7-2010

Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections

Joseph Bafumi
Dartmouth College

Robert S. Erikson
Columbia University

Christopher Wlezien
Temple University

Balancing, Generic Polls and Midterm Congressional Elections

Joseph Bafumi   Dartmouth College
Robert S. Erikson   Columbia University
Christopher Wlezien   Temple University

One mystery of U.S. 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 is not a negative referendum on the president, as midterms do not show a pattern of declining presidential popularity or increasing salience of presidential performance. The shift accords 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, 1938–94, the presidential party suffered seat losses at midterm. In 1998, Clinton's Democrats 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.

At one time the prevailing explanation for midterm loss was Campbell's (1966) "surge-and-decline" theory. Surge-and-decline dictates 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") then wane in the following midterm election as the outcome returns to the "normal" (largely party-line) vote with the president no longer on the ballot and the related "low-stimulus" status of the midterm campaign.[1]

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. More importantly, the presidential party's disadvantage at midterm typically outweighs its advantage 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 panel shows that in presidential years, each party typically earns 2.6 percentage points more of the House vote when it wins the presidency than when it loses. This is the yield from coattails. The third panel shows that, for midterms, each party typically earns 4.1 percentage points more when out of power than when it holds the presidency. (Both regularities pass the test of statistical significance.) To do well in midterm House elections, it is best to lose the presidency. Surge-and-decline theories do not fully account for why this is true.

"Referendum theory" is often cited as a reason for the presidential party's poor midterm showing. Presidents decline in popularity from their initial honeymoon period, and the degree of popularity can

---

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

FIGURE 1   Midterm Loss as the Subtraction of the Presidential Year Vote from the Midterm Year Vote, 1944–46—2004–06
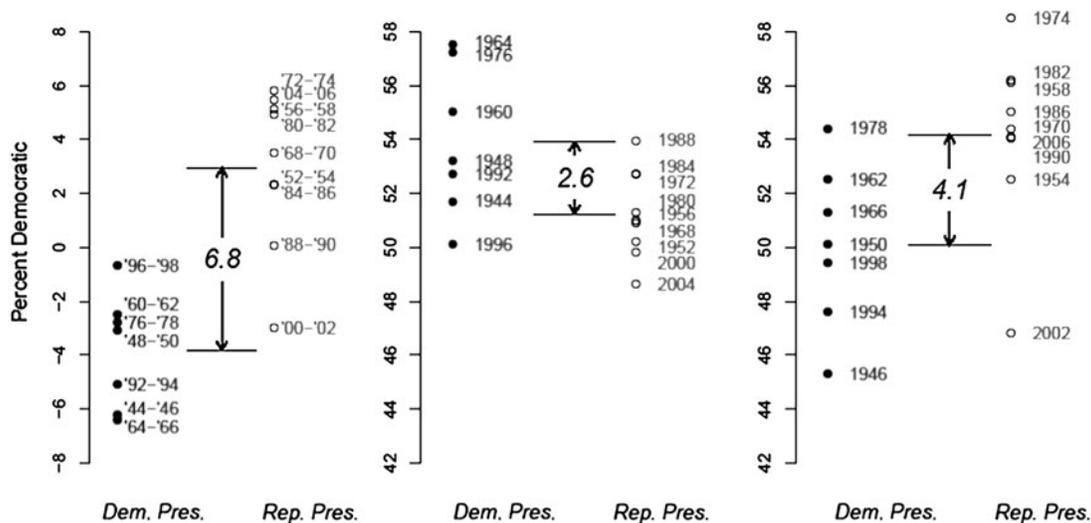
matter at midterm (Campbell 1997; Jacobson 2004; Tufte 1975).[2] But referendum theory has one weak link if it is to explain the midterm slump. As detailed below, presidents' approval levels are *not* particularly low at midterm compared to other non-honeymoon periods. With majorities typically "approving" 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 (1995; see also Fiorina 2003), the electorate boosts its 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 both parties sit in Congress, the presidency is not divisible by party. Thus, net policy must be right of the median voter during Republican administrations and to the left during Democratic administrations. By putting their collective thumbs on the scale in favor of the out party at midterm, voters move policy back toward the center. Sentiments toward balancing emerge and grow as campaigns focus voters on their vote decisions.

