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Can the Democrats Take the House? Uniting the Macro and Micro Perspectives

With the 2006 midterm election only a few months away, Democrats' chances of regaining control of the House of Representatives remain unclear. On the one hand, national political conditions appear to be more favorable for Democrats than at any time since the Republican takeover of the House in 1994. A pickup of only 15 seats would give Democrats control of the House in 2007 and, since the end of World War II the average midterm seat loss for the president's party is 24 seats. Moreover, when the president's approval rating is below 50 percent, the average midterm seat loss is 38 seats and according to data compiled by pollingreport.com, George Bush's average approval rating in March was only 37 percent.

Recent national polls also show Democrats with a strong lead in the "generic vote" for Congress. Between September, 2005 and March, 2006 there were 37 national polls asking Americans which party they preferred in the 2006 House elections. Democrats led in every one of these polls with an average advantage of about 10 percentage points. Even though Democratic candidates typically don't perform as well on Election Day as the generic vote question predicts, this is the largest margin Democrats have enjoyed in the generic vote since 1992.

So if the national outlook for the Democrats is so rosy, why are some of the nation's leading political prognosticators, like the *National Journal's* Charlie Cook and Michael Barone of *U.S. News and World Report*, skeptical about the Democrats' chances? The answer is that a midterm election is not just a national election. It is also a collection of 435 individual House races and 33 individual Senate races and right now the evidence from those individual races does not point to big Democratic gains in 2006.

Because of the tremendous advantages enjoyed by incumbents in House elections, open seats generally present the best opportunities for opposition party takeovers. But so far only 16 House Republicans, along with 9 Democrats, have announced that they will not seek reelection in 2006. And many of those retiring Republicans represent safe Republican districts.

Only 12 House Republicans won by a margin of less than 10 percentage points in 2004 and only 16 House Republicans represent districts that were carried by John Kerry. So among Republican incumbents, there is relatively little low-hanging fruit for Democrats to pick off. And thus far, Democrats have had limited success in recruiting top-tier challengers to run against potentially vulnerable GOP incumbents.

Political scientists Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell have argued that the effects of national issues on congressional elections depend in part on the actions of “strategic politicians.” When national political conditions appear to favor one party over the other, the advantaged party is generally more successful at convincing its incumbents to run for reelection, thereby limiting the opposition party’s open seat opportunities, and at recruiting politically experienced open-seat candidates and challengers who are capable of raising the large sums of money needed to wage competitive campaigns.

Congressional primaries will be taking place for several more months. However, based on past experience, we can predict how the actions of strategic politicians in combination with national political conditions, will affect the results of the 2006 midterm elections.

In order to predict the results of the 2006 House elections, I created two forecasting models—one based entirely on national political conditions and one based on a combination of national conditions and the actions of strategic politicians. I used data on 31 U.S. House elections between 1946 and 2004 to compare the success of these two models at predicting the Republican share of seats in the House of Representatives.

The national conditions model includes five predictors: the Republican share of seats in the previous Congress to measure continuity and the advantage of incumbency, dummy variables for Democratic and Republican midterm elections to capture the effect of anti-presidential-party voting in midterm elections, a dummy variable for elections since 1994 to capture the impact of long-term Republican gains in the South, and net presidential approval (approval – disapproval) in early September to measure the effects of presidential performance evaluations.

The strategic politicians model includes the same five predictors plus variables for Republican vs. Democratic open seats and Republican vs. Democratic quality challengers (defined in terms of elected office-holding experience) to capture the decisions made by strategic politicians.

Table 1. Estimates for House Seat Share Models

Variables	National Conditions	Strategic Politicians
Constant	21.146	.667
Previous seat share	.473***	.973***
Dem midterm	5.015**	4.439**
Rep midterm	- 5.353**	- 2.704*
Pres approval	.116***	.070**
Post 1994	7.124***	3.075
Open seats		.449
Challenger quality		.825***
Adjusted R²	.72	.82

Note: Based on elections between 1946 and 2004. Dependent variable is Republican share of House seats.

- * p < .05
- ** p < .01
- *** p < .001

Source: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by author.

The results in Tables 1 show that the model based entirely on national political conditions does a fairly good job of explaining the outcomes of past House elections—the five variables in the model all have statistically significant effects and the model explains 72 percent of the variation in the results of House elections since World War II. We can use these results to make conditional predictions about the outcome of the 2006 House elections depending on President Bush’s net approval rating in September. The conditional predictions are displayed in Table 2. Based on President Bush’s current net approval rating (-20), the national conditions model predicts that Democrats will gain 33 seats in the House of Representatives in November—far more than the 15 seats they need to regain control of the House.

