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THE INHERENT DISADVANTAGE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL PARTY  
IN MIDTERM CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS\*

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ABSTRACT

The almost inevitable midterm election loss suffered by the president's congressional party still lacks a complete explanation. It is argued here that the policy positions of the president help shape voters' perceptions of the positions of congressional candidates. Because the president implements policies before the midterm campaign begins, and because he has goals apart from winning seats in Congress, his party's candidates are at a disadvantage, relative to their opponents, in communicating the most favorable positions possible to their voters. This model of the midterm campaign not only explains midterm losses, but also accounts for rare failures of this phenomenon, as occurred in 1934.

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The almost inevitable midterm election loss suffered by the president's congressional party is by now an accepted fact among political scientists and politicians. However, the factors which underlie midterm losses are still hazy and several explanations are current. In two recent efforts, Kernell [1977] attributes off-year outcomes to asymmetries of behavior on the part of voters, while Tufte [1978] focuses on economic cycles induced by the government. The classic model is that of Campbell [1960] who posits that the weakness of short-term forces in a midterm election causes low-involvement voters from the previous on-year contest to abstain. In this paper we suggest that, because of certain strategic and informational considerations, the congressional candidates of the president's party have an inherent disadvantage in off-year elections independent of nonvoting patterns and particular issues. Because of incompleteness in the other explanations, we consider this systematic bias against the incumbent president's party to be a significant addition to the explanation of the midterm phenomenon.

Kernell posits that voters react more strongly to negative than to positive impressions of the administration's performance. As a result, voters in the low-stimulus midterm election are

disproportionately those who in effect cast a vote of no confidence against the president's party. Kernell convincingly documents this overrepresentation; without a doubt it contributes to the observed midterm outcomes. However, there is no good explanation as to why individuals should exhibit this "negative voting" behavior. Kernell cites psychological studies in which similar effects are observed, and from which corresponding theories of biased behavior are developed [Kernell, 1977, pp. 51-52]. Such theories are necessarily ad hoc, and require the rather mysterious assertion that people view the world as "a predominantly positive place." One might alternatively appeal to possible asymmetries in the information which reaches the voter through the media; this again might be motivated by the psychological theories referred to, given the economic proclivities of news organizations. These explanations, though, leave us unsatisfied as to the real nature of negative voting. It would be preferable to have some direct explanation in terms of the rational-choice or sociopsychological paradigms currently used to build most models of electoral behavior. If this is impossible, a serious weakness in those approaches to voter behavior will be apparent. Until negative voting can be rationalized in some manner, we hesitate to accept it as a basic tenet of voting behavior rather than as a result of some other underlying feature of the midterm campaign.

The "political business cycle" approach of Tufte holds that demonstrable efforts by the government to pump up the economy at presidential election time result in a bust phase of the economic

cycle at the time of off-year elections. Economic rationales for voting decisions (see, for example, Tufte, 1975) then take over to explain the resulting turn against the president's party. Expanding of social security benefits or pressure on the Fed to increase the money supply may serve as explanations of recent coincidences of economic boom and presidential elections; however, the inescapable midterm losses have been observed since about 1860, when government intervention in the economy was of considerably less significance than it has been since the New Deal. Thus although such an explanation might be used to predict any increased tendency for the president to lose seats at midterm in recent years, the midterm effect would apparently be present without executive efforts to win reelection in on-years. We must search for a further explanation.

The classic "surge and decline" thesis of Campbell held that the president's off-year losses were a direct result of his on-year gains. Short-term forces which are presumed to have swept the president into office in one election, along with a number of coattail-riding congressmen, subside by the midterm election, removing from the electorate those low-involvement voters who were previously mobilized in favor of the incumbent party. Theoretical weaknesses in this approach have been apparent, especially in the simplified model of the operation of short-term forces. In particular, Campbell asserts that the short-term forces can be viewed as, on balance, favoring one candidate or the other; a more complete model must take account of the effects of various short-term forces upon different groups in the electorate. At any rate,

Arseneau and Wolfinger [1973] laid the concept to rest, at least as an explanation of midterm forces, when they showed that the involvement-turnout relation for off-years has not continued to hold since 1960. Since the midterm losses continue, surge and decline cannot have been their driving force.