"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 Tomz 1999). Anticipatory balancing could minimize midterm loss by offsetting coattail effects.

Some see ideological balancing as beyond the capability of the electorate. 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 requires only that voters are motivated by a perceived policy difference between the parties, plus a knowledge of the president's party.[3]

The present paper addresses that portion of midterm loss generated during the midterm year.

---

[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 "low stimulus" result predicted by Angus Campbell's original version.

[3]Variations of these theories deserve mention. Jacobson and Kernell's (1983) "strategic politicians" theory posits that congressional election outcomes are in large part generated by politicians *anticipating* electoral 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. In the extreme, the politicians' beliefs about the political climate generate a self-fulfilling prophesy. 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 out-party supporters are more motivated to vote. This sort of asymmetrical motivation could complement either referendum theory or balance theory. By either scenario, abstentions by presidential supporters would produce a result similar to that from voters shifting their votes toward the out party. A question would be why there would be this asymmetric motivation to vote at midterm but not on other electoral occasions.

We make use 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 16 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 growing dissatisfaction with the president's performance. We find that it is not. As citizens focus more on their vote decision in the run-up to the election, they increasingly balance against the president's party but not in a way that is traceable to their perceptions of presidential performance.

Balancing Theory and Midterm Electorates

The theoretical argument for balancing in midterm elections is presented by Alesina and Rosenthal (1995).[4] The conditions for the balancing argument to hold are that some voters 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 advocate policy to the left (if Democrat) or right (if Republican) of 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 2006 CCES poll plus congressional roll-call data, with voters and politicians scaled on a common metric from Bafumi and Herron (2007). President Bush is to the right of most voters. The pre-election 109th

Congress under Republican control was to the right of the median voter. Following the election of a Democratic House, the 110th Congress was slightly to the left of the median voter. 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 on the left-right scale before the election, it would be perhaps halfway 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 policy shift to the left (halfway between the 110th Congress and President Bush), but still somewhat to the right of the median.

Two factors restrict the dynamism of the model. First, presumably only a small subset of voters decides by strategic balancing based on policy considerations. This is quite different from what the world would be like if everybody did. Second, given the checks and balances of the U.S. system, policy change occurs slowly, not instantaneously following a 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 strengthened Democratic congressional majorities, policy would not immediately move as far to the left as it was to the right before the election. It would move from the status quo toward the midpoint between presidential and Congressional position, but with a considerable lag. Thus the degree of imbalance at any one time is not between the median voter and the congressional-presidential midpoint, 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 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 Bush years. 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, Cover, and Norpoth

---

[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 a clear motivation for balancing, as the party of the president is a strong predictor of policy (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Poole and Rosenthal 2007; Wlezien 2004).

[6]For a discussion of why national policy responds slowly to public opinion, see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002).

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.**
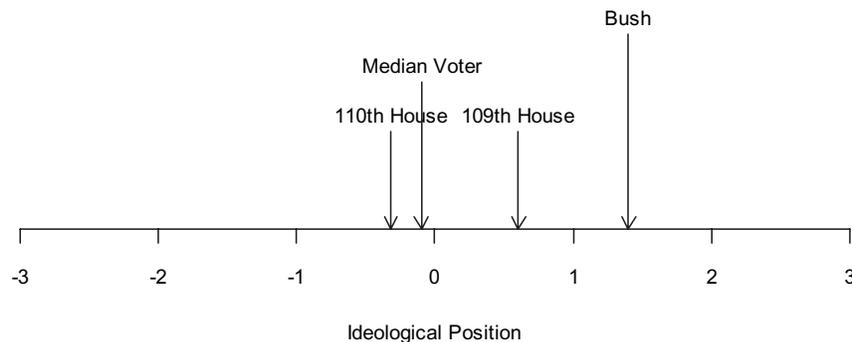
Source: Adopted from Bafumi and Herron, "Preference Aggregation, Representation, and Elected American Political Institutions." Unpublished Manuscript.

