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Election 2002 and the Problems of American Democracy

by John Samples and Patrick Basham

Executive Summary

In the midterm elections on November 5, 2002, there exists the real possibility of change in the partisan control of either or both houses of Congress, which makes each potentially competitive race important to national policy and politics. This situation lends itself to looking at the election as a series of horse races and the overall outcome as the Triple Crown of politics. As a result, respective partisan fortunes are expected to dominate political discussion during the next 60 days. This is unfortunate.

Our analysis offers a different perspective. Although the horse race aspect of this year's electoral contest is interesting, the preoccupation with partisan details obscures broader, more important aspects of the national policy mood and the health of our political system. In this study, we examine the attitude of Americans toward big government, the declining competitiveness of our elections, and some mistaken conventional wisdom about American democracy.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, across America there exists a measurable popular preference for less, rather than more, government intervention. Therefore, in the fall of 2002, the electorate will favor candidates who support defense spending, civil liberties, and smaller government outside of defense. At the same time, the political system's health is seriously weakened by a lack of competition. Unfortunately, the mismeasurement of, and preoccupation with, voter participation serves only to divert attention away from the pressing problem of an uncompetitive political system.

An election that either ushers in a new era of expanded government or further cements the advantages of incumbency will serve neither the representative nor democratic functions of our political system.

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Introduction

The midterm elections of 2002 promise to be exciting. Partisan control of the Senate and the House of Representatives could easily change hands, which makes each potentially competitive race important to national policy and politics. This situation lends itself to looking at the election as a series of horse races and the overall outcome as the Triple Crown of politics. This analysis offers a different perspective. We examine the attitude of Americans toward big government, the declining competitiveness of our elections, and some mistaken conventional wisdom about American democracy.

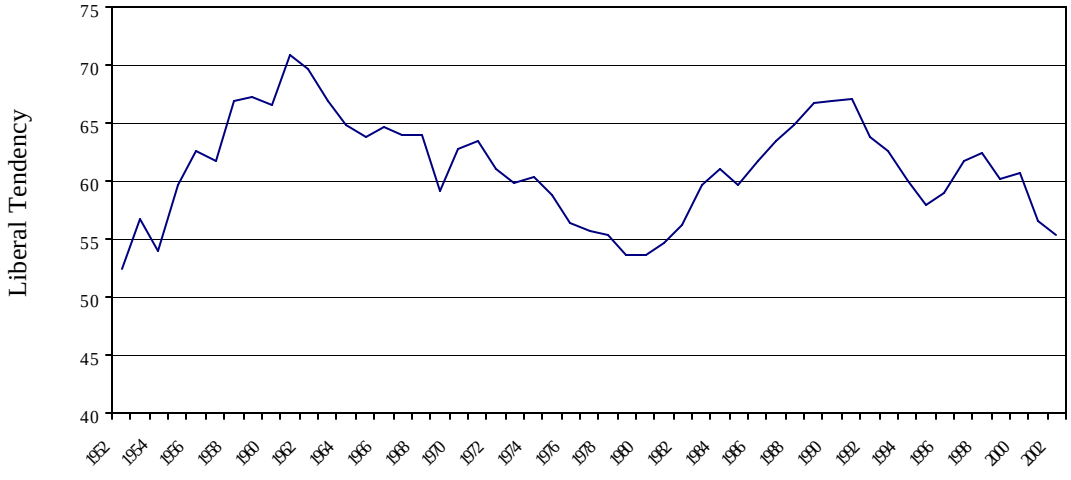
The Policy Mood

Political scientists believe that the policy mood of the public affects the election outcomes and also what elected officials do while anticipating election outcomes. What is a policy mood? The political scientist James Stimson defines a policy mood as the public's general disposition toward public issues and policies.[1] The policy mood of the nation going into an election affects policy outcomes because voters favor candidates who reflect their views, and they force others to accommodate their positions to public sentiment. Stimson's measure of the policy mood focuses on the public's disposition toward government activity. Do Americans want more or less government?

Stimson's notion of the public mood assembles the public's responses to thousands of poll questions about policy issues. Figure 1 charts Stimson's measure of the policy mood over the past 50 years.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a continual decline in public support for more government activism, a trend that bottomed out in 1980. Support for activism then climbed throughout the 1980s. Since 1990, however, the overall trend has been away from supporting government activism; in recent years, the policy mood measure has declined steadily and about as steeply as it did during the 1970s. As the Bush administration began, Americans might not have been looking for a second Reagan revolution, but they were

Figure 1
Stimson's Policy Mood Measure (1952–2002)



Source: Updated from James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Mood Cycles and Swings*, 2d ed. (Boulder: Westview, 1999); personal communication, June 18, 2002.

moving strongly away from increased government activism.

Did September 11, 2001, change all that? Stimson's latest data come from the middle of 2002 and show a continued move away from supporting expansive government. Stimson remarks that his data show "no 9-11 effect at all. Liberal-conservative self-identification, in contrast, does show a small bounce in the conservative direction after 9-11."[2]

The evidence also indicates a renewed decline in public trust in the federal government. For many years survey researchers have asked citizens how much they trusted the federal government to do the right thing. The proportion that answered "just about always" or "most of the time" provides a rough measure of public trust in the federal government. Trust has declined most of the time since its historic high point in the 1960s.

About a month after September 11, the Brookings Institution asked the Princeton Survey Research Associates to pose the trust question to a sample of Americans. They found 57 percent of those polled trusted the federal government to do the right thing "just about always" or "most of the time"—strikingly higher than the recent trend. This trust faded. The same question posed in May 2002 showed that 40 percent of the respondents trusted the federal government.[3] Once we eliminate the immediate post–September 11 reactions, we find that the trust measure may have turned downward beginning in 2000 (see Figure 2). This fits well with a public mood skeptical of expanded government. After all, a public that trusts government less and less will hardly demand that the federal government do more and more.[4]

As the public becomes more concerned about terrorism, it might support additional public spending or greater powers for the government. For the past seven years, Gallup has tracked the public's concern about its becoming a victim of terrorism. National levels of concern about the risk of terrorism are similar to those found before September 11 (with the exception of the 1995 Oklahoma

