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THE ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE IN 2018

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE ARE STRONG

As political scientist and *Washington Post* blogger at "The Monkey Cage" John Sides puts it, "The president's party tends to lose seats in midterm elections. Period.[1]" Democrats were counting on that in 2018. To win back the House, Democrats needed to flip 23 seats to their side of the aisle—the exact average number of House seats a first term president tended to lose in midterm elections over the past eight decades. In the Senate, their path was much more difficult. Thirty-five seats, including a few special elections to formally fill vacated seats like Democrat Al Franken's in Minnesota (Franken resigned after photos of him sexually disrespecting a woman were shared on social media), were up for election in 2018, 24 controlled by Democrats and 2 controlled by Independents who organized with the Democrats in the Senate. Democratically held seats in North Dakota, Indiana, and Missouri appeared to be likely gains for Republicans, making the Democrats' task in the Senate all the more difficult. Electoral forecaster Nate Silver of the website FiveThirtyEight gave Democrats a six in seven chance of winning back control of the House but only a one in seven chance of taking the Senate. But keep in mind, these were probabilities, not certainties. Rolling a dice has a 5-in-6 chance of landing on any number but 6. But would you bet your life savings that one particular roll of the dice would not land on 6? Political candidates tend not to make that bet.

Still, how can forecasts like Silver's, which don't always have good, district-level polling data to build on, make such precise estimates months ahead of an election? Despite media coverage suggesting that midterm elections are driven by

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Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Director, Professor Barry Burden, explains the initial landscape of the 2016 race for control of the House of Representatives.

the president's "message" and ability to "connect" with voters, congressional elections expert Gary Jacobson's research shows that nearly 80 percent of any changes in the president's party's number of House seats is due to three simple factors: the number of seats the majority has, the president's approval rating, and the general state of the economy.[2] Albeit in different degrees, each of these indicators spelled trouble for the Republicans in the House in 2018.

First, President Trump's approval rating spent the entirety of the election season underwater. When Labor Day arrived, a time when many elections forecasters make their predictions, 40 percent of Americans approved of his job performance.[3] Economic growth, measured by political scientist and Mischiefs of Faction blogger Seth Masket as growth in per capita Real Disposable Income, was just above 2 percent, suggesting something in the way of a 23 to 25 seat loss in the House. In short, President Trump was unpopular enough and the economy was growing just slowly enough for Democrats to be hopeful and Republicans to be worried. As Figure 1-1 shows, the House Republicans performed worse than the typical midterm losses experienced by the president's party (represented by the solid line), given presidential approval and economic growth heading into the fall.

In addition to the federal offices at play in 2018, 36 states had gubernatorial elections. Republicans held 26 of the seats and Democrats held 9. The lone independent governor was Alaska's Bill Walker. Each party had seven seats that were not up for re-election. While there is no prize for majority control of governorships, having more governors is an advantage for a political party in terms

> FIGURE 1-1 ■ Income Growth and Midterm Seat Gains and Losses for the President's Party.

Economic Growth and House Seats
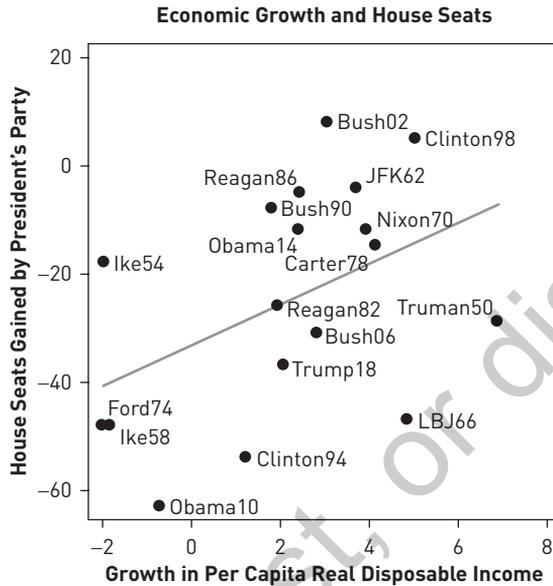
Source: Seth Masket, University of Denver.

of in-state governance and in terms of building up a "bench" of potential presidential contenders. Several presidential "swing states" had hotly contested races for the governor's mansion. Wisconsin's race between incumbent Republican and 2016 GOP presidential candidate Scott Walker and State Superintendent of Schools Tony Evers was highly coveted by partisans on both sides of the aisle. In Ohio, meanwhile, 2016 Republican primary contender and outgoing governor John Kasich's seat was fought over by Republican Mike DeWine and Democrat Richard Cordray. Florida's contest between Republican Ron DeSantis and Democrat Andrew Gillum ended after a statewide machine recount led Gillum to concede several days after the election, upsetting some Democratic activists who had wanted Gillum to push for additional legal action.

