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Conflicting Signs for Midterm Elections

By *JOHN HARWOOD*

As if Republicans did not have enough cause for optimism this year, the pollster Neil Newhouse offers this lesson from history: Since John F. Kennedy occupied the White House, presidents with approval ratings below 50 percent have seen their parties lose an average of 41 House seats in midterm elections.

This year, a gain that large would return the House to Republican control. President Obama's most recent Gallup Poll rating: 45 percent.

There's more. Of Mr. Obama's last nine elected predecessors, none saw his approval ratings rise between January and October of his first midterm election year.

That points to a Republican breakthrough that would snatch the speaker's gavel away from Representative Nancy Pelosi — if 2010 follows historical patterns.

But American voters have smashed plenty of precedents lately, most spectacularly by electing an African-American as president in 2008.

“As soon as a political scientist comes up with a sweeping generality about American politics,” said Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University, “it will immediately be falsified.”

End of 'Dead-Ball Era'

Two decades ago, Democratic strategists bemoaned the “Republican lock” on electoral votes for president; in California, the most populous state, the party of Reagan won 9 of 10 elections from 1952 to 1988. But in 1992, Bill Clinton picked the lock — and no Republican has carried California since.

Two years later, the Democrats lost their own redoubt. Led by Newt Gingrich, Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years.

For 15 straight midterm elections, from 1938 through 1994, the party holding the White House lost House seats. Then Mr. Clinton's Democrats gained seats in 1998 — despite the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Republicans did it again under President George W. Bush in 2002.

As Mr. Clinton, Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Bush started their careers in the 1970s, an increase in split-ticket voting appeared to signal the decline of partisanship and the rise of the political independents.

In reality, that phase marked the realignment of partisanship, especially in the South — not its demise. By 2004, Mr. Bush ran a successful re-election campaign on the theory that truly independent swing voters had all but vanished.

For a time, partisan polarization tempered shifts in the makeup of Congress; neither Republicans nor Democrats gained as many as 10 seats in the five House elections between 1996 and 2004. With the nation evenly divided and gerrymandered districts narrowing the political playing field, James E. Campbell of the State University at Buffalo dubbed it “the dead-ball era” of Congressional competition.

Then Republicans lost more than 50 seats in 2006 and 2008. Within a fearful Democratic Party, no strategist doubts that the ball remains very much alive this year.

Unusual Elements

This midterm campaign involves several historically unusual elements. In addition to Mr. Obama, those include passage of comprehensive health care reform after 70 years of failure and the aftermath of a deep recession with a taxpayer bailout of Wall Street.

With the health care bill signed into law, the president hopes to convince Americans of its virtues while making clear that he has not stopped working on economic recovery. But one new lesson for the age of 24/7 multiplatform news coverage may be the diminished power of the presidential megaphone.

“Yeah, he’s got the bully pulpit, but so do 5,000 other people,” said Daron Shaw, a University of Texas political scientist who advised both presidential campaigns of Mr. Bush. He predicted that Mr. Obama’s approval rating, now that voters have taken his measure, would hardly budge this year.

Though the unemployment rate remains stuck around 10 percent, the economy in March enjoyed its strongest job growth in three years. The stock market has been booming. Democratic candidates hope that continued good news between now and November will begin alleviating the sour mood of voters.

Some models of political behavior suggest that there is little time for that. Attitudes toward the economy tend to harden in springtime, Mr. Campbell said, since the second quarter is “the last one people have an opportunity to process” before Election Day.

Ray C. Fair, an economist at Yale and a student of the relationship between economic conditions and political outcomes, argued that history shows voters take account of third-quarter performance, too. His model of 2010 economic performance projects that Democrats will draw 51.63 percent of the two-party vote for the House.

That translates to roughly 224 seats — enough for Democrats to retain control of the House.

Could 21st-century shifts in the political and media culture be scrambling such calculations? “Give me another 20 elections,” Mr. Fair responded, “then we can test that.”

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