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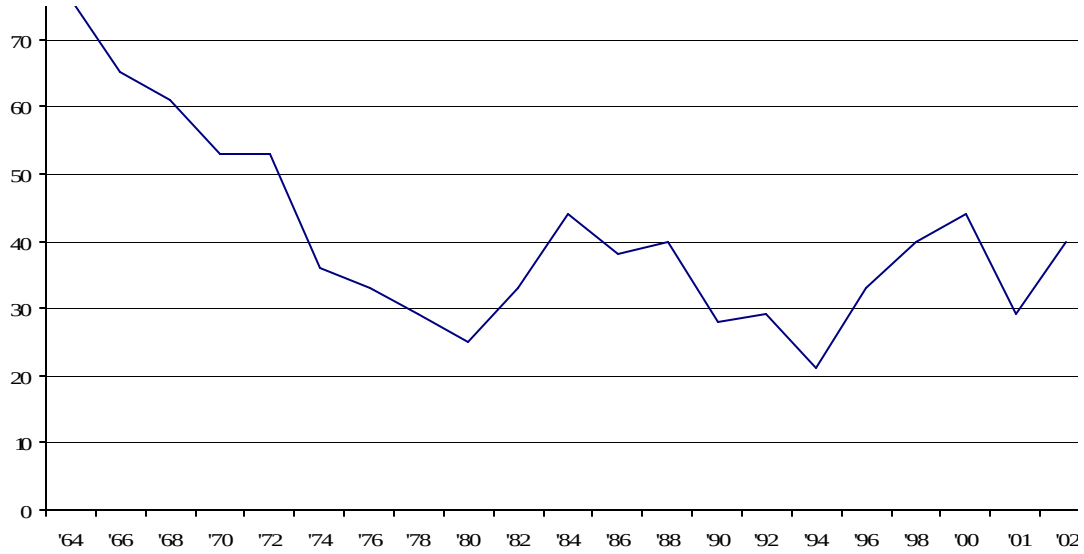
Figure 2
Trust in Government (1964–2002)



Sources: for 1995–2000, National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan. *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior*, www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/nesguide.htm; for 2001 and 2002, G. Calvin Mackenzie and Judith M. Labiner, "Opportunity Lost: The Rise and Fall of Trust and Confidence in Government after September 11," Brookings Institution, May 30, 2002, Table 1, p. 3.

bombing).[5] Nonetheless, the public still ranks terrorism alongside the economy as its top priority.[6]

The Pentagon may benefit from these concerns. Support for an increase in military spending rose sharply throughout most of the 1990s. This trend has continued in this election year.[7] Moreover, the number of people who express a great deal of confidence in the military has risen to 71 percent in early 2002 from 44 percent a year earlier.[8] Few, if any, candidates for national office are likely to run against more military spending.

Concerns about terrorism and support for defense spending may crowd out issues that might prompt increased redistribution by government. The Pew Research Center found that the proportion of the public ranking Medicare prescription drug benefits as a top priority fell 19 points between the beginning of 2001 and 2002. During the same period, public concern about strengthening Medicare fell 16 points as a top priority, and HMO reform slid 16 points.[9] Clearly, support for the war against terrorism need not translate into support for the welfare state.

What about security and civil liberties? Have Americans become more willing to give up some civil liberties in exchange for more security? In the abstract, Americans are willing to trade civil liberties for security. Researchers at Michigan State University found that 45 percent of the public would make such trade-offs in the abstract.[10] Many public opinion surveys taken during the fall of 2001 show most Americans were willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to combat terrorism.[11]

Apart from the military, the public is skeptical of expanding government.

This is understandable and not surprising. The attacks of September 11 were an enormous shock that alarmed if not terrified Americans. Concerned with their safety, they were willing to move aggressively against terrorism. As the shock of the attacks faded, however, respect for civil liberties and limited government returned.

Even in November 2001, researchers at Michigan State University concluded from their survey that "on the whole, American citizens are more in favor of protecting civil liberties than of limiting civil liberties to combat terrorism."[12] By the summer of 2002, the public looked more skeptically at restrictions on civil liberties. Early in 2002, a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll showed that 47 percent of those polled thought the government should take all necessary steps to prevent terrorism even if the respondent's civil liberties suffered; 49 percent opposed such steps if the price included their basic civil liberties. By June 2002, 56 percent opposed preventing terrorism at the cost of civil liberties while 40 percent supported "all necessary steps" against terrorism.[13] Another terrorist attack would move those numbers again, but absent that, Americans seem to be moving back toward their pre–September 11 views on civil liberties.

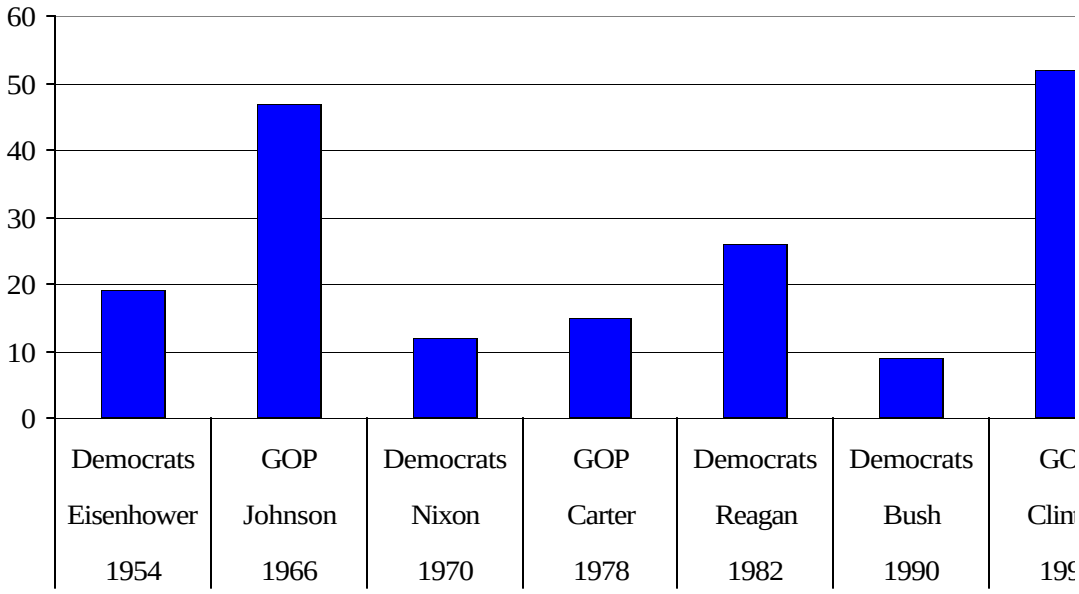
In sum, the public in many ways has returned to its pre–September 11 mood. The general policy mood continues to move away from government activism, and the attacks did not produce a lasting change in public trust in the federal government. Apart from the military, the public is skeptical of expanding government.

What does all of this mean for the election? Currently, the House of Representatives is divided among 223 Republicans, 210 Democrats, 1 independent (who regularly votes with the Democratic minority), and 1 vacancy. As the Senate is divided by the narrowest of partisan margins (50 Democrats, 49 Republicans, and 1 independent), both parties hold the realistic ambition of either maintaining or recapturing control of this chamber.[14] The Democrats need to gain 6 seats to achieve majority status in the House.