As an alternative attempt at accounting for the midterm effect, we appeal to (1) the imperfect information under which voters must make their decisions, and (2) the candidates' task of adopting a platform to win the midterm election. Voters may be thought of as basing their decisions on, broadly speaking, political "issues." But to evaluate the issue stands of candidates a voter must exert time and effort to acquire information about them, where again we broadly define "information" to include any data or impressions about the candidate's positions, power, or even personality, and voters' understanding and expectations of the effects of an officeholder's actions on the real world. Since the voter has other uses for his time and efforts, he may be expected to use any informational shortcuts or rules of thumb which seem appropriate to him. We will argue here specifically that the well-publicized positions of the president are used by voters to infer facts about the less accessible positions of congressional candidates who belong to the president's party. We will show that in off-year elections this type of voter behavior would represent an asymmetry in the campaign for congressional office which is likely to put the presidential party candidates at a disadvantage.

We view the voter as having preferences over an issue space  $S$  in which positions  $\Theta$  (presidential party) or  $\Psi$  (other party)

may be taken by candidates for U.S. Representative in the voter's district. A typical  $\Theta$  or  $\Psi$  may include not only policies advocated by the candidates or by the incumbent administration, but also any valence "issues" [Stokes, 1963], personal characteristics and so on which may figure in such a campaign. Previous to the campaign, the voter receives information on the positions  $\Theta$  and  $\Psi$  of the candidates. Because this information (such as contained in news reports, transmitted in conversations, etc.) may be evaluated in different ways or may be inexact or even false, the voter uses it to create a priori subjective distributions  $f(\Theta)$  and  $g(\Psi)$  of the "true" positions of the candidates. Information received from the candidates in the campaign is used to update these priors.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the vote decision, the voter uses his preferences over  $S$  and the distributions of probable candidate positions to determine which candidate is preferred.

The goal of the candidate is to be elected. It is well-known that congressmen (and presumably candidates) develop subjective estimates about the distributions of opinion within their districts (Fenno [1977] and Stokes and Miller [1963] offer differing demonstrations of this point); the use of modern public opinion survey techniques has recently lent further usefulness to these estimates. Given our broad concept of issues, we can think of the candidate as having some rough information about what his electoral fortunes will be if the voters perceive him as holding a particular set of issue positions. Let us represent this rough information as a likelihood-of-winning function  $L_i$  for the candidate in district  $i$ , which depends upon his position  $\Theta^i$  and takes into account the possible

$\psi^i$  of his opponent.<sup>2</sup>  $\theta^i$  and  $\psi^i$  are both elements of  $S$ , and  $L_i$  takes on values between zero and one. The candidate, in these terms, chooses his position  $\theta^i$  to maximize his chances of winning;<sup>3</sup> call this optimal position  $\bar{\theta}^i$ .<sup>4</sup> The task of the candidate in the campaign, then, is to use what resources he has to inform the voters that he indeed takes the issue positions denoted by  $\bar{\theta}^i$ , because the voters are not certain beforehand. Given the uncertainties involved, voters in effect use information from the campaigns to update their beliefs rather than abandoning their prior beliefs completely; voters place more likelihood on and near  $\theta^i$  and  $\psi^i$  after  $f$  and  $g$  are updated.

One more important actor appears in the campaign: the president himself. The presence of the chief executive, who not only advocates but is required to implement policy alternatives (defined as a position  $\phi$  in the issue space) constitutes another set of campaign messages being sent to voters. In particular these messages are used by voters as further observations upon the position  $\theta^i$  of the candidate of the president's party. Thus the likelihood-of-winning function must be written as  $L_i(\theta^i, \phi)$  (for convenience we suppress the argument  $\psi^i$ ). Strong connections between a voter's evaluation of the president and his vote for congressman have been demonstrated in Kernell [1977] and Tufte [1975] for midterm elections; in addition, the phenomenon of coattail-voting at the individual level [Miller, 1955] and the importance of association (endorsements, etc.) between presidential and congressional candidates [Schoenberger, 1969] in on-year elections

indicate that evaluations of the presidential incumbent or candidate figure significantly in the voter's decision in the congressional race.

