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# The 2008 Presidential and Congressional Elections: Anti-Bush Referendum and Prospects for the Democratic Majority

GARY C. JACOBSON

The 2008 election extended the national trend that had given control of Congress to the Democrats in the 2006 midterm two years earlier. The election was again essentially a referendum on the George W. Bush administration, but this time the referendum also encompassed a presidential election. The Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, capped an improbable journey to the White House by winning the largest share of votes cast for any Democrat since Lyndon Johnson in 1964, defeating Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona by 52.9 percent to 45.7 percent. Obama took all 19 states John Kerry had won in 2004 plus another 9, including 3 in the South, ending up with a 365-173 electoral vote margin. Democrats picked up 21 seats in the House of Representatives and 8 in the Senate. The House victories, added to the 31 seats they gained in 2006 and some pickups in subsequent special elections, left them holding 257 seats to the Republicans' 178, a gain of 55 seats over the two elections. In the Senate, where for the second consecutive election Democrats retained every seat they defended, their total grew to 59 seats, 14 more than they had held after the 2004 election (Table 1).<sup>1</sup> The cumulative results of the congressional elections effectively overturned the verdict of 1994, reducing Republican congressional representation to what it had been before the Party's historic rise to majority status 14 years earlier.

On the congressional side, the 2008 elections shared a number of notable similarities with 2006, although important differences were also evident. Like 2006, 2008 was a referendum on the Republican Party as well as its leader. For

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<sup>1</sup>This count includes the two independents (Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut) who call themselves independents but caucus with the Democrats.

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TABLE 1  
*Membership Changes in the House and Senate 2004–2008*

	Republicans	Democrats	Independents <sup>a</sup>
House of Representatives			
Elected in 2004	232	202	1 <sup>a</sup>
Elected in 2006	202	233	
At the time of the 2008 election	199	236	
Elected in 2008	178	257	
Incumbents reelected	156	224	
Incumbents defeated	14	5	
Open seats retained	17	7	
Open seats lost	12	0	
Senate			
After the 2004 election	55	44	1 <sup>a</sup>
After the 2006 election	49	49	2 <sup>a</sup>
At the time of the 2008 election	49	49	2 <sup>a</sup>
After the 2008 election	41	57	2 <sup>a</sup>
Incumbents reelected	13	12	
Incumbents defeated	5	0	
Open seats retained	2		
Open seats lost	3		

<sup>a</sup>The independents caucus with the Democrats.

Source: Compiled by author.

a second time, the field of competitive races in states and districts defended by Republicans expanded over the course of the election year, and again, Democratic Party strategists had the resources in hand to support their candidates generously against the growing list of Republican targets. Democrats also experienced a late surge to their side in Senate races, once more winning the lion's share of Republican seats listed as in play in pre-election ratings, and again with crucial support from independent voters. Independents also favored House Democrats by a solid margin for the second time running. Finally, just as in 2006, most of the new Democratic House gains occurred in Republican-leaning districts, with the effect of moderating the Party's caucus for the ensuing Congress.<sup>2</sup>

Not all parallels held. Although voters took an even more unfavorable view of Bush and the Republican Party in 2008 than they had in 2006, the leading source of disaffection had shifted from the Iraq war to the recessionary economy. Unlike the Iraq war, the economic crisis soured many Republicans as well as Democrats and independents on the administration. As always, voters held even dimmer views of Congress than of the president, but unlike 2006, the majority party in Congress was not punished at the polls. Most importantly, however, 2008 featured Barack Obama's remarkable victory in the presidential race, the product not only of strongly pro-Democratic national conditions, but also of an unusually well-financed and well-organized cam-

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of these factors in the 2006 elections, see Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (Spring 2007): 1–24.

paign that produced identifiable spill-over benefits for Democratic House and Senate candidates.

### THE REFERENDUM

According to a broad consensus in the political science literature, a modern presidential election is always largely a referendum on the performance of the current administration. Virtually all of the models designed to forecast presidential election results routinely incorporate measures of the state of the economy and the popular standing of the president as independent variables,<sup>3</sup> and these same variables are widely if not universally thought to influence congressional election results as well.<sup>4</sup> The higher the president's approval ratings and the stronger the economy, the better the president's party candidates do on election day. Unpopular presidents and economic difficulties—the two naturally tend to coincide, because a poor economy contributes to presidential unpopularity, although unpopular wars do so as well<sup>5</sup>—cost the president's party votes in contests across all federal offices. In aggregate, then, voters treat both presidential and congressional elections as occasions for imposing collective responsibility on the president and his party.

All of the evidence suggests that the referendum component was even larger in 2006 than is normal for a midterm. For example, evaluations of the president's performance had a much greater impact on the individual vote in 2006 than in any of the eight previous midterms going back to 1974.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Bush's low job approval rating—at 38 percent in the final Gallup Poll taken just before the election, lowest for a president at midterm since Harry Truman in 1950—was a primary reason that his party lost control of Congress.

Bush's job approval rating was even lower in 2008, down to 25 percent in Gallup's final pre-election survey.<sup>7</sup> But the leading source of the public's dissatisfaction with the President had shifted. In 2006, it was clearly the Iraq war.<sup>8</sup> By the time the "surge"—the additional troops Bush ordered to Iraq in early 2007 to try to reverse the deteriorating situation there—had succeeded by the only metric most Americans care about, a dramatic decline in American casualties, the imploding economy had eclipsed Iraq as the nation's dominant issue.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the summary review of nine models in James E. Campbell, "Editor's Introduction: Forecasting the 2008 National Elections," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41 (October 2008): 681.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this literature and a full set of citations, see Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 159–174.

<sup>5</sup> Michael MacKuen, "Political Drama, Economic Conditions, and the Dynamics of Presidential Popularity," *American Journal of Political Science* 27 (February 1983): 165–92.

<sup>6</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, "The President, the War, and Voting Behavior in the 2006 House Elections" in Jeffrey J. Mondak and Dona-Gene Mitchell, eds., *Fault Lines: Why the Republicans Lost Congress* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 128–147.

<sup>7</sup> Bush's average approval rating across all 17 national polls taken during the month before the election was 24 percent.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobson, "Referendum," 5–6.