As noted earlier, Stimson's policy mood measure has moved about five points away from government activism, a change that should benefit Republicans if they are seen as opposing big government. Translated into seats, the change in policy mood itself should result in the Republicans gaining about 12 seats in the House and 3 or 4 seats in the Senate.[15] This analysis invites three objections.

First, the Republicans may not recognize and act on the pro-defense, anti-government policy mood of the nation. We have some evi-

Figure 3
Gain in Congressional Seats for Opposing Party during Midterm Election (1954–1994)



Sources: *Almanac of American Politics;* House of Representatives, "Vital Statistics on Congress"; and *National Journal*, cited in Washington Post.com, July 5, 2002.

dence that House Republicans are willing to spend tax money and expand government in the misguided pursuit of electoral victory.

Second, as illustrated in Figure 3, historically the midterm election after a new president enters the White House produces gains in congressional seats for the opposing party.[16]

Stimson's data show that the party of the president usually does poorly in midterm elections (losing on average about 20 seats), perhaps nullifying the effects of the policy mood.[17]

But we should be cautious. Stimson's data on congressional elections run from 1952 to 1996. In the 1998 midterm elections the president's party picked up four House seats, only the second time this happened in the 20th century.[18] In 2000, the Democrats gained two seats despite losing the presidency. We may have entered an era in which the "midterm factor" does not matter as much as it did during most of the elections of the 20th century.

Third, the stock market decline has led many campaign strategists to conclude that the health of the market will be the key issue in the congressional elections.[19] Two years ago, 71 percent of congressional voters owned stock.[20] Today, according to pollster John Zogby, "two out of three likely voters tell us that they have an IRA or a 401 (k)"[21] and "a lot of people, especially 401 (k) holders, are scared."[22] Dwindling economic confidence, and a loss of confidence in the stock market, specifically, is largely responsible for the fact that Bush's disapproval rating was up to 38 percent by midsummer.[23]

The scandals surrounding incidents of corporate malfeasance may assist Democratic candidates, although the degree of assistance is indeterminable. According to liberal columnist Mark Shields, "the Democrats . . . have been dealt the political equivalent of four aces."[24] Five in 10 Americans now favor greater government regulation of corporations, up from 41 percent in 1995.[25] According to Democratic pollster Peter Hart, for his party's candidates trying to enthuse partisans and

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sway independents, "it comes down to one simple theme: people feel this is a time we need checks and balances."[26]

Will all of this produce a change in the policy mood of the electorate and election outcomes favoring government activism? Experts have found little link between variations in stock prices and election outcomes. They have found a strong tie between election outcomes and economic growth (expressed as consumer sentiment).[27] In late July 2002, the Gallup organization found growing pessimism about the economy among Americans.[28] However, consumer sentiment has varied throughout 2002.[29] Consumer sentiment just before an election best predicts the outcome.[30] Will Americans have a rosier outlook on the economy in October 2002? No one knows, of course. However, consumer sentiment does reflect economic conditions. If projections of 3 percent growth in the GNP for 2002 prove correct, consumer sentiment may again have perked up to the benefit of the president's party.

The United States is deeply and evenly divided politically.[31] Clear and certain predictions about the outcome of Election 2002 are hard to come by. However, the policy mood of the nation is running against more government activism. Absent other factors, that trend should create an opportunity for candidates skeptical of bigger government. But the Republicans' generic ideological defensiveness, exemplified by their political timidity on issues such as Social Security reform, ensured that the Democrats retained their traditional partisan lead on that issue,[32] as well as issues such as prescription drugs.[33]

But other factors are present. The party of the president (the Republican Party) would expect to lose 20 seats (and the majority in the House of Representatives) if we have a normal midterm election. Moreover, citizens may be disappointed with economic trends and vote for the party out of power.[34] Those two factors, which are running counter to the dominant policy mood, cannot be discounted completely. In general, the 2002 election will probably favor candidates who support defense spending, civil liberties, and smaller government outside of defense. Such an election should not usher in a new era of expanded government.

Incumbent Advantage

American representative government suffers from the handicap of a largely uncompetitive political system. Why should we be concerned about a lack of political competition? Political scientist Ross K. Baker suggests a reason:

> Incumbency has become so entrenched . . . that many voters lack any real say in who represents them. Democratic and Republican House incumbents alike share a semi-perpetual easement on their seats that more nearly resembles hereditary entitlement than the competitive politics we associate with a democracy.[35]

Not only are the advantages of incumbency important, but their importance has risen over time, especially since the passage of the first package of comprehensive campaign finance regulations in 1974.[36] In the first 14 House elections after World War II, one party or another gained an average of 27 seats; in the past 14 elections, the average gain was only 16 seats.[37] Not only do incumbents win more often than they used to but they win by increasingly wide margins. In 1998 and 2000, 90 percent of successful congressional candidates secured at least 55 percent of the popular vote, constituting the least competitive elections (with one exception) since 1946.

In 1998, 401 of 435 members of Congress sought reelection; only 6 were not reelected. Therefore, the reelection rate for House incumbents was more than 98 percent. The reelection rate for incumbents at the end of two terms was 100 percent. The most recent evidence is equally discomforting: the 2000 congressional election saw 392 of 399 House incumbents—98 percent again—reelected. Over the past 50 years, the congressional reelection rate has averaged

more than 90 percent and has gradually risen.[38] On the Senate side, only three incumbents were defeated in 1998, producing a 90 percent reelection rate. In 2000, the Senate reelection rate was 80 percent.

Incumbent advantage in congressional elections is a topic of considerable scholarly interest. Economist David S. Lee's empirical analysis found "striking evidence that incumbency has a significant causal effect of raising the probability of subsequent electoral success."[39] In federal politics, incumbency is worth an 11 percent increase in expected vote share to the average officeholder.[40] The factors contributing to this Soviet-style success rate among incumbent politicians illustrate the political advantages conferred by public subsidy.

The advantage of the average congressional incumbent entering any given election is composed of several factors. These include the congressional franking privilege that allows incumbents to flood their districts with free mail that serves to raise their political profiles; large administrative and political staffs both on Capitol Hill and in district offices; free travel; free constituent service;[41] lawmaking power, including district- or state-specific pork-barrel spending;[42] access to the media; free television studios; and, most recently, free Websites for communicating with the electorate.

In addition to being subsidized by taxpayers, these vote-enhancing instruments share a common origin: all were self-bestowed benefits brought into effect by incumbent politicians seeking to reinforce their political invulnerability. Critically, limits on contributions to candidates were similarly designed (and are protected) to ensure the same outcome: an uneven campaign playing field.[43] During the current campaign, a person may give up to $1,000 to a candidate. This is "hard money." The candidate may use it directly for his own campaign. ("Soft money" may be used to advocate issues or for a political party—but not for the candidate directly—and soft money amounts are not restricted, at least not until November 6 of this year.)[44] If adjusted for inflation, the $1,000 contribution limit enacted back in 1974 would be worth around $3,500 today.