Table 1-1 shows the average seat loss in each federal chamber for the president's party. The bolded rows represent midterm elections for a first-term president, like President Trump in 2018. While first-term presidents lost House seats in all but one election, Trump's Republican Party performed the 5th worst, or, depending upon your point of view, 7th best, since 1946 for first-term presidents.

Table 1-1 ■ Seat Changes in Midterm Elections, First-Terms for Presidents in Bold			
NET SEAT CHANGE			
YEAR	**PRESIDENT'S PARTY**	**HOUSE**	**SENATE**
2018	**Republican**	**-38**[*]	**+1**[*]
2014	Democratic	-13	-9
2010	**Democratic**	**-63**	**-6**
2006	Republican	-30	-6
2002	**Republican**	**+7**	**2**
1998	Democratic	+4	0
1994	**Democratic**	**-52**	**-8**
1990	**Republican**	**-9**	**-1**
1986	Republican	-4	-8
1982	**Republican**	**-27**	**1**
1978	**Democratic**	**-10**	**-3**
1974	Republican	-43	-4
1970	**Republican**	**-10**	**1**
1966	**Democratic**	**-46**	**-3**
1962	**Democratic**	**-6**	**4**
1958	Republican	-49	-13
1954	**Republican**	**-16**	**-2**
1950	Democratic	-27	-5
1946	**Democratic**	**-53**	**-11**

*Estimates as of November 25, 2018.

Source: Created using data from US House of Representatives, US Senate, voteview.org and NYT.

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE FOR DEMOCRATS?

The 2018 midterms arrived on the heels of the 2016 presidential elections and the 2014 midterms, both of which were bruising for the Democratic Party. Democrats had performed well in three of the previous four elections, taking back both houses of Congress in 2006 and moving their party back into the White House in 2008. That success didn't last. Democrats lost a whopping 63 House seats—and their House majority—and 6 Senate seats in the 2010 midterms. Democrats stormed back to gain 8 seats in the House and 2 Senate seats in 2012. Though the GOP still held the House majority, the Democrats' majority in the Senate had grown. After all the ballots were counted in 2014, the Republicans reasserted their strength in the House, gaining 13 seats. More importantly, they gained 9 seats to grab a 10-seat advantage and control of the Senate.[4]

In 2016, reality television star and real estate developer Donald Trump shocked the world twice—first, by besting more than a dozen quality candidates on the Republican side for his party's nomination and, second, by defeating Hillary Rodham Clinton, despite losing the popular vote, for the presidency.

In 2018, the Republicans held a 235 to 193 advantage in the House of Representatives.[5] Recall that large majorities and successful previous elections often mean that more seats are likely to be vulnerable in the next election. This is especially true for House members who won a district that was won by the presidential candidate of the previous winning party. For example, simply knowing whether a congressional district voted for Barack Obama or John McCain in 2008, and nothing else, correctly predicted the results of 85 percent of the races in 2010.[6]

On November 4, 2014, President Obama's approval rating was 40 percent;[7] this career low nearly-mirrored where two-term president Republican Ronald Reagan was at a similar point in his term. Reagan's Republicans lost five House seats and nine Senate seats in the 1986 midterms. On the other hand, Democrat Bill Clinton, another recent two-term president, had an approval rating over 60 percent during his second midterm election and watched as his fellow Democrats gained five seats in the House . . . all while he was being impeached! While Barack Obama's approval rating at the times of his midterm elections generally fell into line with most of his predecessors, President Obama was governing at a time of heightened partisan polarization. By some measures, the House and the Senate are more polarized than they have been since just after the Civil War.[8]