Table 2. Conditional Forecasts of Republican Seats after 2006 Midterm Election

Bush Net Approval In September	National Forces	Strategic Politicians
- 30	194	221
- 20	199	224
- 10	204	227
0	209	230
+ 10	214	233
+ 20	219	236
+ 30	224	239

Note: Forecast for strategic politicians model is based on assumption of no party advantage in open seats or challenger quality.

Source: Gary Jacobson and data compiled by author

The results of the national conditions model are consistent with what most pundits and prognosticators have been saying for the past several months—national political conditions right now are highly favorable for Democrats. But the results of the strategic politicians model tell a different story. When we add the open seat and challenger quality variables to the model, its predictive accuracy improves substantially. The expanded model explains 82 percent of the variation in the results of House elections since World War II. Moreover, while the effect of the open seat variable is not statistically significant, the effect of the challenger quality variable is highly statistically significant. And adding the open seat and challenger quality variables to the model reduces the direct effects of several of the variables measuring national political conditions, including the presidential approval variable.

Adding the open seat and challenger quality variables to the model also drastically changes our predictions about how many seats Democrats are likely to gain in the House based on national conditions alone. Even if President Bush’s approval rating does not improve between now and September, the model predicts that if the open seat and challenger quality variables are neutral, Democrats will gain only eight seats in the House of Representatives.

The results in Table 2 indicate that without any advantage in open seats or challenger quality, Democrats have little chance of regaining control of the House of Representatives in 2006. However, the model also indicates that a fairly modest advantage in challenger quality would give Democrats a good chance of regaining control of the House. Table 3 displays conditional predictions of the outcome of the 2006 House elections depending on the size of the Democratic advantage in challenger quality. According to these results, if President Bush's net approval remains at -20 and the number of quality Democratic challengers exceeds the number of quality Republican challengers by 20, the Democrats should gain 24 seats in the House—nine more than they need to regain control.

Table 3. Conditional Forecasts of Republican House Seats after 2006 Midterm Election based on Strategic Politicians Model

Democratic Advantage in Challenger Quality	Predicted Republican Seats
0	224
10	216
20	208
30	200

Note: Based on assumption of equal numbers of Democratic and Republican open seats and Bush net approval of -20.

Source: Data compiled by author.

An Alternate Measure of Challenger Quality: Campaign Spending

The strategic politicians model estimated above leaves out one potentially critical variable: campaign spending. Jacobson and Kernell argue that the behavior of contributors should also be influenced by national political conditions—challengers from the party that is advantaged by national conditions should have an easier time raising campaign funds than challengers from the party that is disadvantaged.

In order to test the campaign spending hypothesis, I added a variable measuring the difference between median spending by Republican and Democratic challengers to the strategic politicians model. Since campaign spending data are not available for elections prior to 1972, this model could only be estimated for the 16 elections between 1972 and 2004.

When I added the campaign spending variable to the strategic politicians model, the effects of both open seats and challenger quality became negligible: it appears that the influence of challenger quality on the outcomes of House elections is mediated by campaign spending. I then estimated a new model using only the challenger spending variable to measure the actions of strategic politicians. The estimates for this model are displayed in Table 4. Conditional predictions of the outcome of the 2006 midterm election based on this model are displayed in Table 5.

Table 4. Estimates for House Seat Share Model with Challenger Spending

Variables	Coefficient
Constant	9.915
Previous seat share	.788***
Dem midterm	- .478
Rep midterm	- 5.225***
Pres approval	.059**
Post 1994	4.664*
Challenger spending	.105**
Adjusted R ²	.94

Note: Based on elections between 1972 and 2004. Dependent variable is Republican share of House seats.

- * p < .05
- ** p < .01
- *** p < .001

Source: Data compiled by author.

**Table 5. Conditional Forecasts of Republican House Seats after 2006
Midterm Election based on Challenger Spending Model**

Democratic Advantage in Median Challenger \$	Predicted Republican Seats
0	219
10,000	214
20,000	210
30,000	205

Note: Based on assumption of Bush net approval of -20.

Source: Data compiled by author.

The revised strategic politicians model explains 94 percent of the variation in the outcomes of House elections between 1972 and 2004. The estimated coefficients are all in the expected direction and statistically significant except for the Democratic midterm variable. Based on President Bush’s current net approval rating of -20, the revised model predicts with no advantage in challenger spending, Democrats can expect to gain about 13 seats in the House of Representatives—not quite enough to regain control. However, the model also predicts that with even a modest advantage in challenger spending, Democrats should win a narrow majority of House seats.

Conclusions

Both national conditions and the actions of strategic politicians will influence the results of the 2006 midterm election. National political conditions have created an opportunity for Democrats to regain control of the House of Representatives, but whether they realize that opportunity will depend largely on how successful they are in convincing quality challengers to run against potentially vulnerable GOP incumbents and, most importantly, how successful those challengers are in raising the funds needed to wage competitive campaigns.