

# IT'S THE WAR, STUPID

Howard J. Gold



With the war in Iraq going badly, with the incompetence of the Bush administration after Hurricane Katrina, with nearly two-thirds of Americans thinking the country was on the wrong track, it's not surprising that the mid-term congressional elections were transformed into a referendum on the Bush presidency. When the dust settled on the elections last month, Republicans had lost both the House of Representatives and the Senate, after controlling both for the last 12 years. Democratic-controlled houses will have different agendas than the previous Republican majority, writes author and Smith College professor Howard Gold, an authority on US elections. "Staying the course on Iraq" won't cut it anymore, either as policy or as a political mantra.

Le borbier irakien, l'incompétence de l'Administration Bush lors de l'ouragan Katrina, deux tiers d'Américains jugeant que leur pays a choisi la mauvaise voie : pas étonnant que les élections de mi-mandat du mois dernier se soient transformées en référendum sur la présidence de George W. Bush. Un scrutin au terme duquel les républicains avaient perdu la double majorité qu'ils détenaient depuis 12 ans à la Chambre des représentants et au Sénat. Désormais à majorité démocrate, les deux chambres appliqueront évidemment un programme différent de celui des républicains, écrit Howard Gold, spécialiste des élections américaines et professeur au Smith College. « Et l'Irak ne fera plus recette, précise-t-il, ni comme politique ni comme formule incantatoire. »

It is a truism in American politics that midterm elections are a referendum on the performance of the president. In 1974, the electorate, repulsed by Watergate, delivered a sharp rebuke to congressional Republicans. In 1994, with Clinton's universal health care plan in tatters and perceptions of rampant corruption in the Democratic leadership, voters turned to the Gingrich-led Republicans and gave them a majority. In a similar vein, there is little doubt that the recent Democratic takeover of Congress reflects a deep public dissatisfaction with President George W. Bush, in particular with his management of the Iraq war. And although this election was above all a repudiation of President Bush, the Democratic victory is in fact the opening salvo in the 2008 election campaign that is now under way.

As is well known by now, the Democrats captured Congress. As of this writing, they gained 29 seats in the House of Representatives, and they will govern with a comfortable majority. The Democrats gained six seats in the Senate, and with the support of Independent Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, they will control the Senate with a 51-49 majority (table 1). In historical terms, these House gains are a bit below the 35-seat average for the sixth year of an administration (going back to Franklin Roosevelt's second term). Indeed, given the depth of dissatisfaction with President Bush, some

pundits predicted even larger House gains for the Democrats this time around. But fewer incumbents are vulnerable now — even in the midst of an unpopular war — thanks largely to the effects of partisan redistricting.

Still, these Democratic gains were striking. What is most remarkable is that not a single Democratic incumbent lost — no Democratic representatives, senators or governors were unseated anywhere. Even in open seats previously held by Democrats, Republicans did not win a single race. Nationally, Democrats won 54 percent of the vote for the House of Representatives, their best performance in a congressional election since 1992 (figure 1).

There is little doubt that President Bush's policy in Iraq was decisive to the Democratic victory. Going into the election, the president's overall approval rating was low, 38 percent according to a Gallup poll. Only 30 percent approved of his handling of the situation in Iraq. And pessimism was rampant — 62 percent felt that the country was on the wrong track. With a national mood so unfavourable to the president and to the war, it is little wonder the Democrats made significant gains.

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during the campaign exacerbated the party's difficulties. Bush dusted off the 2004 campaign playbook, suggesting that a vote for the Democrats was a vote to "cut and run" from Iraq and would hand victory to the terrorists. In effect, he nationalized the war issue in a congressional election where local issues often come to the fore. But the mood in 2006 is a far cry from what it was only two years earlier.

In 2004, presidential decisiveness and a willingness to stay the course appealed to an electorate that still saw connections between Iraq and the war on terror. By 2006, Americans saw "stay the course" as evidence of a rigid president out of touch with the reality on the ground in Iraq. That reality, of course, is mounting American casualties and a country on the verge of a civil war, if it is not there already.