There is a wide array of evidence that the public is increasingly polarized as well, as Americans have increasingly matched their political ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative) to their political party (Democrat, Independent, Republican).[9] Approval of the president in polarized times should be a better predictor of congressional vote choice because the distance between the two parties, among both citizens and lawmakers alike, is so vast. This means that party labels

should matter even more to most voters than they did during periods in which the parties exhibited fewer differences. Even so, several election forecasters, such as political scientist Rachel Bitecofer, pointed out that small shifts in presidential approval had the potential for big consequences at the ballot box.[10]

This fact was not welcome news for President Trump, despite his regular claims that his approval rating was higher than it really was. Simply put, President Trump's approval was far lower than is typical for presidents presiding over an economy that was growing as much as the American economy was in the fall of 2018. The president's penchant for controversy, nursed on Twitter, in press conferences and in public rallies around the country, turned off many Americans who might otherwise have more favorably evaluated a president presiding over low unemployment and increasing growth in the nation's Gross Domestic Product.

In summary, presidential approval, the state of the economy, and the size of the majorities the president's party is defending explain 80 percent of midterm election results. What about the other 20 percent? Even though it is tempting to treat each congressional race separately, election forecasters also rely on the "generic ballot," which asks a nationwide sample of voters which party they would vote for in their own congressional district if the election were "held today." FiveThirtyEight's average generic ballot gave Democrats an 8.9 percent advantage over Republicans, contributing to the site's steady prediction—from August 1st to Election Day—that Democrats had a roughly 80 percent change to take the House.

POLITICAL VARIABLES IN THE 2018 MIDTERMS

Congressional Retirements

Several factors that can nudge election results to one side of the aisle or the other are not as steady as presidential approval, economic growth, and the pull of the generic ballot. One such factor is the number of lawmakers who choose retirement over a re-election fight. Comparing the number of retirements among members of each political party can often be a useful signal to explain how lawmakers interpret the direction in which the political winds are blowing. In 2018, three senators, all Republicans, retired. However, all three served in states where Republicans typically had electoral advantages—Utah, Tennessee and Arizona. Two of the retirees, Jeff Flake and Bob Corker, had been rhetorical thorns in the side of President Trump, even though they typically voted with him on matters of policy. Even so, Flake and Corker would have been likely to face stiff challenges from the ideological right in their own party's primary election if they had sought to run again. While the Senate retirements did not offer a clear signal about how lawmakers were handicapping the 2018 elections, the House of Representatives was a different story. Twenty-three Republicans retired, as compared to only 10

Democrats. While his own seat was safe, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who represented the 1st congressional district in Wisconsin, chose not to run for re-election. Ryan's retirement signalled to the political class that he thought he may lose his speakership to a Democratic Party takeover. Just as telling, the retirements were not confined to a single geographic area. Republicans were retiring from the House from Florida to California. President Trump blamed part of his party's loss on the retirements, claiming that if some lawmakers had run for re-election, the results would have been different. But this ignores political science evidence suggesting that many retirements are strategic—that is, lawmakers are more likely to retire if they think they are going to lose.

President Trump and the News Media

Another non-structural factor that can nudge election results is news coverage. Most coverage of the midterms focused on President Trump's polarizing style, trips to campaign for Republicans around the country, and hotly contested Senate and gubernatorial races around the country like Texas Republican Ted Cruz's Senate re-election campaign against Democratic Congressman Beto O'Rourke. News coverage of elections can highlight issues or candidate traits that tend to benefit one political party or the other. More often, however, news coverage focuses on the horse race—"game frame" coverage focusing on who is ahead, behind and the various strategies parties and candidates pursue. Economic and political factors can affect the news media's likelihood of using the game frame to cover elections. In terms of economic factors, large media companies' news outlets are more likely than small chains and privately-held news organizations to cover elections as a game. On the political side, the more competitive a race, the more likely game frame coverage will be present.[11] President Trump's behavior was catnip to political reporters. On the one hand, reporters feel compelled to provide thorough, accurate coverage to any president. On the other hand, this president regularly referred to reporters as enemies of the American people—causing some journalists to pursue other strategies to cover the White House.

