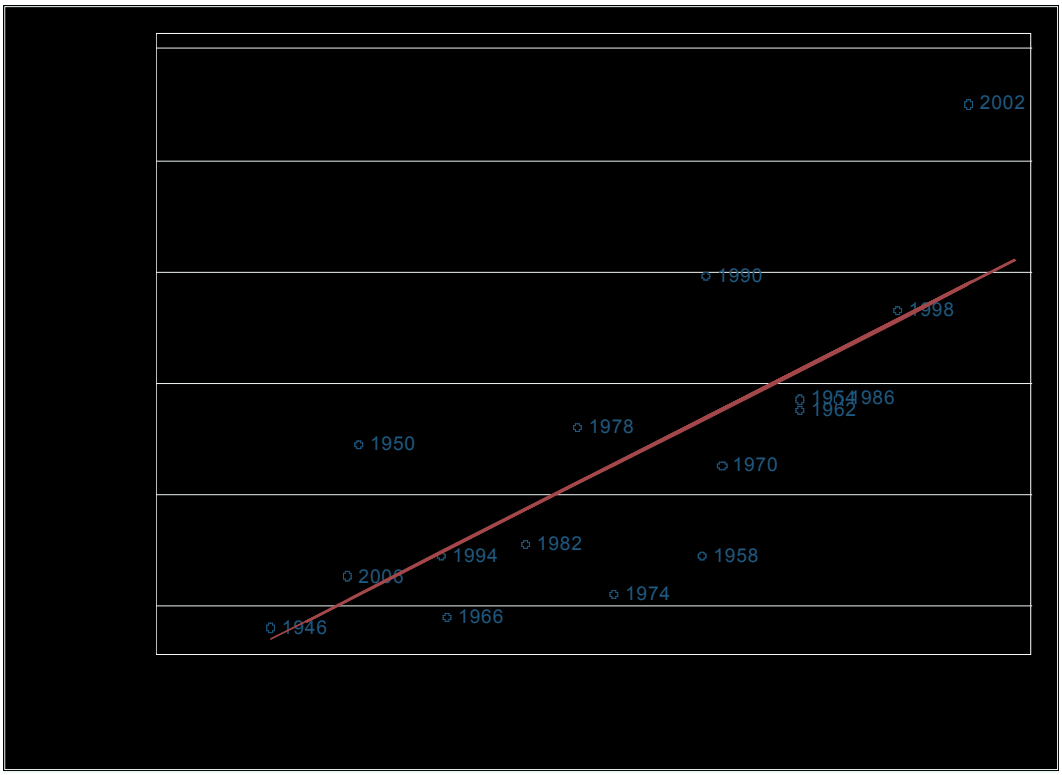

Figure 2. Midterm Vote Swing for the Presidential Party by Presidential Approval.
The approval measure is the mean Gallup percent approval in October of the election year.