Two general reasons can be given for expecting the effect of presidential evaluations to manifest itself in the evaluation of the congressional candidate, or, in terms of our model, for expecting  $\phi$  to be used to update voter beliefs about  $\theta^i$ . First, inasmuch as the president is viewed as a leader of his party in government, responsible for legislative proposals, his positions naturally influence and are influenced by those of his fellow party members. Implicit in this, as well as in the use of party label as a cue, is the requirement that voters perceive some amount of issue coherence in the parties. Such perceptions are demonstrated by the ability of many voters to verbally evaluate the parties by issue positions in survey responses [see, for example, Nie et al., 1976]. The second reason voters might attach importance to the president's position is the relative ease of obtaining information on the president, compared with information on the congressional candidate. Any attention at all to news media exposes the voter to the actions and declarations of the president, allowing the voter to at least form an opinion of the president's proximity to the voter's own (however vague) preferred positions. Hence the president's positions should contribute heavily to the voter's a priori perception about one candidate. On the other hand, perceptions of the other candidate in an off-year election generally have no such component. Our main point is that the candidate of the president's party may therefore find it difficult to impress voters with his true position if it

differs from that of the president, whereas the opposing candidate has no such concern. As we will now demonstrate, this simple fact puts the incumbent party candidates at a disadvantage.

Using the notation we have developed thus far, we can describe the midterm campaign in the following way: the president, through his actions while in office, first assumes an issue position  $\Phi$ . Then, in district  $i$ , the candidate of the president's party and his opponent choose positions  $\theta^i$  and  $\psi^i$  respectively to maximize their chances of winning, given  $\Phi$ .<sup>5</sup> The presidential party candidate, in particular, wishes to

$$\max_{\theta^i} L_i(\theta^i, \Phi)$$

where the action of his opponent is implicit in  $L_i$  and in the choice of  $\theta^i$ . The process of signalling to the voters, as described above, ensues.

Were the president's message not received by the voters, only the optimal messages  $\bar{\theta}^i$  and  $\bar{\psi}^i$  would be received by voters during the campaign, where  $\bar{\theta}^i$  is chosen to

$$\max_{\theta^i} L_i(\theta^i)$$

and similarly for  $\bar{\psi}^i$ . The expected number of seats to be won by the president's party would then be

$$\sum_i L_i(\bar{\theta}^i) = \sum_i \max_{\theta^i} L_i(\theta^i).$$

If this were the case, the president's party would suffer no inherent disadvantage at midterm. However, the president's importance

to the voters is inescapable; accordingly, suppose the president chose  $\Phi = \Phi^*$  to maximize the number of seats won, i.e.

$$\max_{\Phi} \sum_i \max_{\theta^i} L_i(\theta^i, \Phi).$$

The candidates' maximizing choices would in general be  $\theta^{i*} \neq \bar{\theta}^i$  and  $\psi^{i*} \neq \bar{\psi}^i$  given the president's choice  $\Phi^*$ . Since, in the typical election, voter preference distributions differ greatly from district to district, many of the presidential party's candidates will experience nonoptimal messages from the chief executive in their individual districts. In normal times, the voter priors  $f$  and  $g$  place considerable weight on positions near  $\theta^i$  and  $\psi^i$ , the actual positions assumed by the candidates. The president's messages, then, simply cause the updated  $f$ 's to place less weight near the candidates' optima than would otherwise be the case. Hence the presidential party candidates' likelihoods-of-winning will overall be lower, and the number of seats won will be less, than if the president did not figure in the campaign at all; that is:

$$\sum_i L_i(\theta^{i*}, \Phi^*) < \sum_i L_i(\bar{\theta}^i).$$

In fact, having concerns and objectives apart from the fortunes of his party in Congress (for example, his own reelection or constraints from promises during the previous election campaign), the president will choose some  $\tilde{\Phi} \neq \Phi^*$ . This suboptimal choice makes his congressional candidates even worse off; they choose  $\tilde{\theta}^i$ , and their opponents  $\tilde{\psi}^i$ , to maximize their chances in the face of  $\tilde{\Phi}$ . The presidential party's expected number of seats is then

$$\sum_i L_i(\tilde{\theta}^i, \tilde{\Phi}).$$

In the typical off-year election, we thus find

$$\sum_i L_i(\tilde{\theta}^i, \tilde{\phi}) < \sum_i L_i(\theta^{i*}, \phi^*) < \sum_i L_i(\theta^i),$$

that is, the presidential party's candidates are worse off overall than they would be if the president sent no messages in the campaign. Since the latter is the hypothetical case in which both party's candidates are on equal footing, we have showed that the presidential party is faced with an inherent disadvantage in winning seats in the midterm election.