Campaign Ads and Interest Groups

Beyond the news media attention, candidates and organized interest groups—representing both public-facing organizations like the National Rifle Association and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and "Dark Money" groups who spend massive amounts of money from undisclosed sources—spent more than $3.3 billion on television and radio ads and another $900 million in digital advertising.[12]

Many Political Action Committees (PACs), like the National Beer Wholesalers Association, give to both parties, usually giving slightly more

to the majority party. Not all PACs behave this way, though. Many give to one party. Most heavy-hitting labor unions gave between 75 and 95 percent of their campaign donations to the Democrats, while most business-oriented PACS gave between 65 and 80 percent of their money to Republicans. Other PACs that represent single-issue groups, such as NARAL-Pro Choice America and the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), give almost exclusively to one party—NARAL to Democrats, the NRLC to Republicans. Other groups, such as EMILY's List (Early Money Is Like Yeast: it makes the dough rise), exist specifically to help candidates of one party, in this case Democratic women.

Issues

While voters tend to see their electoral choices through partisan-colored glasses, candidates, parties, and interest groups also seek to focus people's attention on a variety of issues. While public opinion generally opposed President Obama's legislative achievements on health care while he was in office, the Trump administration's threats to overturn Obama's Affordable Care Act re-ignited public opinion about the issue—this time in a new direction. In the 2010 midterms, the vote share for Democrats who supported the ACA, also known as "ObamaCare," was 8.5 points lower than Democrats who opposed it.[13] In 2018, approval for the ACA reached 54 percent in February. Democratic candidates, who avoided airing ads about the issue in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016, suddenly flooded the communication environment touting their support for the young law.[14]

While health care was an issue Democrats spent their time and money on, Republicans spent a great deal of their resources on immigration. As Election Day drew near, a group of poor Central American migrants were making their way toward the United States to seek asylum. President Trump called the caravan a danger to the country, claiming without evidence that the caravan was filled with "gang members" and "thugs." Seventy-two percent of Republican voters had a favorable view of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, while only 20 percent of Democrats felt similarly.[15]

President Trump's second Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, was also a flashpoint for partisan activists on both sides of the aisle. Serious questions raised about Kavanaugh's behavior in his youth surfaced during his confirmation hearing in the Senate. A psychology professor named Christine Blasey Ford accused Kavanaugh of attempting to sexually assault her at a party in 1982. Dr. Ford testified movingly during the confirmation hearings, impressing the slate of senators doing the questioning. Judge Kavanaugh's fiery and emotional response was viewed very differently by Republicans and Democrats. Eighty percent of Democratic men believed Ford as did 74 percent of Democratic women whereas 77 percent Republican men and 73 percent of Republican women believed Kavanaugh.[16]

Discussion Questions

1. As elections get increasingly hotly contested, do you think the fundamental explanations (economy, presidential approval, size of majorities) or short-term explanations (scandals, media coverage, fleeting issues and occurrences) will matter more when it comes to predicting midterm election results?

2. How can Republicans and Democrats, who watched the same Supreme Court hearings for Justice Brett Kavanaugh, come away with such different ideas about whether Kavanaugh was qualified and fit to serve the nation's highest court?

3. What are the positive and negative aspects for scholars and media organizations like FiveThirtyEight making such precise predictions about how elections are going to turn out?

Notes

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/11/03/the-2014-midterm-election-fundamentals-in-4-graphs/?utm_term=.b0ad4832ef3a

2. https://news.gallup.com/poll/243971/trump-job-approval-improves.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Trump%2520Job%2520Approval%2520Improves%2520to%252044%2525

3. Seven seats were vacant, two of which had been held by Democrats. 193+2+23=218, the requirement for a majority in the 435-seat House.

4. http://bostonreview.net/mcghee-nyhan-sides-midterm-postmortem

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6. http://polarizedamerica.com/#POLITICALPOLARIZATION

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8. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/opinion/democratic-party-midterm-elections-polling.html

9. Johanna Dunaway and Regina G. Lawrence, "What Predicts the Game Frame? Media Ownership, Electoral Context, and Campaign News," *Political Communication* 32(1): 43-60.

10. https://www.axios.com/record-midterm-ad-spend-explodes-money-was-no-object-1541450836-f92d1767-ad5f-4d85-99ee-96d9847e7691.html

11. http://mysite.du.edu/~smasket/Nyhan_et_al_APR.pdf

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13. http://www.people-press.org/2018/07/24/growing-partisan-differences-in-views-of-the-fbi-stark-divide-over-ice/

14. https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/654054108/poll-more-believe-ford-than-kavanaugh-a-cultural-shift-from-1991