Extensive political science scholarship confirms what politicians recognize at first glance—it is difficult for a challenger to oust an incumbent unless the challenger spends at least as much as and probably more than the incumbent during the campaign period.[45] Only by spending large sums on television advertising, direct mail solicitations, and grassroots organization can a challenger develop the levels of name recognition, issue identification, and voter mobilization to catch up with the years (frequently decades) of subsidized campaigning and pork-barrel spending that characterize an incumbent's terms in office.

Under the rhetorical guise of warding off unspecified corruption, incumbents are happy to limit themselves to $1,000 (or even $2,000, as of November 6, 2002) contributions. Certainly, they may detest the phone calls they have to make and the fundraising breakfasts, lunches, and dinners they have to attend. But at night the incumbents sleep well knowing that their challengers back home must do the same (more, if the challengers are serious about winning) without, in most cases, a comparable network of contacts, donors, and lobbyists whose long-standing collective investment in the incumbents' careers ensures continuing financial commitment. Incumbent politicians raise, on average, more than twice the amount of campaign contributions that their challengers do.[46] For example, political action committees contribute nearly eight times more money to incumbents than to challengers.[47]

Three decades of empirical evidence show that contribution limits have two insidious consequences. First, they greatly reduce the likelihood that a challenger will successfully oust an incumbent, thereby reducing the level of competition necessary for a healthy political system. Second, such long odds against success provide an enormous disincentive for qualified people to put themselves forward as candidates in the first place, thereby reducing the quality of the pool of poten-

Not only are the advantages of incumbency important, but their importance has risen over time.

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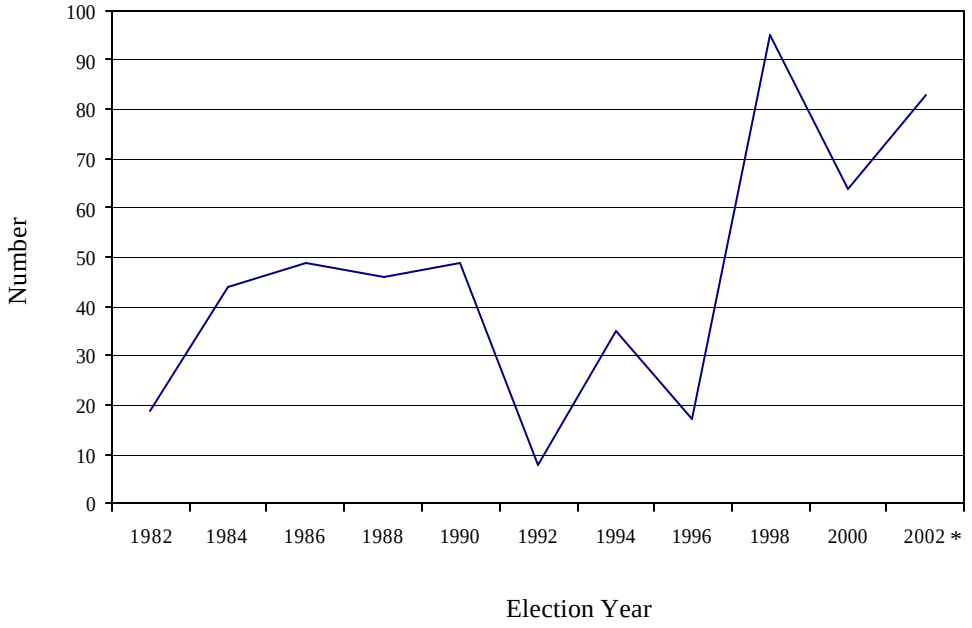
tial challengers and would-be successors should—by scandal, death, or resignation—an incumbent fail to gain or seek reelection.[48] Hence, incumbency advantage makes candidate recruitment much harder.

Because of increasingly sophisticated gerrymandering, running for office is harder for newcomers because the redistricting process strengthens the advantages incumbents enjoy. According to the *Wall Street Journal*'s John Fund: "Incumbents are using high-powered computers to create lifetime sinecures for themselves. That kind of privilege and protection is certainly not what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they overthrew a monarchy to form a republic."[49] Consequently, neither major party is expected to win or lose the House of Represent-atives on the basis of the latest redistricting battle. Overall, the Republicans may have come out ahead by two or three seats, but no more than that, despite initial National Republican Congressional Committee forecasts that the GOP would gain 8 to 10 seats from redistricting.

Although the redrawing of congressional districts following the 2000 census should not produce any major shifts in the national partisan landscape, it has made many more congressional races noncompetitive affairs. Electoral instruments, such as redistricting, that serve to protect the "Incumbent Class" ensure that one in five incumbent members of Congress will be returned to Capitol Hill following uncontested races in their districts, that is, one in which the incumbent has no major party challenger. It is estimated that more than 80 incumbents are already guaranteed a free pass back to Congress (see Figure 4).

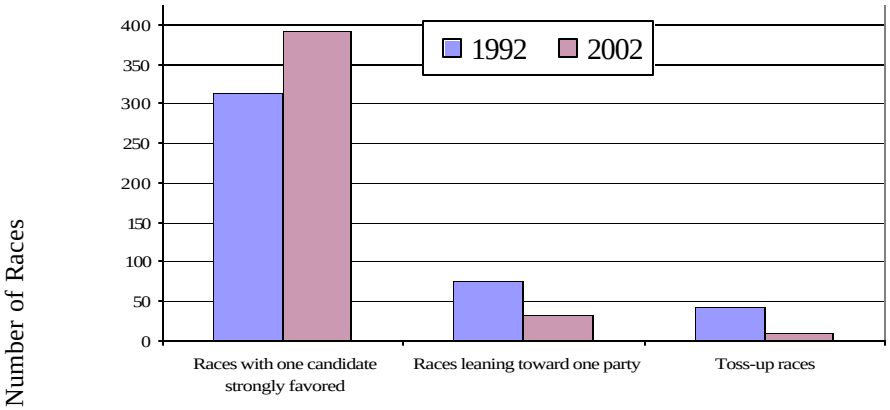
During the current campaign season the real electoral battleground is smaller than ever because only 30 to 45 seats are truly competitive[50] compared with 121 seats a decade ago.[51] Some partisan polling identified just 10 vulnerable incumbent Democrats and only 18 vulnerable incumbent Republicans.[52] Of the few dozen competitive seats, only 11 are toss-up contests that either party could just as easily win,[53] down from 44 in 1992 (see Figure 5).[54]

Figure 4
Uncontested House Races (1982–2002)



Source: Center for Voting and Democracy.
* Estimate by the authors.