The housing price deflation that began in late 2006 left many sub-prime mortgages worthless, wiping out financial institutions that had invested heavily in mortgage-backed bonds and freezing the credit markets. By summer 2008, the fallout was hammering the stock market, driving share prices down more than 30 percent for the year, sharply reducing the wealth and retirement funds of millions of Americans. By election day, economists were virtually unanimous in predicting a deep recession, with massive job losses, perhaps the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Not surprisingly, Americans' views of the economy turned decisively negative,<sup>9</sup> as did their evaluations of the President's handling of it (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup>

Whatever benefit Bush might have gotten from the success of the surge in Iraq was more than offset by negative views of his economic performance. Approval of Bush's handling of the Iraq war actually rose between the end of 2006 and the 2008 election—on average, from 27 percent to 33 percent—while the average approval of his handling of the economy fell steeply, from 42 percent to 18 percent. The trend lines in Figure 1 suggest that at the time of the 2006 election, the Iraq war was dragging down Bush's overall job rating despite increasingly positive opinions of his handling of the economy, whereas in 2008, the economy dragged down his rating despite (modestly) more-favorable views of his handling of Iraq. The economy's effect was sufficiently powerful to leave Bush with the lowest pre-election approval rating of any president in the 70 years such surveys have been taken. The falloff in Bush's pre-election approval between 2006 and 2008 occurred primarily among Republicans (dropping from 81 percent to 61 percent), and secondarily among independents (falling from 31 percent to 20 percent); his ratings among Democrats had been in single digits since early 2006 and so could not fall much further (7 percent to 5 percent).<sup>11</sup> A large majority of ordinary Republicans had stuck with the President when Iraq was the dominant issue, but the economic meltdown evidently proved to be the last straw for more than a few of them.

Republican supporters were fond of pointing out before the election that the Congress, controlled by Democrats, was earning even lower approval ratings than Bush in 2008. Indeed, its ratings were even lower than in 2006, when widespread disdain for Congress contributed to the Republicans' loss of majority status.<sup>12</sup> Although there is some evidence that, even under divided

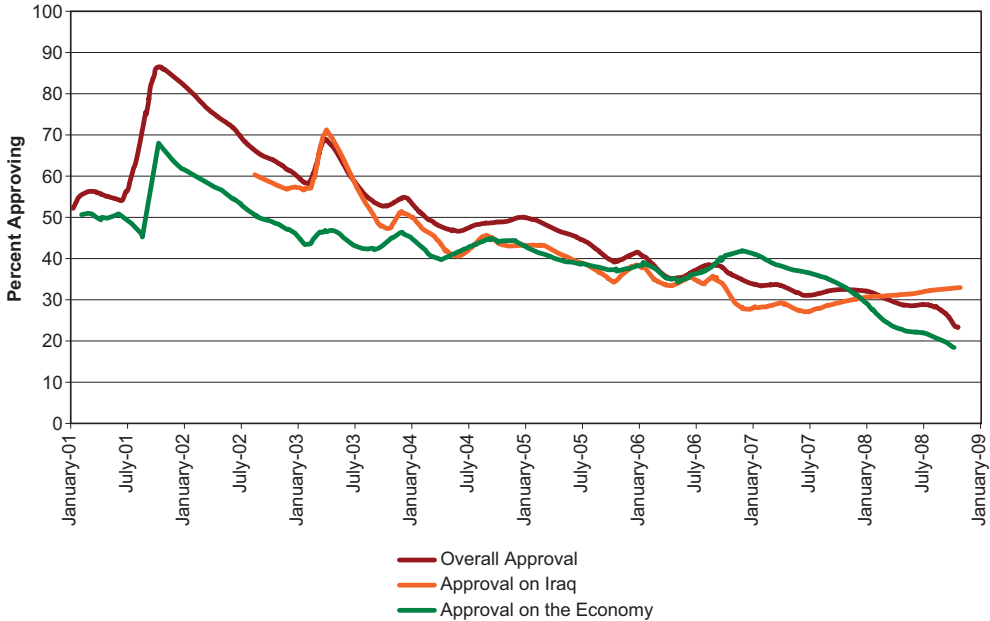
<sup>9</sup> In the Gallup Poll closest to the election, only 5 percent rated the economy as excellent or good, 22 percent said it was only fair, and 73 percent deemed it poor; accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1609/Consumer-Views-Economy.aspx>, 19 January 2009.

<sup>10</sup> The data in Figure 1 are the lowest-smoothed trends from results reported by 15 national media polls, gathered mainly from [pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com) but in some cases from the survey organization's Web site. The number of smoothed observations is 1,003 for overall approval, 409 for approval on handling the economy, and 312 for approval on handling Iraq.

<sup>11</sup> Based on data from CBS News/*New York Times* and Gallup Polls.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobson, "Referendum," 9–10; Dona-Gene Mitchell and Jeffrey J. Mondak, "The Context for Defeat" in Mondak and Mitchell, eds., *Fault Lines*, 9–12.

FIGURE 1  
*Approval of G.W. Bush's Job Performance on Iraq, the Economy, and Overall*



Source: See footnote 10.

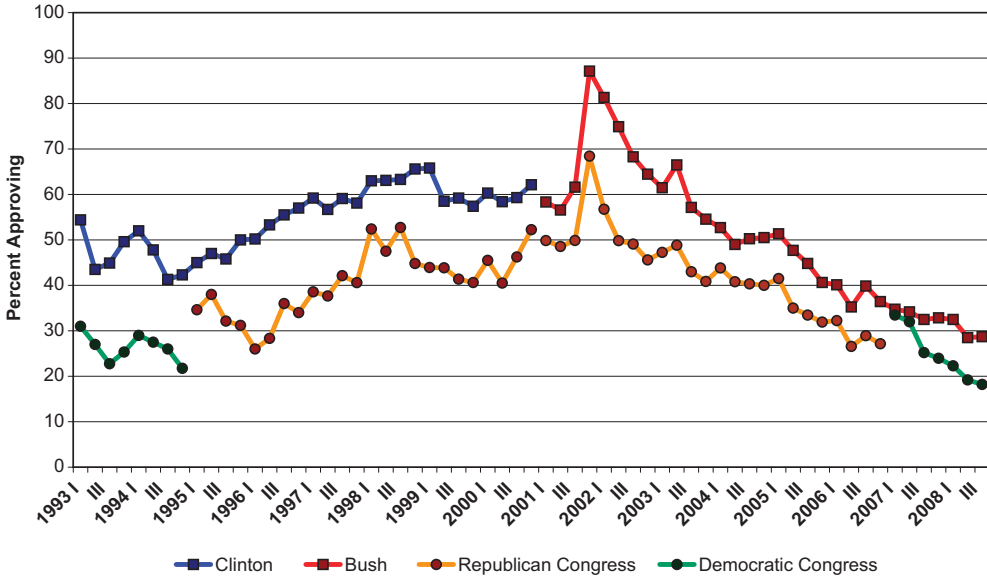
government, voters unhappy with Congress's performance take it out on candidates from the controlling party,<sup>13</sup> record low ratings obviously did not prevent Democrats from making substantial gains in 2008.<sup>14</sup> A majority of the 73 percent of voters questioned in the exit poll who disapproved of Congress's performance still voted for the House Democrats (52 percent to 46 percent). To be sure, the Democratic vote was 10 points higher among the minority approving of Congress, but this was largely a consequence of partisanship, for most approvers were Democrats.

