

# Politics 101

## The meaning of the midterms.

By Paul Glastris

Off-year elections are murky affairs. Most Americans don't pay attention to them. Even fewer vote in them. And their political significance must be discerned, oracle-like, from the results of hundreds of House and Senate races, most of which turn as much on local as national issues.

Still, once the returns are in, a roughly accurate consensus usually forms about the meaning of a particular midterm. In 1994, the GOP took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in over 40 years. That rout was widely seen as a rejection of sclerotic and uninspired Democratic congressional rule, a rebuke of the shaky first two years of Bill Clinton's presidency, and a sign that a growing portion of the electorate was open to conservative ideas. In 1998, the Senate held steady and the Democrats picked up five House seats. That result—the first time since 1822 that the party not in control of the White House had failed to gain seats in the mid-term election of a president's second term—was understood as a protest against impeachment inquiries then underway against a by-then-popular Clinton. In 2002, the Democrats lost their paper-thin Senate majority along with seven House seats. In that case, too, the message was clear: The public wasn't impressed with tremulous Democrats who, 14 months after 9/11, only wanted to talk about prescription drugs.

While midterms offer important lessons, politicians don't always learn them. After 1994, Bill Clinton got it right: He retooled his staff, reembraced New Democratic ideas like welfare reform, and won big in 1996. After the 1998 midterms, by contrast, GOP House leaders ignored the message voters were sending and impeached the president anyway, a move now widely seen, even by many conservatives, as a mistake. And after 2002, Democrats waited another year—for Iraq to descend into chaos and for presidential candidate Howard Dean to show them how to fight—before challenging the GOP on national-security grounds.

This year's midterms are at least as crucial as the last three, and already it is possible to predict how their results will be read, and misread. In a nutshell, if Democrats win, both parties will likely learn the right lessons. But if Republicans win, both

parties are liable to take away the wrong lessons.

### "Had Enough?"

Consider the former possibility: that Democrats take the House, and possibly the Senate. Many conservatives are already so openly disgusted with the behavior of House Republicans—the spending, the corruption, the failure to stand up to the White House on civil liberties and separation of powers—that it will be hard for any Republican leader to credibly argue that a midterm loss is anything but a rebuke for that same behavior.

Democrats, meanwhile, are unlikely to read too much significance into their win. After three straight election losses and endless rounds of self-flagellation, few Democratic leaders are under the illusion that they have a master plan for political success or the ideological key to voters' hearts. Should they take back one or both houses, Democrats will feel not so much triumphant as relieved to finally be back in the game.

Now consider the other possibility: that the GOP manages to hold on to its majorities in the House and Senate. In that case, Republicans, led by the president, will want to claim even the thinnest victory as public validation of everything they've been doing over the past six years. One glance at the opinion polls—on the economy, Iraq, you name it—is enough to show that this isn't true. But you can safely bet a month's pay that this is precisely what GOP leaders will do.

And if they do, they will be repeating the mistake Bush made two years ago. After narrowly winning reelection in 2004, the president claimed he had faced his "accountability moment," and not only didn't need to change course but could now spend his "political capital" on such radical endeavors as privatizing Social Security. A year later, Bush's approval ratings were in the 30s and vulnerable GOP candidates were avoiding his presence.

Democrats, too, are liable to miss the real lesson of a failure to win at least one house. Egged on by their "friends" in the mainstream media, Democrats may come to believe that their mistake was one of message: They didn't offer up enough bold ideas, an alternative vision to contrast with the Republicans'.

It's true that Democrats have a message problem in the most profound sense: They don't quite know, and certainly can't get across to voters, what they stand for or where they'd

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take the country. But that's a problem that needs to be hashed out during presidential elections. It's much harder to do in off-year elections, and less important, too.

Midterms tend to be referendums on the party in power. If that's the case this November, Republicans will almost certainly lose. Indeed, if Democrats were running on big, bold, visionary ideas this year, they'd be playing right into the hands of their opponents, who would like nothing better than to shift attention away from their own sorry record by making the election a contrast between the two parties' positions on the issues.

"I've never seen a positive message win a midterm," observes veteran political analyst Charlie Cook. Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" may seem like an exception. But as Cook notes, a poll in late October 1994 showed that 70 percent of voters hadn't even heard of the contract, which, we forget, was mainly a collection of dull procedural reforms ("limit the terms of all committee chairs ... ban the casting of proxy votes in committee") meant to reinforce Gingrich's larger negative strategy of highlighting "corrupt" Democratic rule. This year, the former speaker has wisely counseled the Democrats to do likewise: make the election a referendum on corrupt and incompetent Republican rule by adopting the slogan "Had Enough?"