Figure 5
Competitiveness in House Races–1992 vs. 2002



Source: *Cook Political Report*, May 1992 and May 2002 surveys.

This anti-competitive trend led economist Randall Holcombe to conclude that "political markets are divided in the same way that cartels would divide markets in order to make each member a monopolist in his own territory to help enforce the cartel agreement."[55]

The influential congressional prognosticator Charles E. Cook Jr. notes:

> Perhaps most alarming about this decline in competition is that, typically, greater competition and turnover characterize the first couple of congressional elections after redistricting. Then legislators settle into their new districts and the level of competition goes down until new maps are drawn. If the competition is this low in the first election after a redistricting, imagine what it will be like by 2008 and 2010.[56]

Take the example of California. This state has the nation's largest congressional delegation—53 seats—but this year it will have only one competitive race (in the 18th District). And that contest is occurring only because of Democratic state Rep. Dennis Cardoza's primary defeat of disgraced seven-term Rep. Gary Condit, tarred by the investigation into the disappearance and murder of Chandra Levy. Across the country, according to Rob Richie, executive director of the Center for Voting and Democracy, in practice "the only way you can lose a seat that's safe is by losing a primary."[57] According to Dan Johnson-Weinberger, national field director for the center: "A lot of states are drawing out competitive districts. This might make for interesting primaries . . . but it makes for coronations in the general elections."[58]

Incumbent advantage is a concept that is not lost on the public. A Rasmussen poll found 72 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that "in American elections, members of Congress have unfair advantages over people who want to run against them."[59]

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As Ross Baker recently observed:

> If you value a spirited and competitive congressional election campaign, it's always distressing to see a large number of uncontested seats. It's one more bit of evidence that the incumbent advantage is very difficult to overcome. It serves as a deterrent in many cases and a complete obstacle in many others. And it's not going to change any time soon.[60]

Those looking for electoral competition in 2002 should have paid close attention to some of the intraparty primary battles this past spring and summer rather than wait for the foregone outcome of the vast majority of partisan contests this fall. For example, Rahm Emanuel, a former senior adviser to President Clinton, effectively won election to the House after winning an expensive and hard-fought Democratic primary in Chicago against Nancy Kaszak. Some of the more notable battles occurred between the eight incumbents of the same party forced to battle one another in primary competition.[61] On November 5, an additional eight incumbents from different parties will compete against one another in four congressional districts.[62]

Political Competition and Congressional Term Limits

One of the most effective ways to level the political playing field would be to limit congressional terms through the passage of a constitutional amendment.

At the federal level, a tradition of voluntary retirement after only one or two congressional terms lasted until nearly the end of the 19th century.[63] From 1830 to 1850, turnover in the House averaged 51.5 percent each election year. After the Civil War, legislative tenure gained new importance when the introduction of the seniority principle for congressional committee membership changed the dynamics of obtaining leadership positions. Consequently, between 1860 and 1920 the average tenure of House members increased from four to eight years, and it has continued to rise ever since.[64] The average House member currently serves for 13.2 years.

Skepticism about and distaste for political careerism are central to the American experience.[65] Careerism flourishes because incumbents are virtually certain to be reelected, largely because of the inherent advantages of holding office. Therefore, term limits constitute, in large measure, an attempt to overcome the problem of the costs of the incumbent advantage. Careerism poses several problems for our system of representative democracy. Once in office, careerist legislators pay less attention to the needs and wishes of their constituents. Moreover, careerist elected officials became a political class attentive to their own interests.

A decade ago, conservative columnist George F. Will referred to "a perpetual incumbency machine" that "has become today's swollen government operating with no limits on the incontinent spending and regulating that is undertaken to perpetuate in office the spenders and regulators." Hence, in Will's view, "term limits are needed as an auxiliary precaution against the perennial lust for power,"[66] as "careerism is the shared creed of Democrats and Republicans."[67] Therefore, one of the most effective ways to level the political playing field would be to limit congressional terms through the passage of a constitutional amendment. By mandating frequent legislative turnover, term limits would bring new perspectives to Congress, reduce the concentration on reelection, and thereby diminish the incentive for wasteful election-related pork-barrel spending that flourishes in a careerist legislative culture.[68]

As the long odds against ousting an incumbent deter better-qualified potential candidates from running for office, term limits would attract a different kind of candidate and, consequently, would provide far more citizen legislators, that is, nonprofessional politicians.[69] The distinction between professional and citizen legislators is an important one because differences in the types of legislatures affect turnover rates. Turnover is much higher in citizen legislatures than in professional legislatures.[70]

Congressional term limits would immediately reduce the barriers to entering federal politics. That is, term limits would produce more open seats. It is reasonable to forecast that more candidates for office and the increased turnover of representatives and senators would produce better choices for voters.[71] Overall, a Congress composed of average citizens would be a Congress that looked more like America and less like a political class of arrogant and ambitious politicians intent on self-aggrandizement.

The Partisan Struggle

Until recently, the Democrats were handicapped by the lack of a campaign issue with national resonance that appealed to swing voters in competitive districts and to the party's populist base. With the corporate scandals surrounding Enron, Arthur Andersen, and WorldCom, along with the tainting of companies such as Global Crossing, ImClone Systems, Tyco, Adelphi, Qwest, and Xerox, the Democrats have finally found an issue that cuts their way—the alleged need for greater corporate responsibility and economic patriotism.[72] This issue enables the Democrats to assert that the Bush White House and the congressional Republicans are too close to the business community to govern as impartial umpires but that a Democratic Congress would stand up to this powerful special interest.

In macroelectoral terms, the Democrats enter the general election campaign with two principal advantages over the GOP. First, numerically the Democrats have less to lose than their opponents. In the Senate, for example, 20 Republicans are up for reelection but only 14 Democrats, ensuring that the GOP's quest for a Senate majority will be that much harder to achieve. Second, electoral history is on the side of the Democrats. During the past 140 years, only once (in 1934) has the first-term president's party not lost seats in the midterm election.

By contrast, the Republican congressional leadership, led by House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Majority Whip Tom DeLay, is pursuing a "spend-and-elect" campaign strategy, betting that a further blurring of the ideological divide between the two parties will salvage the GOP's House majority and recapture the Senate.[73] It is an overtly pragmatic approach that aims to exploit the microelectoral factors (e.g., incumbency, local issues, individual candidates, campaign funds, and projected turnout) that currently favor the GOP candidate in most of the competitive races around the country.