More generally, data from the Bill Clinton and G.W. Bush administrations show a strong tendency for the approval ratings of Congress and the president to move in parallel, regardless of whether the branches are controlled by the same or different parties. The data also show that Congress is consistently

<sup>13</sup> Monika McDermott and David R. Jones, "Do Public Evaluations of Congress Matter? Retrospective Voting in Congressional Elections," *American Politics Research* 31 (March 2003): 155–177; David R. Jones and Monika McDermott, "The Responsible Party Model in House and Senate Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 48 (January 2004): 1–12.

<sup>14</sup> Congress's approval ratings dipped as low as 12 percent in two October 2008 CBS News/*New York Times* and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* polls, accessed at <http://www.pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm>, 27 January 2009.

FIGURE 2  
*Approval of the President and Congress 1993-2008 (Quarterly Averages)*



Source: See footnote 15.

rated less favorably than the president (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> The two trends diverged for a couple of quarters after the switches in party control of Congress in 1995 and 2007 but soon reverted to their earlier pattern. These data support the idea that approval of government institutions tends strongly toward the generic.<sup>16</sup> So do survey data; among respondents in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES), approval of Congress was strongly and positively related to approval of Bush once party identification was controlled.<sup>17</sup> Thus, under divided government, any electoral advantage the minority party in Congress might get from public dissatisfaction with that institution is more than offset by the related and more consequential dissatisfaction with the president.

<sup>15</sup> Figure 2 displays the quarterly averages in presidential approval (from the Gallup Poll series) and congressional approval (from the Gallup, ABC News/*Washington Post*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, CBS News/*New York Times*, *Time*, *Los Angeles Times*, Hotline, Quinnipiac, Ipsos, and Fox News polls accessed on 29 December 2008 at [pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com) and the Roper Center's *iPOLL* Databank.)

<sup>16</sup> James A. Stimson, "Between the Campaigns: Public Approval and Disapproval of Government" in James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137–157.

<sup>17</sup> With party identification set at its mean value, the estimated probability of approving Congress's job performance rises from .13 to .24 if the respondent approves of Bush's performance. The data are from Stephen Ansolabehere, *Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008*: common content. [computer file] Release 1: 2 February 2009. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. [producer].

## PARTY EVALUATIONS AND IDENTIFICATION

Evaluations of Bush had a direct impact on individual voting decisions in the 2008 elections—the evidence is presented in a later section—but the election-relevant effects of a president’s standing with the public begin to register long before election day. A sitting president is his party’s most prominent public face, and his performance in office inevitably colors popular attitudes toward the party, affecting its image and attractiveness as an object of individual identification.<sup>18</sup> The association between G.W. Bush and the Republican Party was particularly close: Bush’s approach to governing tended to be highly partisan; congressional and other Republicans supported him with unusual fealty, and he devoted much more energy than his predecessors to party-building activities.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as his approval ratings declined, opinions of the Republican Party grew increasingly negative (Figure 3). Favorable opinions of both parties peaked (along with ratings of every national institution) right after the attacks of September 11, 2001, with the Republican Party enjoying a windfall from Bush’s record-high approval levels. Subsequently, as Bush’s standing with the public declined, so did his Party’s, its favorability rating dropping nearly 20 percentage points between the first half of 2002 and 2008.<sup>20</sup> Bush’s slide did not improve the Democrats’ public image nearly as much as it hurt the Republicans’, although the Democratic Party favorability did rise by a few points during Bush’s second term. The combination of trends gave the Democrats an average 15-point advantage on this dimension in polls taken during 2008.

The Republican Party also suffered a significant erosion of mass identification during Bush’s second term.<sup>21</sup> Figure 4 displays the annual averages and overall mean of the Party’s share of major-party identifiers in surveys conducted by four national polling organizations active from 1990 through 2008. In 2003, the Republican Party was at near parity with the Democratic Party in

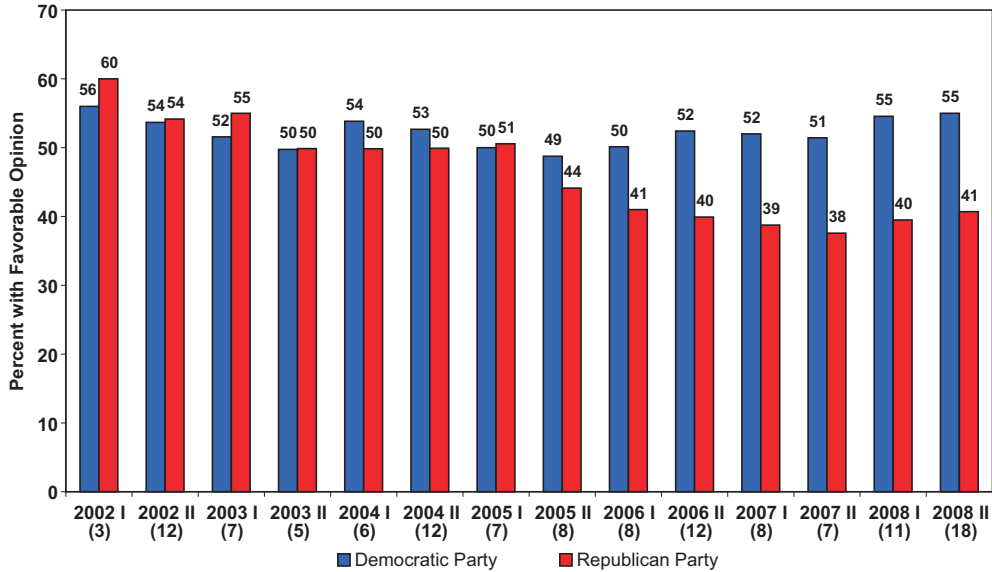
<sup>18</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “The Effects of the George W. Bush Administration on Partisan Attitudes,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39 (June 2009), in press.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney M. Milkis and Jesse H. Rhodes, “George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the ‘New’ American Party System,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (September 2007): 461–488; Richard M. Skinner, “George W. Bush and the Partisan Presidency,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123 (Winter 2008–09): 605–622.

<sup>20</sup> Regressing Republican Party favorability on presidential approval in the surveys used for Figure 3, the estimated equation is: Republican Party favorability = 25.90 (0.88) + 0.44 (0.02) Bush approval, adjusted  $R^2 = 0.82$ ,  $N = 121$ . Standard errors are in parentheses. The data are from CBS News/*New York Times*, Gallup, CNN, Quinnipiac, Fox News, Pew Research Center for the People and Press polls accessed on 23 January 2009 at [pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com) or the Roper Center’s iPOLL Databank.