## Street Fighting

If the Democrats lose the midterms, it will not really be because of what their candidates said or didn't say on the stump. It will be because of what their campaign organizations did or did not do behind the scenes. For years, Democrats have let their political machinery atrophy, while Republicans built theirs up. The result is that Democrats today simply aren't as good as Republicans at the basic blocking and tackling of electoral politics.

The very field on which Democrats must compete this year is tilted against them as a result of superior GOP political organizing. In the 1980s, Republicans put in place a long-term strategy to redraw congressional lines to their advantage by winning statehouses and investing heavily in technology and legal expertise. That strategy bore fruit, not just in Texas—which in 2004, at Tom DeLay's behest, used a mid-decade redistricting to gain 5 House seats—but also in Florida, Michigan, and other states. Were it not for those gains, Democrats would need only a few seats, not 15, in order to retake the House this year.

Midterms, being low-turnout elections, tend to be won or lost on the ground, by whichever party gets more of its base voters to the polls. Democrats long excelled at this GOTV ("get out the vote") game, but in the last two election cycles, the Republicans have outperformed the Democrats through mastery of the new technology of "microtargeting." Rather than merely relying on voter lists to identify known supporters in electoral strongholds (the traditional Democratic GOTV method), microtargeting allows a party to find likely supporters anywhere in a district or state. It does so by mining consumer databases with the help of algorithms that match peoples' lifestyle habits with their likely political leanings (fishermen are more Democratic than hunters, college-football watchers are more Republican than pro-football

fans), then sending targeted messages that push their likely hot buttons (say, a piece of direct mail about illegal immigration to an out-of-work union carpenter).

Democratic Party officials claim to be catching up to the GOP in microtargeting. But in reality, intra-party Democratic feuding, plus continued GOP advances, mean that Democrats may now be further behind the Republicans in this crucial field than they were two years ago.

Another shortcoming is talent. For decades, the national GOP has invested far more than have Democrats in groups that serve as political farm teams—organizations such as GOPAC, which helps aspiring Republicans run for local and state office, and the College Republicans, where ambitious young conservative political operatives like Lee Atwater, Karl Rove, and Grover Norquist cut their teeth. Consequently, "Republicans have more people who know how to do the mechanics of running successful campaigns than Democrats do," notes former GOPAC head Rich Galen. Were it not for this talent imbalance, says Galen, "there's no question Democrats would take over the House, because there's just so much dissatisfaction with Republicans."

The list goes on. Democrats have not managed to find organized allies to replace shrinking labor unions, while Republicans are persuading corporations like Wal-Mart to organize their employees on behalf of the GOP. The RNC has made bold moves to poach persuadable members of traditional Democratic constituencies (blacks, Jews, Hispanics) while DNC efforts to do the same with traditionally Republican constituencies (environmentally minded hunters, moderate evangelicals) are barely off the ground.

The good news for Democrats is that some in the party—both in leadership and the grass roots—get it. One sign is the success of the liberal blogosphere, with its focus on hardball politics and raising small-donor campaign contributions (a perennial Democratic weakness). Another is a quiet national strategy now underway to reverse the Democrats' redistricting losses (see "The Race to Gerrymander," p. 15). There is also DNC chair Howard Dean's effort to rebuild state parties, as Republicans have been doing for years. Many question Dean's competence, and Hill Democrats are furious that he's put too few resources into helping congressional candidates win this year. But few doubt the need to rebuild state parties. That Democrats are now having to rob Peter to pay Paul is yet one more example of how past under-investment in political capacity is hurting the party this year.

If the election is close and Republicans do eke out a victory, there will be no end to debates about which message point the Democrats should or should not have stressed. Should they have talked more about the "culture of corruption" in Congress? (Yes, probably). Could they have put forth a more compelling alternative for Iraq? (Perhaps, but it's hard to think of one). Did they fall into Karl Rove's trap with their votes on terrorist detention and interrogation legislation? (We shall see). But debates about positioning and messaging could obscure the larger lesson of these midterms: They will be won or lost not so much in soundbites but on the streets. ♦