The outcome of most midterm elections comes down to turnout, that is, which party's base of supporters is most enthused or upset about the current political climate. For example, the Republican sweep of 1994 resulted, in part, from low turnout among disenchanted Democrats, while unexpected Democratic gains in 1998 stemmed from higher-than-expected turnout among Democrats angry over the GOP-led Congress's treatment of President Clinton. In analyzing the factors currently at play in individual congressional races, it appears that the GOP may benefit from greater voter intensity among its supporters than among Democratic supporters. Polls reveal relative voter apathy among black voters, traditionally the most loyal component of the Democratic vote. To some extent, this may reflect the fact that President Bush has a 63 percent job approval rating among black voters.[74] Further, a June 2002 Battleground poll showed a significant gap between the voter intensity of blacks and whites. Among those extremely likely to vote, the numbers for whites are 10 to 25 percent higher.[75] Polls reveal relative apathy also among single female voters, [76] the voting bloc most responsible for the gender gap that has benefited Democratic candidates during the past decade. Some consolation for the Democrats may be found in the evidence of a highly motivated anti-Republican vote among union members.[77]

Some Republican candidates and strategists seek electoral comfort in Bush's still-impressive approval ratings, which they hope will have an indirect influence on some of the closer House

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New studies show that turnout has remained steady for three decades. The idea that low voter turnout indicates defects in our polity can be sustained only by accepting some questionable assumptions.

and Senate races. In mid to late July, an impressive 66 to 72 percent of Americans approved of the job Bush was doing,[78] including comparable approval among independents and undecided voters.[79] As long as Bush's approval ratings remain relatively high, especially among swing voters, and because most of the closest congressional races are in states carried by Bush in the 2000 presidential contest, Republican candidates welcome the president's influence on their races.

Somewhat reassuringly for the Republicans, 49 percent approve of Bush's handling of the crisis in corporate America versus 43 percent who disapprove and, although 60 percent say the corporate crisis will be "very important" in determining their votes in November, the issue ranks behind education, the economy, health care, and the war on terrorism.[80] As discussed previously, Republican spines also may be stiffened by a continuing popular preference for smaller rather than bigger government. For example, even amid the scandals surrounding well-publicized cases of corporate malfeasance, by a margin of 48 to 37 percent Americans think enforcement of existing regulations, rather than additional regulations, is the best way to address the issue.[81] The GOP also leads on issues such as taxes, energy policy, moral values, foreign affairs, the military, and terrorism.[82]

Along with the corporate malfeasance issue, prosecuting the war on terrorism is the other variable of unpredictable electoral influence. As the GOP is favored over Democrats by 55 to 27 percent to best handle the anti-terrorism campaign, Republican candidates would clearly benefit from public sentiment emphasizing this issue.[83] Hence, as Cook reports, "Democrats are trying to inoculate themselves, and Republicans are trying to prolong their advantage."[84] According to GOP pollster Whit Ayres, "The war and homeland security is the ubiquitous backdrop for every federal campaign in the country."[85] However, recent polling indicates that prospective voters will base their votes more on domestic issues than the war on terrorism.[86] Therefore, although the war is unlikely to prove singularly decisive, it has influenced, and will continue to influence, campaign strategies and the content of campaign advertising. It may be to an incumbent's advantage that the Republicans gain the most from the war on terrorism. Because a wartime political climate tends to favor experience, some voters will probably support their incumbent representative or senator on that basis alone.

Among the GOP's microelectoral advantages must be counted a considerable edge in the battle of the campaign war chests. During the first 18 months of the 2001–2002 election cycle the three major GOP committees—national, senatorial, and congressional—outraised their Democratic counterparts by a collective $137 million. Crucially for the congressional races, as of July 1 the National Republican Congressional Committee had $34.1 million in cash on hand compared with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's $25 million.[87]

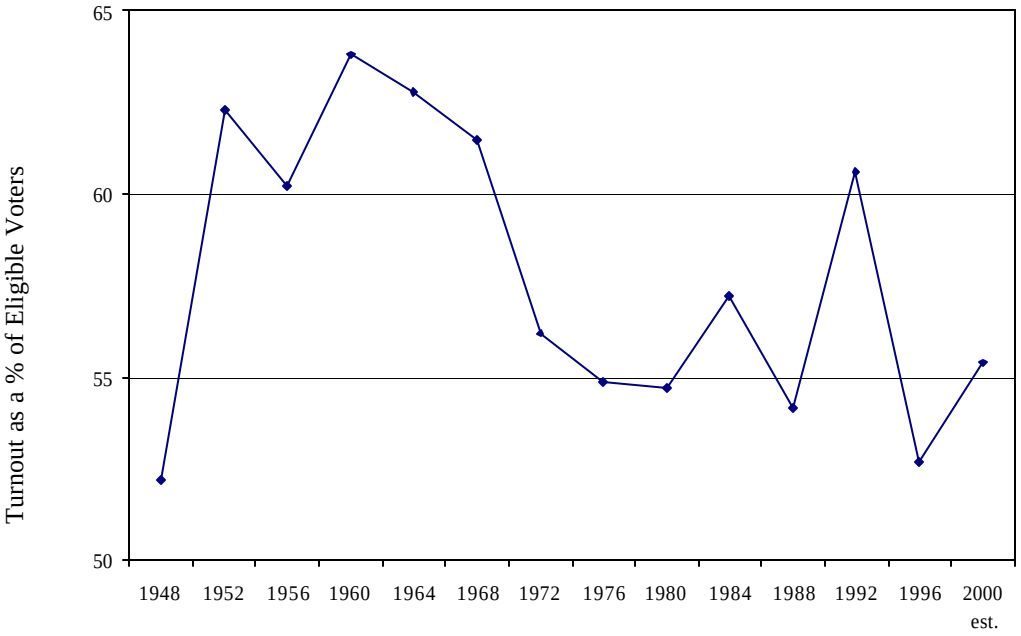
Voter Turnout

Every election brings anguished cries about the state of American democracy. Policy activists and political scientists have argued for a generation that our nation has experienced declining voter turnout. But they have turned out to be wrong. New studies show that turnout has remained steady for three decades. Moreover, the idea that low voter turnout indicates defects in our polity can be sustained only by accepting some questionable assumptions.

Political scientists have generally measured voter turnout by dividing the number of voters on Election Day by the total population of voting age. Some have also looked at turnout as a percentage of registered voters. Measured against the voting age population, turnout in presidential election years fell from its high of 62.8 percent in 1960 to an estimated 51.2 percent in 2000.[88] As a percentage of registered voters, turnout fell from 86 percent in 1960 to 65 percent in 1996.

But measuring voting turnout as a percentage of the voting age population leads to

Figure 6
Turnout in Presidential Election Years 1948–2000



Source: Michael P. McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95(4) (2001): 963–74.

inaccurate figures. Recently, political scientists Samuel Popkin and Michael McDonald have shown that "voting age population" distorts turnout. The Census Bureau's estimate of the voting age population includes several categories of persons ineligible to vote: noncitizens, disenfranchised felons, persons who have moved to a new residence after registration closed, and the mentally incompetent. Popkin and McDonald have produced a new and more accurate measure of the American population eligible to vote.[89] Figure 6 shows turnout during presidential elections as a percentage of those eligible to vote. Figure 7 indicates turnout during off-year elections as a proportion of those eligible to vote.