<sup>21</sup> A pattern consistent with the literature on macropartisanship; see Michael MacKuen, Robert S. Erikson, and James A. Stimson, “Macropartisanship,” *American Political Science Review* 83 (December 1989): 1125–1142; Robert S. Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, “What Moves Macropartisanship? A Response to Green, Palmquist, and Schickler,” *American Political Science Review* 92 (December 1998): 901–921; Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, “Macropartisanship: A Replication and Critique,” *American Political Science Review* 92 (December 1998): 883–899.

FIGURE 3  
*Favorable Opinions of the Parties, Semiannual Averages, 2002-2008*



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.

Source: See footnote 20.

popular identification; by 2008, its share of identifiers had fallen by more than seven percentage points to reach its lowest level in the series.<sup>22</sup> Because “the influences of the political environment are most noticeable among new voters, whose partisan attachments often bear the stamp of the political *Zeitgeist* that prevailed when they reached voting age,”<sup>23</sup> it is not surprising that disaffection with the Bush administration had its strongest effect on the partisan attitudes of younger voters. By 2008, Democrats held a 28-point advantage in party favorability and a 15-point advantage in party identification among eligible voters younger than 30.<sup>24</sup>

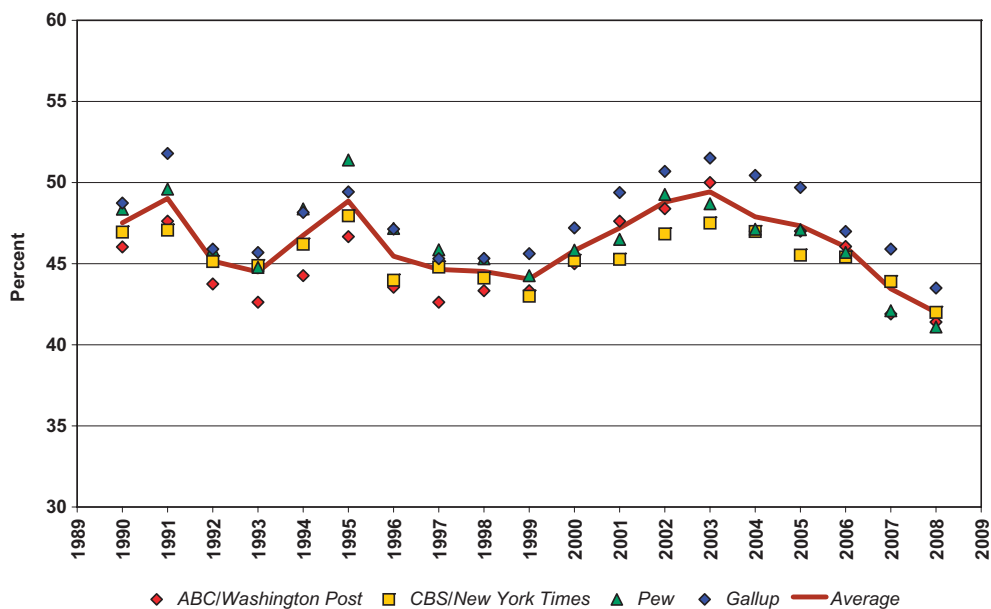
These trends contributed significantly to the Democrats’ successes in both 2006 and 2008, for both elections featured the high levels of party-line voting that have become the norm over the past decade or so. According to exit polls

<sup>22</sup> The 2008 average of 42 percent Republican was the lowest since Ronald Reagan’s first term in the two survey series (CBS News/*New York Times* and ABC News/*Washington Post*) that go back that far.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 108; see also Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 166–178.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobson, “Effects of Bush Administration on Partisan Attitudes,” Figure 15 and Table 6.

FIGURE 4  
*Republican Share of Major Party Identifiers, 1990-2008 (Annual Averages)*



results, party loyalty in presidential elections was 90.0 percent, 91.0 percent, and 90.5 percent, respectively, in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 elections; in House elections, it has ranged between 90.1 percent and 92.0 percent over the last four elections. The estimate from the 2008 CCES was 93.4 percent in the presidential contest, 91.0 in House contests. In national exit polls, the Republicans held a three-point advantage in party identifiers in the 2002 House electorate, and the parties were at parity in 2004; the Democrats took a two-point lead in 2006, which grew to seven points in 2008.<sup>25</sup> Voters under 30, who, according to the exit polls, had given Al Gore 48 percent of their votes in 2000, and John Kerry 54 percent in 2004, gave Obama 66 percent in 2008. They gave Democratic House candidates 48 percent of their votes in 2002, 55 percent in 2004, 62 percent in 2006, and 63 percent in 2008. In the 2008 CCES, 63 percent—of the 18–34 age cohort—reported voting for the Democratic House candidates, 65 percent for the Democratic Senate candidates.

A shift toward Democratic candidates also occurred among independent voters over these four elections. Bush had a three-point advantage among independents in 2000, Kerry, a one-point advantage in 2004, and Obama, a six-point advantage in 2008. In 2002, Republican House candidates enjoyed

<sup>25</sup> The Democrats' advantage was estimated to be 9 points in the 2008 CCES.

a six-point advantage among independents; Democrats had a three-point advantage in 2004 and an eight-point advantage in both 2006 and 2008. It is no coincidence that Bush's final pre-election job approval ratings among independents were 63 percent, 42 percent, 31 percent, and 20 percent, respectively, across these four elections.

### THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

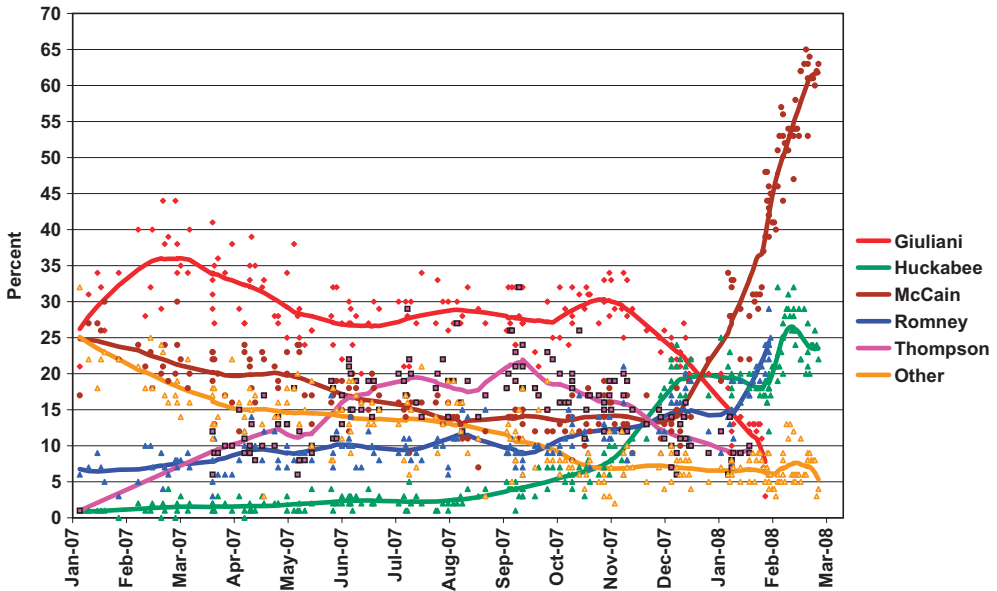
Against the backdrop of Bush's unpopularity, the overwhelming public dissatisfaction with the economy and the direction of the country, and the Republican Party's tattered image, the mystery is not Barack Obama's victory but John McCain's ability to remain competitive. As his campaign continually emphasized, Obama embodied "change," which, however vaguely defined, almost all Americans desired in 2008. Yet McCain kept it close until the final weeks of the campaign for several reasons. As a maverick sometimes conspicuously at odds with his Party and President, McCain was the least-Republican of the Republican aspirants in 2008 and thus the least burdened by the Party's tainted reputation. This image guaranteed that his road to the nomination would not be smooth, however. McCain experienced a long decline in support among Republican voters in surveys taken during 2007 that left him running third just before the primary season (Figure 5).<sup>26</sup> But as support for his rivals fell off or stalled, McCain mounted a strong comeback, winning January primaries in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida, after which he was unstoppable. The aggregate trends read as if Republican voters with reservations about McCain, a well-known quantity, auditioned the rest of the field one by one, saw reasons to find each of them wanting, and concluded with some reluctance that McCain was best for the role after all. In doing so, they backed into nominating arguably the only Republican capable of winning in the toxic political environment Republicans faced.

As the first nominee of the president's party since 1952 to have had no role in the current administration (either as president or vice president), he could and did run against it. McCain's campaign ran television ads declaring that "we're worse off than we were four years ago" and "we can't afford four more years of the same." It was McCain, not Barack Obama, who rallied the crowd at a Missouri campaign stop with "I promise you, if you're sick and tired of the way Washington operates, you only need be patient for a couple of more months. Change is coming! Change is coming! Change is coming."<sup>27</sup> His most memorable zinger in the presidential debates was, "Senator Obama, I am not

<sup>26</sup> The data for Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8 were collected from <http://www.pollingreport.com> and <http://www.pollster.com>; these sources posted a comprehensive set of media poll results regarding all aspects of the primary and general elections during the 2007–2008 campaign season.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Baker, "Party in Power, Running as if It Weren't," *New York Times*, 5 September 2008, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/05/us/politics/05assess.html>, 3 December 2008.

FIGURE 5  
*Republican Presidential Preferences, 2007-2008*



Source: See footnote 26.

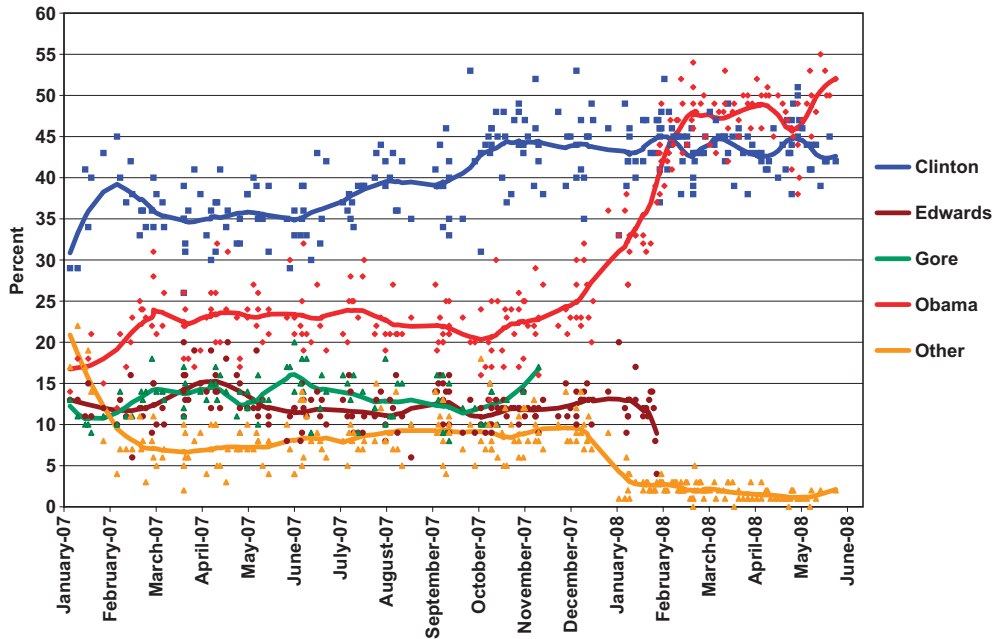
President Bush. If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago.”<sup>28</sup>

Aside from his reputation as a maverick reformer, McCain was helped by the sharp drop in American casualties in Iraq during the election year; had the “surge” failed to have this effect, McCain, as its foremost advocate, would probably not have even won the nomination and certainly would have had no chance in November.

McCain was also helped by the Democrats’ drawn-out and contentious primary season that left the Party almost evenly divided between supporters of Obama and of Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, a division that healed slowly and never quite completely. Clinton had been the clear frontrunner in surveys of Democrats throughout 2007, but Obama overtook her after winning the Iowa primary in January (Figure 6). He took an early lead in the delegate count that Clinton managed to erode with victories in later primaries but ultimately could not overcome. Her comeback fell short because of the Party’s requirement that each state’s delegates be allocated proportionately (a winner-take-all system would have given her the nomination) and because Obama

<sup>28</sup> Jim Rutenberg, “Candidates Clash over Character and Policy,” *New York Times*, 16 October 2008, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/us/politics/16debate.html>, 5 December 2008.

FIGURE 6  
*Democratic Nomination Preferences, 2007-2008*



Source: See footnote 26.

dominated in the caucus states, where the effect of his superior planning and organization was most telling.

In the end, despite the party rift, the lengthy contest with Clinton probably helped Obama's cause by keeping him in the public eye, giving him the chance to show resilience under competitive pressure, and preparing him to deal with the sorts of attacks he would face in the general election campaign. This was no small matter, for the most important reason McCain did as well as he did, given the burden of the Bush legacy, was Barack Obama himself. As a young African American with a foreign-sounding name, unfamiliar to most voters before the campaign began, and carrying a very thin resumé considering the job he sought, Obama had obvious political vulnerabilities. Obama's race and inexperience no doubt cost him some votes, although just how large a share has yet to be determined. But despite such liabilities, Obama won a decisive victory, a tribute to his strategic acumen, rhetorical skills, and superb campaign organization to be sure, but also again the unintended gift of George W. Bush. It is hard to imagine that Obama would have won either the Democratic nomination or the presidency had disaffection with Bush and the Iraq war not been so high. Obama's opposition to the war (along with superior strategy, organization, and fundraising) helped him outpace Clinton, who had voted to authorize the war,

in the contest for Democratic delegates. His prodigious fundraising, a total of at least \$750 million, more than Bush and Kerry combined in 2004,<sup>29</sup> reflected the eagerness of ordinary Democrats—among whom Bush’s approval rating reached an astonishing record low of 3 percent in several pre-election Gallup polls—to effect wholesale national regime change. And the extraordinarily high levels of popular dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, disapproval of Bush, and economic anxiety that peaked just before the election no doubt helped overcome whatever reluctance many voters might have felt to risk electing a president so different from the familiar prototype.