1986), the tendency of a party to lose more seats after six years in office than after only two.

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 other survey organizations, 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 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 online appendix available at http://journals.cambridge.org/jop.[8]

We measure both the actual vote and the verdicts in the generic congressional polls as percentages of the two-party vote. To aid assessment of possible (partisan) poll bias, we measure the vote and the survey-based generic vote 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. Details are available in the online appendix.

The answer to the question "how accurate are the generic polls?" must be nuanced (Erikson and Sigelman 1995; Moore and Saad 1997). Generic polls perform poorly as point estimates; the leading party in the polls typically ends up with a smaller 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. When properly interpreted, the generic polls are far better augers of congressional elections than their sometimes ragged reputation would have us believe.

---

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

[8]The online appendix is also available at www.dartmouth.edu/~jbafumi.

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

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.[9] Presidential approval is measured in the conventional way, as the percent who say they "approve" of the current president's performance.[10]

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.

[9]Interestingly, unlike with the generic vote, there is no effect on party identification of being in or out of power at midterm. The mean October macropartisanship is exactly 58.3% Democratic for both the seven midterms with a Democratic president and the nine midterms with a Republican president.

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

Ideological Balancing and the Midterm Campaign

It is widely agreed that the function of election campaigns is to bring the issues of the campaign to the voters. In midterm election years, the presidential opposition party tries to prime 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.

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 milepost for which we can get readings for all 16 midterm years of our analysis. By this time point of the campaign, any coattail effects from the previous presidential election should have dissipated. 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 also expect that nine months before the election, survey respondents are not yet thinking strategically to take into account the presidential party and its policy implications.

As Table 1 shows, this is what we find but with one twist: in February of the midterm year, survey respondents balance the incumbent president from the *previous* term. We see this from equation (1), where party identification and the presidential party from the *prior* term account for almost 90% 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. An effect of the previous presidential party is difficult to challenge since even with only 16 cases it is statistically significant at the .001 level.

Other plausible variables for predicting voter choice offer no contribution to predicting the February generic vote once our two contributing variables are in the equation. Equation (2) shows that the current presidential party does not yet have an impact. Nor, as equations (3) and (4) show, does the lagged congressional vote or the vote for president from the previous presidential year. Equation (5) shows that these variables collectively do not matter. Importantly, the

lack of a presidential vote effect suggests that coattails from the previous election are withdrawn as of early in the next campaign. If coattail voting were to persist 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's equations predict the generic vote from current partisanship plus the lagged and current presidential party at six time points of the campaign. Party identification in later months predicts the generic vote similarly to what we observe in February. The previous presidential party continues to matter, although fading in importance. Now the current presidential party begins to affect elections, first emerging with a statistically significant effect (.05) in August. By September and again in October, the

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) 241–300 Days Out (Feb.)	(7) 181–240 Days Out (April)	(8) 121–180 Days Out (June)	(9) 61–120 Days Out (August)	(10) 31–60 Days Out (Sept.)	(11) 1–30 Days Out (Oct.)	(12) Election Day Vote (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	0.88 (0.95)	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. Equation 6 is a repeat of equation 2 from Table 1.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

current party coefficient is significant at the .001 level. Clearly, by the 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% 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 that for the actual vote, the estimated effect of the current presidential party is 1.89 percentage points, for almost a 4-point differential. The lagged presidential party continues to matter as well.

Our interpretation is that midterm voters respond negatively to the continuation of the policy direction inherited from 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 80% 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

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) 241–300 Days Out (Feb.)	**(19)** 181–240 Days Out (April)	**(20)** 121–180 Days Out (June)	**(21)** 61–120 Days Out (August)	**(22)** 31–60 Days Out (Sept.)	**(23)** 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)
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. Equation 18 is a repeat of equation 13 in Table 3.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

party (which, like party identification, is incorporated in the February generic vote).