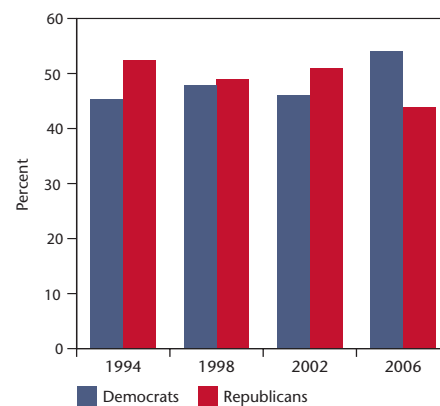
There is evidence that the Republican campaign team understood this message, but they reacted somewhat erratically. In October, President Bush announced that he would no longer employ the oft-used phrase "stay the course" to summarize his policy in Iraq — an attempt to show that he was open to alternative approaches. Yet one week before the election, he announced that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would stay on until the end of his term. If ever a president was guilty of sending mixed signals, Bush was. More than anyone else, Rumsfeld was associated with the failing war effort, and the promise to retain him

undermined Bush's assertion that he was open to new thinking. The president's decision to accept Rumsfeld's resignation on the day after the election infuriated many Republicans who believe that had he acted earlier, he might well have saved the Republican majority in the Senate. After all, in Virginia, with its large military presence, Republican Senator George Allen lost by only 7,000 votes out of over 2.2 million cast; this in a state where according to the exit polls, 53 percent of voters disapproved of the war, and 83 percent of these voted for the Democratic candidate.

The war in Iraq obviously weighed heavily on voters' minds. Exit polls revealed that the war was very or extremely important to 76 percent of voters; 72 percent of voters made a similar assessment of the war on terror. But there was another national issue that captured the attention of voters. Nearly three-quarters of voters stated that government scandals were extremely or very important to them, and these voters decisively supported Democratic candidates.

The corruption scandal involving businessman and lobbyist Jack Abramoff dogged the Republicans for some time and undermined support for them. Former majority leader Tom DeLay resigned from Congress in June 2006 and another Republican congressman, Bob Ney, resigned only a few days before the election, keeping the corruption scandal in the headlines until the last minute. But politi-

FIGURE 1. POPULAR VOTE IN RECENT MIDTERM ELECTIONS



Source: Author

cal corruption scandals are nothing new to Americans (or to anyone else for that matter), who are generally skeptical of politicians' ethics, regardless of party.

A second set of scandals, however, did capture both the media's and the public's attention and arguably delivered a fatal blow to Republican hopes of maintaining control of Congress. First, Florida Representative Mark Foley resigned from Congress after revelations that he had sent sexually suggestive e-mails to young congressional pages. On top of these allegations, there was some evidence to indicate that the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives had long known about Foley's behaviour and did nothing about it. From the Republicans' point of view, the timing of these revelations could not have been worse. The Foley story broke at the very end of September, and it dominated media coverage just as the campaign was heating up. Unlike the Abramoff scandal, this one was not particularly complicated, and it raised troubling questions about the integrity and judgment of the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives, including Speaker Dennis Hastert. According to various polls, well over one-half of Americans said that the Foley scandal would affect their vote; and two-thirds believed that Republicans in Congress knew about Foley's inappropriate behaviour and

TABLE 1. PARTISAN COMPOSITION OF THE 109<sup>TH</sup> AND THE 110<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS (2006-08)

	109 <sup>th</sup> House	110 <sup>th</sup> House <sup>1</sup>
Democrats	203	232
Republicans	232	197
	109 <sup>th</sup> Senate	110 <sup>th</sup> Senate
Democrats	45	51
Republicans	55	49

Source: Author

<sup>1</sup> six seats still undecided at time of writing.



Reuters

**Incoming Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi with President Bush in the Oval Office at the White House following the “thumping” the Republicans took in the midterm congressional elections, losing control of both the House and the Senate to the Democrats. The midterms were transformed into a referendum on Bush, particularly on Iraq.**

intentionally failed to take action to try to protect his seat.

And one week before the election came the *coup de grâce*. While Republicans tried to make John Kerry and his botched joke the centre of attention, the Reverend Ted Haggard made sure that Kerry’s time in the spotlight was limited. On November 3, Haggard, one of the nation’s most prominent evangelical leaders, was “outed” by a male prostitute who claimed that he and Haggard had been engaged in a sexual relationship for three years and that he had helped Haggard purchase crystal methamphetamine. The media of course ran with this story and prominently featured photos of Haggard and President Bush. The damage here was significant: guilt by association here with a defrocked evangelical leader, and further alienation of the president’s evangelical base.