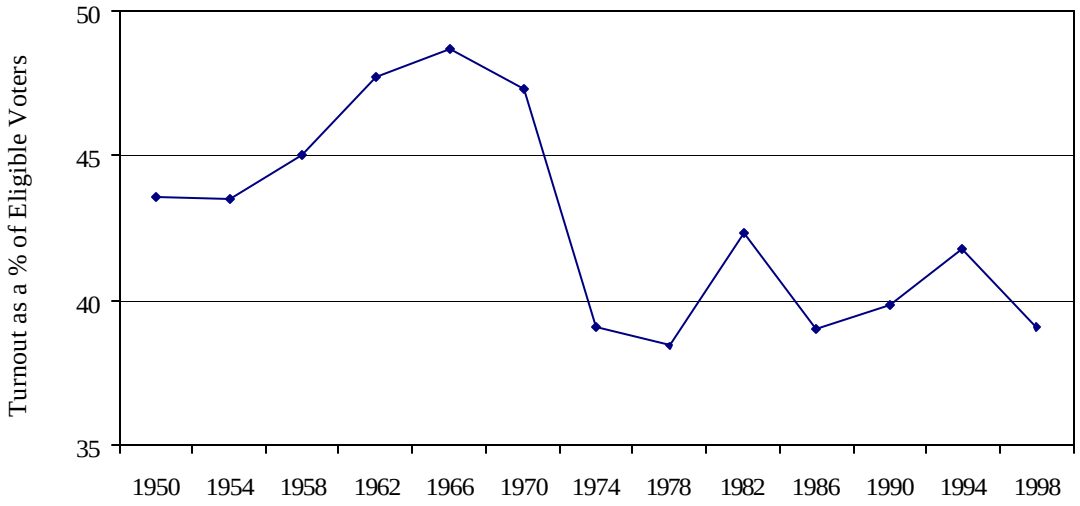
The United States saw a decline in turnout between 1970 and 1974. But, since 1974, the trend in voting turnout in national elections has been basically flat during presidential years and has been slightly upward during nonpresidential election years though we have seen much variation around the overall trend. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, the United States has experienced steady turnout at the polls for about three decades.

The United States does have relatively low turnout compared with other countries. For example, one estimate calculated the average turnout in 25 countries from 1945 to 1999 and found that the United States and Switzerland landed at the bottom of the list.[90] Although our turnout is higher than previously thought, it still clearly lags behind other developed nations.

Should that matter? Why should the United States have the same electoral turnout as Australia or Belgium? Americans would not support compulsory voting, for example, though that would certainly raise turnout. Our separation of powers also reduces our turnout relative to European nations. We have chosen constitutionally to limit and restrain political power. Such limits make it harder to translate the wishes of the voter directly into law.[91] Elections are thus less significant and attract fewer voters. Perhaps that is unfortunate, but

Since 1974, the trend in voting turnout in national elections has been basically flat during presidential years and has been slightly upward during nonpresidential election years.

Figure 7
Off-Year Elections 1950 to 1998



Source: Michael P. McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95(4) (2001): 963–74.

Across America there exists a measurable popular preference for less, rather than more, government intervention.

the separation of powers and the general American skepticism about political power has served the nation well for two centuries. Limited government gives us both insurance against tyranny and a lower turnout compared with other advanced nations. Judging by public support for the Constitution, most Americans seem happy with that tradeoff between liberty and participation.

Those who decry America's low voting turnout assume citizens should be involved in politics. In the world we live in, Americans do not care much about being involved in politics. Two political scientists summarize their findings from a survey of public views about governmental processes:

> Many people do not find politics intrinsically interesting. They express no desire to reengage with the political process. They do not follow most political issues because they do not care about most issues. As a result, they want someone else to take care of the political sphere for them.[92]

Americans are not troubled by our level of voting turnout because they do not believe politics matters much. Elite commentators disagree; they think politics and democracy are crucial to a life well lived. They criticize anything other than near universal turnout as a national disgrace and set about removing barriers to voting and registration. In doing so, they show little respect for the views and values of ordinary Americans who have a right, after all, to stay away from the polls. In 2002, we can do without the biennial berating of Americans for failing to live up to the European expectations of the media and putative political experts.

Conclusion

On November 5, 2002, there exists the real possibility of change in the partisan control of either or both houses of Congress. As a result, respective partisan fortunes are expected to dominate political discussion during the next 60 days. This is unfortunate. Although the

horse race aspect of this year's electoral contest is interesting, the preoccupation with partisan details obscures broader, more important aspects of the national policy mood and the health of our political system.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, across America there exists a measurable popular preference for less, rather than more, government intervention. Therefore, in the fall of 2002 an appreciation of popular sentiment will favor candidates who support defense spending, civil liberties, and smaller government outside of defense. At the same time, the political system's health is seriously weakened by a lack of competition. Unfortunately, the mismeasurement of, and preoccupation with, voter participation serves only to distract attention from the pressing problem of an uncompetitive political system.

An election that either ushers in a new era of expanded government or further cements the advantages of incumbency will serve neither the representative nor the democratic functions of our political system.

Notes

1. James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview, 1999), p. 20.

2. James A. Stimson, personal e-mail communication to the authors, June 16, 2002. Stimson notes also a small move in the liberal direction in January 2002, a typical development given that a conservative occupies the White House.

3. See Stanley B. Greenberg, "What Voters Want," *New York Times*, August 5, 2002, p. A17.

4. We have some evidence that lack of public trust in government reduces government activity. See Marc J. Hetherington and Suzanne Globetti, "Political Trust and Racial Policy Preferences," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (April 2002): 253–75.

5. Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, "Four Out of Five Americans Willing to Trade Some Freedoms for Security," June 11, 2002, www.mipt.org/gallupoustudy.html.

6. See the Harris Poll conducted 6/14–17/02; surveyed 1,010 adults; margin of error +/-3% reported at www.nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2002/issues/02mostimportant.htm#13.

7. See the survey results at National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan), "Military Spending (2), 7-Point Scale 1980–2000," www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/toptable/tab4d_3b.htm.

8. See the Harris Poll conducted on January 16–21, 2002. N=1,011 adults nationwide. Margin of error = ± 3. Results available at www. pollingreport. com/institut.htm.

9. Andrew Kohut, "The Long Winding Road to Midterm Elections," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, www.people-press.org/commentary/display. php3?AnalysisID=43.

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11. See all of the 2001 survey responses at American Public Opinion on the Terrorists Attacks, AEI Studies in Public Opinion, June 26, 2002, pp. 47–54, www.aei.org/ps/psbowman5.pdf.