The McCain campaign’s main object was to instill doubts about Obama’s qualifications for the job (as well as his character and associations) and to emphasize the risk he supposedly represented as an unknown quantity. Obama countered by displaying a mastery of issues and their connections to voters’ lives and by projecting a steady, calm, and disciplined image throughout the lengthy primary and general election season while voters were getting to know him. The three presidential debates were crucial to this effort, for they put Obama in a straight match-up with the far more seasoned McCain, giving him the opportunity to appear equally “presidential.” He largely succeeded, and was, according to all of the national polls, the consensus winner of all three debates.<sup>30</sup>

The high point of McCain’s campaign came earlier, just after the Republican convention, which was enlivened by his selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. For a brief moment, McCain’s choice of Palin appeared inspired, delighting the delegates, shaking up the race, and bringing disgruntled social conservatives, with whom McCain had a rocky history, back into the fold. But questions about her experience and qualifications soon emerged, and she became more a liability than an asset. As her campaigning progressed, the proportion of Americans viewing her favorably and deeming her qualified steadily declined (Figure 7), raising questions about McCain’s judgment, undermining his argument that Obama’s inexperience was disqualifying, and casting doubt on the sincerity of his “Country First” campaign slogan.

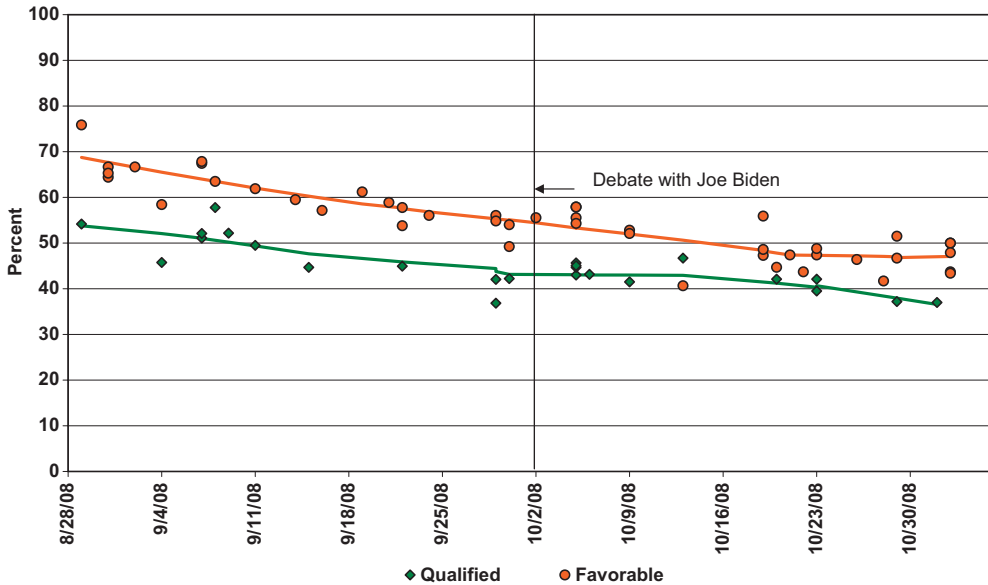
## VOTING FOR CHANGE

Although treating Americans to the unique spectacle of a contest in which both parties’ candidates ran against the incumbent administration, John McCain ultimately could not persuade most voters that he was a better vehicle for change than Barack Obama. He came closest at the Republican convention in late August, which produced a brief upsurge in Republican Party favorability (from an average of 41 percent in the two months before the convention to 46 percent in three polls immediately after the convention, temporarily nar-

<sup>29</sup> Michael Lou, “Obama Hauls in a Record \$750 Million for Campaign,” *New York Times*, 5 December 2008, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/05/us/politics/05donate.html>, 6 December 2008.

<sup>30</sup> See the surveys reported at <http://www.pollingreport.com/wh08.htm>, accessed 16 February 2009.

FIGURE 7  
*Opinions of Sarah Palin (Among Respondents with an Opinion)*



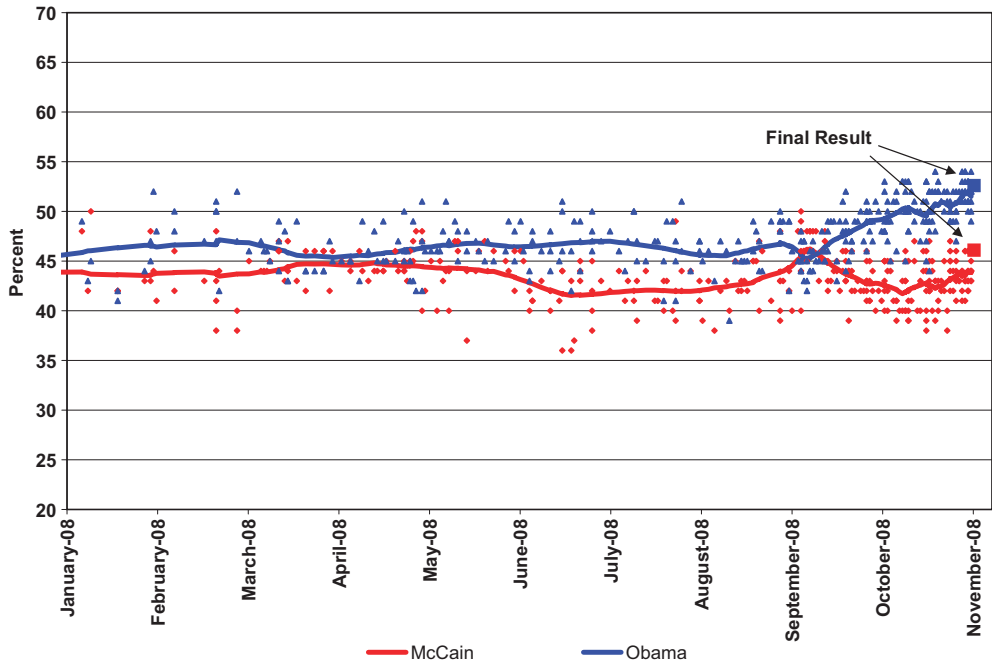
Source: See footnote 26.

rowing the Democrats' favorability advantage from 14 to 8 points), suggesting that for a week or two at least, McCain (and, perhaps more notably, Sarah Palin) had begun to give the Republican Party a new face. This was also the only period in which McCain edged ahead of Obama in the horserace polls (Figure 8). In the end, though, the economic meltdown after mid-September finally tilted the field decisively in favor of Obama. McCain's response to the crisis was erratic and unfocused, while Obama stuck to his disciplined script, appearing more the seasoned pro than McCain.