Although these scandals and the Iraq war created the national context for the midterm elections, many outcomes were also influenced by local issues and by developments during the campaign itself. For example, in Arizona, voters unseated two long-serving Republican representatives who supported the construction of a fence along the Mexican border. Nationwide the Democrats registered a 14-point gain among Hispanics; a nativistic immigration policy reversed much of the prior progress President Bush had made among Hispanic voters.

What did bind many races, however, was intense and personal negative campaigning. Nationwide, \$2 billion was spent on campaign advertising, and the bulk of it was for attack ads. In many contests, the atmosphere was highly charged.

In Tennessee, Democratic Representative Harold Ford Jr. was trying

to become the first black senator from a southern state since Reconstruction. Ford’s Republican opponent, Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker, ran a campaign that was intensely personal and negative. Most striking was an ad, sponsored by the Republican National Committee, featuring a white woman with blond hair and bare shoulders, looking and winking into the camera and saying, “Harold, call me.” Reaction to the ad was heated, as it subtly played on old white southern fears of miscegenation. Playing the race card is nothing new to Republican campaigns. Back in 1988, a Republican ad featuring a convicted African-American rapist and murderer by the name of Willie Horton was aired in an attempt to scare white voters away from Democrat Michael Dukakis, who was said to be soft on crime. This time, Republicans pulled the ad quickly, but it appeared to have

worked. A survey of Tennessee voters found that over 80 percent of them had seen the ad. Corker ended up winning by three percentage points.

In Virginia, incumbent Senator George Allen was seeking re-election against a Republican-turned-Democrat, James Webb, who served as secretary of

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the navy in the Reagan administration. Although the war and Allen's support for it were crucial factors, the campaign itself was nasty. Allen used a racial epithet to disparage an aide to his opponent; he reacted defensively to questions about his mother's Jewish heritage; and other stories about his alleged racial insensitivity surfaced. Allen's campaign turned on Webb, accusing him of misogyny and smut-peddling (Webb had written some novels with sexually explicit content some 30 years earlier). Webb won the race by one-half of one percentage point.

In Missouri, the race was less vitriolic. A statewide ballot initiative on embryonic stem cell research emerged as the central issue of the campaign. An ad featuring actor Michael J. Fox passionately endorsing Democrat Claire McCaskill because of her position on stem cell research engendered some controversy, as the symptoms of Fox's Parkinson's affliction were evident in the ad. Some on the right accused Fox and McCaskill of taking advantage of Fox's condition for political gain. McCaskill defeated incumbent Republican Jim Talent by three percentage points; the stem cell initiative passed by two points. Three-quarters of those supporting the initiative voted for the Democrat.

In Rhode Island, Republican incumbent Senator Lincoln Chafee lost

to Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse. Chafee was the most liberal Republican in the Senate, siding with Democrats on many issues. Yet the Republican Party rallied behind Chafee, in the hopes that he could maintain this heavily Democratic state. Chafee played down his partisanship and played up his inde-

pendence. But with Bush's approval rating at only 23 percent in Rhode Island, the Democratic campaign emphasized Chafee's partisan connections to the President. Democrat Whitehouse won by six percentage points.

Perhaps the strangest race took place in Connecticut, where incumbent Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman was re-elected, this time as an Independent. Lieberman, the Democrat most supportive of President Bush's policy in Iraq, lost the Democratic primary to a vocal opponent of the war, Ned Lamont. In the election, only one-third of Democratic voters supported Lieberman, but he won on the strength of solid support from Independents (54 percent) and especially Republicans (70 percent). Lieberman intends to caucus with the party that rejected him, the Democrats, and as the 51<sup>st</sup> member of the Democratic Senate caucus, he is in a position to exert considerable influence over party policy and strategy.

Moderates and Independents — who formed the core of Lieberman's coalition in Connecticut — were essential to the Democrats' success nationwide. This represented an important shift from other recent elections, where so-called swing voters had supported Republicans. In every election since 1994, white Independents have voted Republican, with levels of support

ranging from 51 to 60 percent. This time around, only 43 percent of white Independents voted Republican. Major Democratic gains among moderate swing voters made the difference.

The war in Iraq was obviously the single most important factor in moving swing voters to the Democratic camp.

This was especially so in a midterm election when one could vote against the president but still retain him as commander-in-chief. In a presidential election, when one votes against the commander-in-chief, one had better like the alternative. But in a midterm election, you can have your cake and eat it too. That most voters could

not articulate a Democratic position on the war did not matter. Swing voters were quite simply rejecting the president's management of the war. This was a vote for change.