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 5 percentage points (−2.65 × 2) beyond the prediction from the generic polls in February. This differential represents the effect of the campaign between 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 standardized "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.

As estimated, the out party gains 5.3 percentage points (2.65 times 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 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. They 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.[11] The equations' intercepts are consistently small and nonsignificant, 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. 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 presidential party coefficient weakens continuously as we use more and more updated polls. From −2.65 in February (equation 18), it drops in almost linear fashion over the campaign. By the final increment of time for October

[11]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.

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.
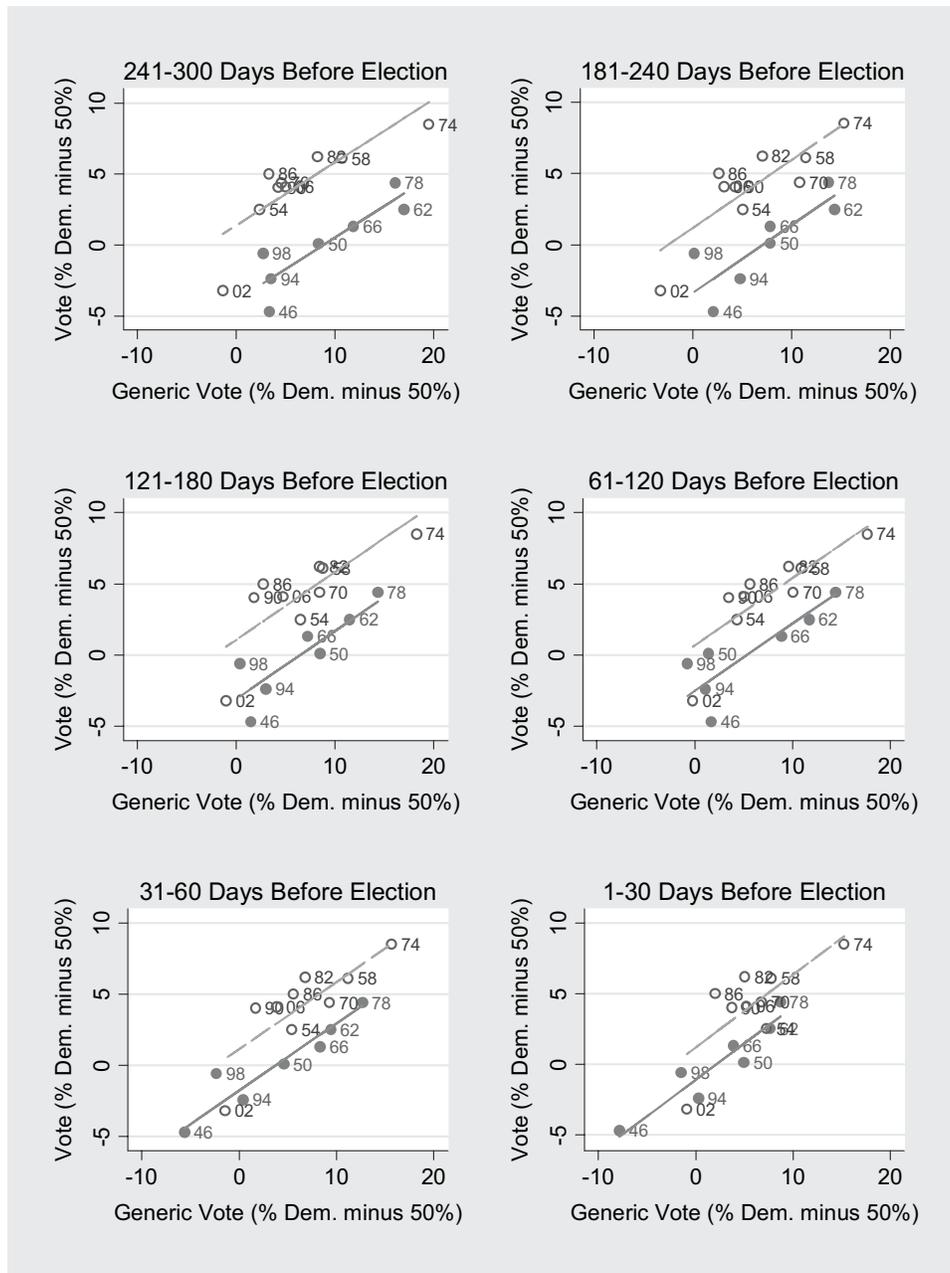
(equation 23), the coefficient is only -1.15 and barely statistically significant ($p = .04$).[12]