Campaigns always compete to frame the choice in a way that favors their side. Obama's campaign had always wanted voters to view the economy and the Bush administration's record as the deciding issues; McCain wanted voters' attention focused on national security and terrorism. The economic crisis brought Obama's frame dramatically to the forefront, and it put Bush back on the front page, depressing his approval ratings further, raising public dissatisfaction with the direction of the country to as high as 90 percent in some surveys, and driving Republican Party favorability ratings back down to an average of 38 percent for the remainder of the campaign.<sup>31</sup> By mid-September, Obama had reassumed a lead in the polls that he never relinquished (Figure 8).

<sup>31</sup> Survey data on party favorability, assessments of the direction of the country, and the presidential matchups are from <http://www.pollingreport.com>, accessed 5 December 2008.

FIGURE 8  
McCain vs. Obama



Source: See footnote 26.

The McCain campaign's adoption of "Joe the Plumber" as a mascot in its final weeks was emblematic of its ultimate futility.

On the question of who was the better prospective agent of change, late October and early November polls gave Obama an advantage ranging from 17 to 27 percentage points.<sup>32</sup> In the national exit poll, voters split 48-48 on the question of whether McCain would continue Bush's policies. Those who said he would went for Obama, 90-8; those who said he would not went for McCain, 85-13. That is, not only did voters who thought a McCain administration would constitute a third Bush administration vote overwhelmingly for Obama, but about 90 percent of those who voted for McCain did so in the belief that his administration would *not* be a continuation of Bush's.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that the Obama campaign was fully prepared to exploit the financial meltdown's effects and to keep the economic frame and the theme of "Change We Can Believe In" in the public eye. By declining public funds, it avoided the accompanying spending limits, and with its highly success-

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.pollingreport.com/wh08.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Calculated from the national exit poll, reported at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>, accessed 5 December 2008.

ful fundraising effort, it was able to outspend the McCain campaign and its Republican allies by a wide margin. Obama's operatives made major investments in registering and mobilizing new voters in swing states, targeting young and African American citizens in particular. These efforts evidently helped move some states into the Democratic column. Nationally, voter turnout rose by 1.6 percentage points between 2004 and 2008; in the nine states won by Bush in 2004 but Obama in 2008, turnout increased by an average of 3.4 points, including increases of 8.0 points in North Carolina, 7.1 points in Virginia, and 4.6 points in Indiana, compared to the average of 0.8 points for states that kept their red or blue coloring.<sup>34</sup>

#### DETERMINANTS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

The shift in presidential voting to the Democratic side between 2004 and 2008 was broadly based, reflecting the breadth of popular discontent with the status quo. According to exit poll data, Obama attracted greater support than John Kerry among all groups except for white voters in deep Southern states.<sup>35</sup> For a summary view of the determinants of the presidential vote in 2008, I analyzed data from the 2008 CCES, which included questions regarding the presidential as well as congressional races. Table 2 displays the results of a logit model estimating the presidential vote choice as a function of the respondent's party identification, ideology, and opinion of Bush's job performance, along with several demographic variables expected to be relevant in 2008. Logit analysis is akin to regression analysis but is better suited to estimate the effects of independent variables on a dependent variable that takes only two discrete values, as in this case a vote for Obama or for McCain. Unlike regression coefficients, logit coefficients do not allow a simple intuitive interpretation, but they can be used to estimate how each independent variable affects the probability that the dependent variable takes one rather than the other of its two possible values. Thus in Table 2, the potential effect of each variable is indicated by the predicted probability of a vote for Obama at the variable's lowest and highest values, when the remaining variables are set at their mean values. For example, with the variables other than party identification set at their means, a strong Republican's probability of voting for Obama was .08, while a strong Democrat's was .89. The difference in that probability between respondents at the extremes of the party identification scale is thus estimated to be .81.<sup>36</sup>

The results of this analysis underline the dominance of partisanship and ideology in shaping the presidential vote in 2008; the estimated effect of assess-

<sup>34</sup> Based on Michael McDonald's data available at [http://elections.gmu.edu/voter\\_turnout.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm), accessed 19 February 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Larry Bartels, "How Obama Survived the Culture War," manuscript, 10 November 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Estimated using Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King, *CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results*, 2001. Accessed at <http://gking.harvard.edu/clarify/docs/clarify.html>, 5 September 2007.

TABLE 2  
*Logit Model of Presidential Voting in 2008*

	Probability of a Vote for Obama				
	Coefficient	SE	Variable Setting		Total Effect <sup>a</sup>
			Low	High	
Party identification (7-point scale)	.75***	.02	.08	.89	.81
Ideology (5-point scale)	1.00***	.04	.15	.90	.75
Approve of Bush's performance (5-point scale)	-1.07***	.03	.78	.05	-.73
Under 30 years old (1, 0)	.90***	.08	.49	.70	.21
African American (1, 0)	2.45***	.16	.46	.91	.45
White (1, 0)	.08	.09	.51	.53	.02
Income <\$30,000 (1, 0)	.24**	.07	.51	.57	.06
High school or less (1, 0)	.50**	.15	.48	.60	.12
College graduate (1, 0)	.26***	.07	.50	.57	.07
High school X White (1, 0)	-.82***	.16	.58	.38	-.20
Constant	.45***	.10			
Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	22,146.40				
Percent correctly predicted (null = 54.5)	92.7				
Pseudo $R^2$	.71				
Number of cases	22,566				

<sup>a</sup>Estimated change in probability with the other variables set at their mean values.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Note: The dependent variable takes the value of 1 if respondent voted for Obama, 0 if for McCain. Party identification is scored in the Democratic direction, ideology in the liberal direction; approval of Bush runs from strongly disapprove (-2) to strongly approve (2); the other variables are dichotomous, as indicated.

ments of Bush's performance was very large as well. All three of these variables are of course highly correlated with each other. The results also confirm Obama's attraction to younger and African American voters over and above the effects of their political identities and opinions. Obama also did better among people with family incomes below \$30,000 (income was unrelated to the vote above this level), and he did better among voters in the least-educated (high school or less) and most-educated (college graduates) segments of the population ("some college" is the omitted category). But note from the interaction term (high school X white, indicating a white high school graduate) that he drew less support from lower-educated white voters than would be predicted by their other demographic characteristics and political views, evidence that the McCain campaign's pursuit of working-class whites was not entirely ineffective.