Given the imperfect information of voters and the nature of political coalitions in individual districts,<sup>6</sup> our model clearly does not predict that the president's party will lose every seat, nor even that it will lose control of Congress. If the opinion distributions of potential presidential-party voters were similar in enough districts, and if  $\phi$  were not too unfavorable nationwide, the disadvantage would be limited as would the net loss of seats. Indeed, these are the conditions which characterize most midterm elections. Under certain rare conditions, the president's power to communicate his party's positions to voters could even provide a net advantage for his party. Suppose that cataclysmic political events made it necessary for congressional candidates to communicate  $\theta^i$  and  $\psi^i$  which were previously considered unlikely positions; that is, most voters' priors placed very little weight near those positions.

It might be prohibitively expensive if not impossible for the candidates to effectively inform voters of their new positions. But the extra signalling ability of the president could provide his party with an advantage in moving those priors which would outweigh the disadvantage of their strategic immobility discussed above.

In fact, the 1934 midterm elections may represent just such a case. Following the political upheaval of the early Depression years, many voters' prior distributions of candidates' positions were conceivably centered near pre-Depression optima, probably with greatly increased dispersions due to the seriousness of the nation's problems and the wide variety of solutions being proposed. President Roosevelt's aggressive leadership may have facilitated the efforts of a substantial number of Democratic candidates to achieve and transmit to voters the optima appropriate to the new economic and political situation.

Our model suggests two other interesting interpretations. First, the occasional tendency of intense midterm campaigning by the president to do more harm than good [Key, 1964, pp. 565-567] may be explained by more than the possible resentment among the locals due to their perceptions that the president is "meddling" in their affairs. The president, by campaigning on some issues in a particular district, is generating potentially nonoptimal messages for other districts. In addition, he is tying the local candidate with the administration's overall issue position, which may be nonoptimal in that district. Secondly, notice that the often-heard proposal for the opposition party to develop policy-specific national programs for all its candidates carries with it potential

disadvantages as well as benefits. If voters begin to evaluate the position of the opposition candidate's message  $\Psi^i$  in conjunction with that of a nationwide platform or spokesman, the opposition party would then suffer the same sort of mobility disadvantage which now afflicts the president's party. The opposition party may well find that the informational problems of the lack of a national voice may be outweighed by the mobility advantages of being able to optimize  $\Psi^i$  district by district.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Using a model in which (1) voters have imperfect information, and (2) voters infer information about a candidate's position from the president's position when both are of the same party, we have seen that the basic nature of the election contest between incumbent and challenger implies the existence of a tactical disadvantage for the presidential party candidate. This disadvantage stems from two facts. First, the importance of the president as national executive and leader of his party means that his single position influences voter perceptions of his party's candidates in 435 districts, although patterns of voter preferences in those districts will generally vary widely. Thus a presidential party candidate will have difficulty in convincing some voters that his true position is not the president's, but one which is more popular in the district. Second, the president has a multitude of goals and constraints which may prevent him even from choosing his single position to maximize the expected strength of his party in Congress.

In midterm elections, no outstanding national figure plays the role for the opposition party that the president plays in his own party; we therefore expect the presidential party to be at a relative disadvantage under normal circumstances.

There are two important points to be made concerning the relationship between our model and the existing literature. First, the framework presented here allows us to obtain Tufte's thesis as a special case, in which one subset of the relevant issue space consists of economic policies and in which the president's actions (his choice of  $\Phi$ ) are colored by his own reelection considerations. The result of these economic policies, according to Tufte, is a sour economic situation at midterm with which the presidential party candidates are saddled in their campaigns. Thus our model expands, rather than contradicts, the insight in Tufte's work.

Second, any model which purports to explain the "general" phenomenon of midterm losses should leave room for the well-known counterexample of the 1934 elections. Previous theories can account for 1934 only in an essentially negative way. Surge-and-decline could be invoked only if there were no 1934 decline or no 1932 surge in voter involvement; it gives little insight into the reason for these absences. Negative voting would allow off-year gains only if presidential popularity were higher at midterm than two years previous, but it fails to explain why this should occur so rarely. Our model not only accommodates the 1934 elections, but in fact presents a description of the world which explains why the Democrats gained seats and what conditions could bring about a similar anomaly in the future.