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

[12]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.

election between 1946 and 2006. In the first frame, using February polls, one sees that conditional on the generic vote margin, the president's party makes a difference with a gap of about 5 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, the prediction lines for Democratic and Republican presidents approach convergence.

FIGURE 4 **Net Change in the generic congressional vote (Percent Democratic), February to October, relative to February as the starting point. Dashed lines indicate midterm years with Republican presidents. Solid lines indicate midterm years with Democratic presidents.**
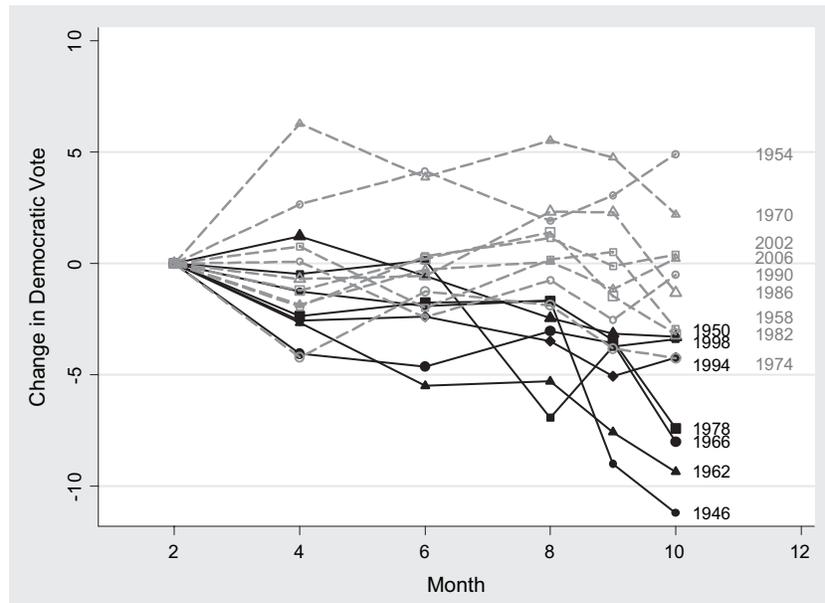

Figure 4 offers a further illustration. With February readings as the "zero" base, it shows the shifts in the generic polls from February to November. If the president is a Republican, the Democrats gain votes. If the president is a Democrat, the Democrats lose votes. By itself, the presidential party can account for over half of the variance in the February to October shift in the generic vote.[13]

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. This static predictability suggests that 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 to vote for the out-

party; this seems to be the *only* appreciable effect of the campaign on the national vote.[14] 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.[15] That this does not happen suggests the

[13]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 paribus, the shift in preferences over the midterm campaign tends to favor the Republicans.

[14]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. 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.

[15]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 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.) This analysis of presidential election polls is based on data compiled by the authors.

absence of unaccounted-for events that affect the vote.[16]

Summary

This section has analyzed the generic congressional election poll results over 16 midterms. At our first measurement in February we find no evidence of electoral balancing. As the campaign progresses, the out-party gains in the polls and ultimately at the ballot box. Although involving only a small percent of the electorate, this change is nearly universal across the 16 elections. Moreover, the evidence suggests that little else contributes to change in the national vote.