12. "Americans Protect Civil Liberties," p. 3.

13. AEI Studies, p. 53. Note also the Harris Interactive Poll that found a doubling of those who were "not very confident" that the government would use expanded surveillance powers in a proper way. Ibid.

14. The 10 most closely contested Senate races are as follows: Arkansas—GOP Sen. Tim Hutchinson versus Democrat Mark Pryor; Colorado—GOP Sen. Wayne Allard versus Democrat Tom Strickland; Iowa—Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin versus GOP Rep. Greg Ganske; Maine—GOP Sen. Susan Collins versus former Democratic state Sen. Chellie Pingree; Minnesota—Democratic Sen. Paul Wellstone versus former St. Paul GOP mayor Norm Coleman; Missouri—Democratic Sen. Jean Carnahan versus former GOP Rep. James M. Talent; New Hampshire—GOP Sen. Bob Smith or GOP Rep. John E. Sununu versus Democratic Gov. Jeanne Shaheen; North Carolina—Republican Elizabeth Dole versus Democrat Erskine Bowles; South Dakota— Democratic Sen. Tim Johnson versus GOP Rep. John Thune; and Texas—GOP state attorney general John Cornyn versus Democratic Dallas mayor Ron Kirk.

15. Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. Mackuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 280–81.

16. For an economic analysis of why midterm elections almost always favor the nonpresidential party, see Robert Stein, "Midterm Electionomics," *National Review Online*, June 4, 2002, www.nationalreview.com/script/nrof_comment/comment-stein060402.html.

17. Stimson's analysis suggests a normal Republican loss in the midterms would be in the 20-seat range; Senate midterms would normally lead to a two- or three-seat loss by the Republicans. *Macro*, p. 282.

18. Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress 1999–2000* (Washington: AEI Press, 2000), p. 45.

19. Sources: Survey of 721 registered likely voters conducted by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for National Public Radio, July 23–25, 2002; and Roland Watson and Katty Kay, "Bush Struggles to Avert Backlash on Business Scandals," *Times* (London), July 10, 2002, www.timesonline.co.uk/0,,1-3-352013,00html. See also Howard Fineman, "The Politics of Greed," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2002, p. 46.

20. Cited by Republican pollster David Winston, in Alison Mitchell, "Democrats See Scandals as Chance to Attack Privatizing Social Security," *New York Times*, July 13, 2002, p. A9.

21. Quoted in Deborah McGregor, "Bush Popularity Holding Up Despite Market Turmoil," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2002, p. 2.

22. Quoted in Jim VandeHei and Juliet Eilperin, "In House Bid, Democrats Target Corporate Abuse," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2002, p. A10.

23. Zogby International poll result, cited in Deborah McGregor, "Bush Popularity Holding Up Despite Market Turmoil," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2002, p. 2.

24. Mark Shields, "2002–Advantage to Democrats," July 11, 2002, www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/07/11/column.shields/index.html.

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26. Quoted in Albert R. Hunt, "Loud Words, Little Action," *Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2002, p. A17.

27. Erickson et al., p. 247.

28. See also Adam Nagourney, "Economy Stirs G.O.P. Worry in House Races," *New York Times*, August 6, 2002, pp. A1 and A12.

29. www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr020716. asp.

30. Erickson et al., p. 247.

31. For a recent overview of this partisan divide, see David Von Drehle and Dan Balz, "Fifty-Fifty America–The Weakened Parties: GOP, Democrats Locked in Race toward Decline," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2002, pp. A1 and A12.

32 See Greg Hitt, "Social Security Plan Stalls," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2002, p. A4; Cato Institute news release, "New Cato-Zogby Poll Shows Two-Thirds of Likely Voters Want to Invest in Personal Social Security Accounts," July 23, 2002, www.cato.org/new/07-02/07-23-02r.html; and Alison Mitchell, "Democrats See Scandals as Chance to Attack Privatizing Social Security," *New York Times*, July 13, 2002, p. A9.

33. By a margin of 45 percent to 29 percent, voters believe Democrats are better able to handle the prescription drug issue than Republicans. Source: Late May USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll results, cited in Walter Shapiro, "Senate Candidate Has Rx For Success," *USA Today*, June 25, 2002, www.usatoday.com/news/e98/shapiro/637.htm.

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59. Rasmussen poll, cited in James C. Miller III, "Incumbents' Advantage," Citizens for a Sound Economy Foundation, Washington, DC, December 17, 1997, p. 5.

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61. The intraparty primary incumbent wars featured Democratic Rep. John Dingell's defeat of Democratic Rep. Lynn Rivers in Michigan's 15th District; Republican Rep. Steve Buyer's defeat of Republican Rep. Brian Kerns in Indiana's 4th District; Democratic Rep. John Murtha's defeat of Democratic Rep. Frank Mascara in Pennsylvania's 12th District; and Republican Rep. Bob Barr versus Republican Rep. John Linder in Georgia's 7th District. The three other incumbents to lose in primaries were Condit, Rep. Earl F. Hilliard (D-Ala.), who lost to attorney Artur Davis, and Rep. Tom Sawyer (D-Ohio), beaten by state Sen. Tim Ryan.

62. The general election battles are Democratic Rep. David Phelps versus Republican Rep. John Shimkus in Illinois' 19th District; Republican Rep. Charles W. Pickering versus Democratic Rep. Ronnie Shows in Mississippi's 3rd District; Republican Rep. George Gekas versus Democratic Rep. Tim Holden in Pennsylvania's 17th District; and Democrat Jim Maloney versus Republican Nancy Johnson in Connecticut's 5th District. The Maloney versus Johnson race may be the bellwether race of the 2002 election, that is, a Johnson loss may signal a national swing in favor of the Democrats.

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65. See, for example, Mark P. Petracca, "The Poison of Professional Politics," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 151, May 10, 1991, www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-151.html.

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71. See Will, "The Improving Case for Term Limits"; and Tabarrok.

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76. Battleground poll, cited in Dan Balz, "Poll Finds GOP Voters More Motivated Than Democrats," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2002, p. A6.

77. Ibid.

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84. Quoted in Helen Dewar, "War on Terror Colors the Battle for Congress," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2002, p. A1.

85. Quoted in ibid.

86. A survey of 721 registered likely voters conducted by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for National Public Radio, July 23–25, 2002, found the most important issues for congressional voters to be the following: the economy and jobs (mentioned by 35 percent of respondents), Social Security and Medicare (24 percent), education (23 percent), health care (21 percent), terrorism (16 percent), moral values (16 percent), taxes (12 percent), federal spending (12 percent), corporate abuse (9 percent), the environment (8 percent), and crime (7 percent). See also Helen Dewar, "War on Terror Colors the Battle for Congress."

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