## NOTES

1. This is a Bayesian model of voter evaluations. In general such updating can be represented as follows. Let  $f(\theta)$  be the a priori distribution of  $\theta$  and let  $W$  be a random variable representing the message to be received. Suppose  $W$  has the conditional density function  $h(w|\theta)$  and marginal density  $h_1(w)$ . The updated, or posterior, distribution of the candidate's position after  $W=w$  is observed is

$$f(\theta|w) = \frac{h(w|\theta)f(\theta)}{h_1(w)}$$

where  $h$ ,  $h_1$ , and  $f$  are all known to the voter beforehand.

This equation is known as Bayes' theorem.

2. The likelihoods-of-winning should be thought of in the most general possible terms. They may be asymmetric, i.e., the candidate of one party need not get the same likelihood-of-winning with position  $\theta$  that the other party's candidate would get at that same position. This freedom allows the  $L_i$  in each district to take into account such things as the differing constituencies of two candidates within a district in Fenno's [1977] sense; the (related) ability of a candidate to communicate his positions to some groups but not, perhaps, to others; and the political history of a district, including personal backgrounds of particular candidates.

3. There are several important special cases of this decision problem. If the presidential party's candidate is forced to make his decision before his opponent does so, he may be viewed as choosing a maxmin strategy  $\theta^{i*}$  against his opponent using a likelihood-of-winning function  $\hat{L}_i(\theta^i, \psi^i)$ . If on the other hand his opponent has already chosen  $\bar{\psi}$ , the candidate will simply choose  $\theta^i$  to maximize  $\hat{L}_i(\theta^i, \bar{\psi})$ . More generally we may assume that the decisions are in effect made simultaneously, and that our candidate estimates a subjective distribution  $H(\psi)$  of the position his opponent will take. Then we might view the decision problem as maximizing  $E[\hat{L}(\theta^i, \psi)] = \int \hat{L}(\theta^i, \psi) dH(\psi)$  with respect to  $\theta^i$ . In the sequel we will suppress the argument  $\psi^i$ .

Aranson et al. [1974] give conditions under which maximization of  $L_i$  is equivalent in effect to various forms of plurality maximization and vote maximization.

4. Formally, there is of course the problem of existence and uniqueness of such a strategy. Straightforward assumptions about continuity of  $L_i$  and compactness of  $S$  yield existence in the expected value formulation of note 3; the situation is even simpler for the sequential choice situations. For the maxmin situation, the fact that the  $L_i$  sum to unity means that the problem always has a solution in mixed strategies (it is a two-person zero-sum game), but mixed strategies are not well defined

in our model of the campaign. Existence of an optimal pure strategy in this sense is not assured. However, we require that the candidates do choose positions, which seems reasonable in the present context. Given only that they are attempting in some approximate sense to maximize  $L_i$ , the argument of this paper still applies. Finally, given this requirement that a choice be made, the uniqueness question does not affect our argument either, since one of the optima is chosen by some criterion, be it random or whatever.

5. In practice we may observe the president being pinned down on only a subset of issues prior to the midterm campaign, or being restricted to a subset of the possible positions on an issue. Also, he may advocate policies with particularized benefits for individual districts when campaigning for those districts' candidates. These distinctions are not crucial to our model, since in any case the president's position will be constrained to some extent on several issues before the congressional candidates begin campaigning.

Notice that the constraining of the president's platform prior to the choice of  $\psi^i$  by the opposition means yet another disadvantage for his party's candidates. Because of the connection between voters' perceptions of  $\phi$  and  $\theta^i$ , the candidates are to a certain extent also constrained prior to the campaign. Downs [1957, pp. 55-62] examines a simple model of this phenomenon, demonstrating the advantage of choosing an

opposition platform. More generally this phenomenon results from the almost certain presence of majority rule cycles in  $S$  (see, e.g. Davis, Hinich and Ordeshook [1970]; Hoyer and Mayer [1975]). Kramer [1975] analyzes the dynamic behavior of an electoral system under these conditions.

6. These factors are all taken into account in the  $L_i$  -- see footnote 2.

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