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 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. 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 simply due to voters become disillusioned with the presidential party's performance at governing, as referendum theory suggests? If presidential support can account for the slide in the

TABLE 5 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)
October Presidential Approval (minus 50%) × Presidential Party (1 = D, −1 = R)	0.16 (0.07)*	
October Presidential Approval (minus 65.6%) × 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)
Intercept	2.73 (0.76)**	2.73 (0.76)**
Adj. R^2	.43	.43
Root MSE	2.80	2.80

Note: Equations 30 and 31 are algebraically equivalent.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

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 referendum explanation, we measure political conditions using the president's approval rating in the Gallup Poll. We wish to understand the effect of approval on the vote independent of the trial heat polls. First, we ask, does approval matter? Table 5 models the midterm vote with presidential approval on the right-hand side. Approval is measured as the deviation from 50% multiplied by the presidential party dummy variable (+1 if Democrat, −1 if Republican). Choosing 50% as the benchmark provides no loss of generality regarding the approval coefficient, which is a statistically significant 0.16.[17] Note,

---

[16]Suppose we replace the generic vote on the right-hand side in Table 4, with its two predictors—current party identification plus the lagged presidential vote. The result is again a stable *R*-squared, averaging .80—slightly higher than in Table 4. With these alternative equations, the presidential vote coefficient is stable from the February to October, which makes sense since partisanship is fairly stable over the campaign interval.

[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 consumer sentiment index 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.

TABLE 6   PREDICTING THE VOTE FROM PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL, 16 midterm elections 1946–2006

	Dependent Variable = Democratic % of Two–Party Vote minus 50% (November)			
	(32)	(33)	(34)	(35)
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.). × Pres. Party		0.04 (0.06)		
February Presidential Approval (minus 50) × Pres. Party (1 = D, −1 = R.)			0.03 (0.04)	
October Presidential Approval (minus 50) × Pres. Party (1 = D, −1 = R.)				0.08 (0.04)
Current Presidential Party (1 = D, −1 = R.)	−2.65 (0.45)***	−2.56 (0.47)***	−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.
***$p < .001$

however, that the size of the presidential party coefficient now becomes conditional on approval at 50%.[18]

We can manipulate the presidential party coefficient to become larger or smaller by moving the benchmark up or down from 50%. If we move it up to 65.6%, we make the presidential party 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.[19] If it were the case that presidents typically average about 66% approval at midterm, there would be no advantage for being the out party.[20]

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% 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

[18]The product of presidential approval (minus 50%) and the presidential party dummy is an interaction term. The coefficient and standard error are unaffected by the choice of 50% 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% since it is a useful, seemingly neutral, reference point. We do not include presidential approval in the equation as an additive term because we assume that the effect of approval is identical for Republican and Democratic presidents. The equations of Table 5 are algebraically equivalent to an alternative equation format where the vote variables are measured as the presidential party vote rather than the Democratic vote and 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% presidential approval is the value that would neutralize the midterm disadvantage for the presidential party, it does not take into account midterm loss from the presidential election. Using equations (30) or (31) as a guide, presidents would need on average around 76% approval to overcome both the party's disadvantage at midterm plus the loss of coattails from the presidential year.

[20]With party identification added to the equation, the approval coefficient plunges to 0.08, half its original value. Evidently, to the extent approval affects the midterm vote, it is also absorbed by party identification, 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

(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 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. 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 sour 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. 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, approval declines a modest 3.4 percentage points from February to October. Is this sufficient to make a mean-

ingful difference in support for the presidential ticket?[21]

Table 6 shows some relevant regressions. Equation (32) sets the benchmark, repeating equation (13) (from Table 3) which predicts the Democratic vote from February polls and the president's party. Equation (33) 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 nonsignificant, 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 refutes the idea that declining presidential approval over the midterm year generates the evolving rejection of the presidential party.[22]

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. To test this idea, equation (34) 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 the public 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 (35) substitutes October approval

---

[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. For 14 observations of consumer sentiment from quarter 1 to quarter 3, sentiment rose in three but fell in the other 11. The mean change, however, was a trivial 3 out of 200 points.