**B**ut beyond the war, the Democrats changed their approach to candidate recruitment, and this paved the way to their success among swing voters. Take the 11<sup>th</sup> District in North Carolina as an example. North Carolina-11<sup>th</sup> had been in Republican hands since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. In 2004, incumbent Republican Representative Charles Taylor defeated his Democratic challenger by some 30,000 votes (55 percent to 45 percent), a margin fairly consistent in all of Taylor's victories going back to 1992. But in 2006, with an unpopular president dragging down Republicans all over the country, the Democrats ran a different kind of candidate. They recruited Heath Shuler, a retired National Football League quarterback well known in the district from his days as a high school football star. But Shuler's religious and ideological profiles were just as important as his name recognition. Shuler is an outspoken evangelical Christian. He is also pro-life, pro-guns and opposed to gay marriage. And he defeated Taylor by 54 to 46 percent.

Shuler is not alone. Moderate Democrats won districts not only in

North Carolina but also in Indiana, Arizona and Kansas, states that have been hostile to Democrats in recent years. Similarly, in Montana, Missouri and Virginia, the new Democratic senators are moderate to conservative. So although the war created an environment highly favourable to the Democrats, their success was made possible by the decision to actively recruit candidates like Heath Shuler — candidates who successfully pre-empted the usual Republican counterattack that Democrats are secular liberals out of touch with mainstream America.

There may be, however, at least a modicum of truth to this Republican accusation. In seven states, voters endorsed state constitutional amendments that would ban gay marriage. In some states the margin of victory was fairly narrow (52 percent in South Dakota, 56 percent in Colorado). In most of the states, opposition to gay marriage — Idaho, 63 percent; South Carolina, 78 percent; Tennessee, 81 percent — was decisive. There are now 27 states where voters have rejected gay marriage (including blue states such as Michigan, Oregon and Wisconsin).

The presence of moderate-to-conservative Democrats helped secure victory for the Democrats, but it is less clear how a party with a new-found ideological diversity can govern. In a sense, this election has reversed the decades-old images of the parties.

In the 1980s, when neo-conservatives and the religious right joined forces within the Republican Party, the Republicans portrayed themselves as a “big tent.” Their party, they have since claimed, could peacefully house fiscal conservatives, social and religious conservatives and even moderate Republicans from the Northeast. If they accomplished nothing else, the 2006 elections did away with any pretense that moderate Republicanism is a force within the party.

Self-described moderate Republicans lost races all over the Northeast, both

House and Senate. For the first time since 1954, the party with the majority of House seats in the South (the

**The Democratic Congress is also likely to engage in oversight of the executive branch — something else Americans have not seen since George W. Bush was elected in 2000. This oversight will lead to investigations of all aspects of the war — from faulty pre-war intelligence to postwar reconstruction contracts. Oversight may well extend to Vice-President Dick Cheney’s secret energy commission, to the president’s domestic eavesdropping program and to the administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina. Presidential power — largely unchecked since the advent of unified Republican government — will now run up against a Congress willing to flex its muscle.**

Republicans) will form the minority party chamber-wide. The conservative party is now ideologically purer than it has ever been.

The same cannot be said of the Democrats. Heath Shuler and other social conservatives now join a caucus dominated by traditional liberals from the West and from the Northeast, representatives like the new Speaker, Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, and Charles Rangel of New York, the new chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee. There is no doubt going to be some tension in this “big tent.” But the Democrats will likely focus on what binds these various factions: economic populism. Estate taxes, windfall profits for oil companies, universal health care, minimum wage, prescription drugs — these are the kinds of issues that the Democratic Congress will take up. They may also take up the president’s proposed immigration reform in a demonstration of bipartisanship to which Americans are no longer accustomed.

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Americans never really get a respite from campaigning. The 2008 “invisible primary” began the day after the midterm elections. Governor Tom Vilsack of Iowa announced his intention to seek the Democratic presidential nomination; to no one’s surprise, Senator John McCain and Rudy Giuliani have formed exploratory committees. But what the parties and their candidates have learned from 2006 remains to be seen. They face at least two daunting challenges. First, can centrist candidates emerge from a primary process that favours ideological outsiders? And second, how will the war shape the debate heading into 2008? If there is one lesson to be learned from the 2006 midterm elections, it is that Americans will settle for nothing less than a new direction in the Iraq war.

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