[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; given that the two measures share some of the same respondents, they share sampling error. (For example, 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.

for February approval. Again the coefficient is not significant and there is no impact on the other terms of the equation. Knowing 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]

The remarkable aspect of equation (35) 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 hypothesis that the presidential party's negative trajectory at midterm is due to voters reacting negatively to the president's performance. While the national vote 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 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, the latter is actually of greater magnitude, as parties typically gain more at midterm by losing the presidential election than they gain from winning the presidency. This article has examined trends in partisan vote preference over the sixteen most recent midterm years. We do not challenge the presence of a presidential year surge or 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 our research derives from the use of "generic ballot" polls for midterm congressional elections. 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 course of the campaign that follows 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 absorbed in the generic polls as of February of the election year. 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 against the incumbent president as if for no reason at all. Such a bias against the sitting president is noticeably absent at other times during the election cycle, even in the

---

[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. Seemingly, the effects of presidential approval 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 hypothetical congressional ballots.

[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.

Spring of the midterm year itself. We thus settle on a purpose-driven explanation: a desire to balance the policies of the president's party. To some, this idea asks too much of ordinary voters. But, all that is required is that some voters know and care about the parties' policy tendencies and 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. This advantage is withdrawn in midterm election years. As we have examined here, at 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.

Acknowledgments

References

Abramowitz, Alan, Alan Cover, and Helmut Norpoth. 1986. "The President's Party in Midterm Elections: Going from Bad to Worse." *American Journal of Political Science* 33 (3): 562–76.

Alesina, Roberto, and Howard Rosenthal. 1995. *Partisan Politics, Divided Government, and the Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[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, such as those who appear more politically knowledgeable, a group more likely to take policy considerations into accounts. Evidence that voters chose based on their own ideology would be consistent with balancing behavior but also with issue voting that ignores the presidential party. The value of survey analysis is limited, 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.

Bafumi, Joseph, and Michael Herron. 2007. "Preference Aggregation, Representation, and Elected American Political Institutions." Dartmouth College. Unpublished manuscript.

Campbell, Angus. 1966. "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change." In *Elections and the Political Order*, ed. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. New York: Wiley, 40–62.

Campbell, James E. 1997. *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Erikson, Robert S., Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson. 2002. *The Macropolity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Erikson, Robert S., and Lee Sigelman. 1995. "Poll-Based Forecasts of Midterm Congressional Elections: Do the Pollsters Get it Right?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (Winter): 589–605.

Fiorina, Morris P. 2003. *Divided Govenrment*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman.

Jacobson, C. Gary. 2004. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 6th ed. New York: Longman.

Jacobson, C. Gary, and Samuel Kernell. 1983. *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kernell, Samuel. 1977. "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting." *American Political Science Review* 71 (1): 44–66.

Lau, Richard R. 1994. "An Analysis of the Accuracy of 'Trial Heat' Polls During the 1992 Presidential Election." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58 (Winter): 2–20.

McDermott, Monica L., and Kathleen A. Frankovic. (2003). "The Polls—Review: Horserace Polling and Survey Method Effects: An Analysis of the 2000 Campaign." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67 (2): 244–64.

Mebane, Walter. 2000. "Coordination, Moderation, and Institutional Balancing in American Presidential and House Elections." *American Political Science Review* 94 (1): 37–58.

Moore, David, and Lydia Saad. 1997. "The Generic Ballot in Midterm Congressional Elections: Its Accuracy and Relationship to House Seats." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (4): 603–14.

Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 2007. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Press.

Scheve, Kenneth, and Michael R. Tomz. 1999. "Electoral Surprise and Midterm Loss in US Congressional Elections." *British Journal of Political Science* 29 (July): 507–21.

Tufte, Edward. 1975. "Determinants of Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 69 (3): 812–26.

Wlezien, Christopher. 2004. "Patterns of Representation: Dynamics of Public Preferences and Policy." *Journal of Politics* 66 (1): 1–24.

Joseph Bafumi is assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755.

Robert S. Erikson is professor of political science at Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

Christopher Wlezien is professor of political science at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122-6089.