## THE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

### *Strategic Politicians*

Even when national conditions favor a party as strongly as they did the Democrats in 2006 and 2008, they do not automatically add to its congressional votes and seats. Elections are still fought at the local level, where the relative quality

of candidates and the resources at their disposal determine, among other things, the extent to which national issues shape voting decisions. Voters rarely reject an incumbent without the option of a qualified replacement; national issues need effective local sponsorship to have their full impact on voters' decisions. The electoral effects of national conditions are thus mediated by strategic political actors making decisions about running for office and investing resources in campaigns. If a favored party fails to recruit qualified candidates or to fund their campaigns adequately, it will not reap the full benefit of auspicious national conditions.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, incumbents of a party facing a bleak year can magnify the damage by making the strategic decision to retire, for a contest is much more likely to attract a seasoned and well-financed out-party candidate and thus to change party hands when not defended by an incumbent.<sup>38</sup> The Democrats' takeover of the House and Senate in 2006 immediately made service in Congress less satisfying to Republicans. Just as the Republicans' victory in 1994 prompted an abnormally large Democratic exodus from Congress in 1996, the insults of minority status made retirement more attractive to Republicans in 2008. The attraction was all the greater because conditions that had made 2006 such a tough year for Republicans had continued to deteriorate, making reelection less certain and a quick recapture of majority status most unlikely. The loss of three additional Republican seats in special elections held in early 2008—including the seat vacated by former Speaker Dennis Hastert in Illinois—signaled how bad conditions were for the Party. As a result, five Republican senators and 26 Republican representatives chose not to seek reelection. Of the latter, only three left to pursue higher office (none succeeded); the remaining 23 retired from electoral politics.

Among Democrats, in contrast, not a single senator and only six House members retired, and three of the six left to run for the Senate (two succeeded). After primary defeats and a death further culled the ranks of reelection-seeking incumbents, Republicans were left defending 29 open House seats to the Democrats' 7, and 5 open Senate seats to the Democrats' none. By anticipating a bad year for their Party, departing Republican incumbents helped to bring it about. As Table 1 shows, Democrats won 12 of the 29 open Republican seats (41 percent) but only 14 of 170 (8 percent) of the seats defended by Republican incumbents. They also picked up 3 of the 5 open Senate seats, compared to 5 of the 18 defended by Republican incumbents. The imbalance of open seats between the parties—most lopsided of the entire post-World War II era—thus both reflected and contributed to the Republicans' woes in 2008.

The same conditions that inspired Republican incumbents to retire helped Democrats attract capable candidates and finance their campaigns. Looking

<sup>37</sup> Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 19–34.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections*, 41–45.

forward to 2008, Democratic leaders, potential candidates, and associated activists had reason to believe that conditions were as conducive to success as they had been in 2006, and they acted accordingly. Just as in 2006, the Democrats fielded high-quality candidates for most of the potentially vulnerable Republican seats and generously funded almost all of their campaigns. And again as in 2006, despite an expanding field of Republican targets, Democratic committees had sufficient resources to provide major financial assistance to every promising candidacy that came to their attention, and very few were overlooked.

### *The Balance of Campaign Resources*

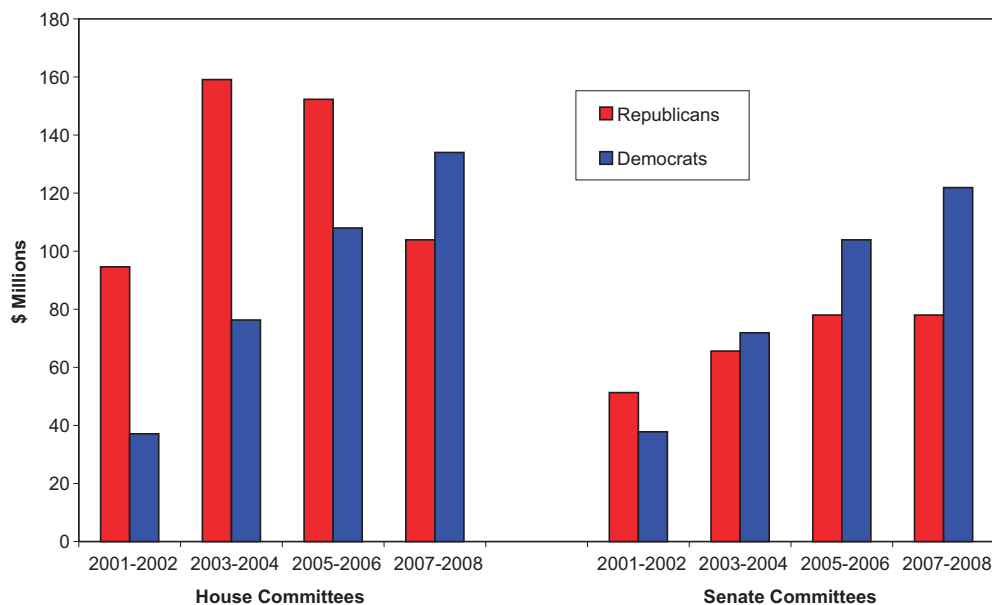
The same sentiments that fueled Barack Obama's prodigious fundraising also contributed to the Democrats' financial advantage in House and Senate elections. Preliminary totals reported through 15 October 2008 indicate that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) substantially outraised and outspent their Republican counterparts, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC). As Figure 9 shows, the DCCC raised more money than the NRCC for the first time in the past four election cycles, an advantage only partially attributable to its new status as the majority party; on the Senate side, the Democrats' advantage was even greater than it had been in 2006. Most of the money donated to party campaign committees is now spent on "independent" campaigns on behalf of candidates. Through election day, the DCCC had spent \$75.2 million independently for their candidates, compared to the NRCC's \$22.8 million; the DSCC had spent \$70.1 million compared to the NRSC's \$36.2 million.<sup>39</sup>

Distributing money efficiently is as important to a party as raising it in the first place, although an abundance of funds makes it easier to risk investing in the kind of long-shot races that can produce surprise victories. In 2008, the DCCC spent more than \$1 million on 14 of the 17 Democratic candidates for open Republican seats who won at least 45 percent of the vote and thus could be considered at least potentially competitive; these candidates were also abundantly funded by individual donors and political action committees. The remaining 3 spent more than \$1 million in money they raised for their own campaigns. The Democrats won 12 of these 17 races, and none of the losers could blame the defeat on a shortage of funds. The DCCC spent more than \$1 million to bolster their only candidate for an open Democratic seat where the outcome was in doubt.

The DCCC also spent more than \$1 million on independent campaigns for 15 challengers to incumbent Republicans and between \$290,000 and \$1 million on another 11. All 14 successful Democratic challengers were among the ben-

<sup>39</sup> Campaign Finance Institute, "A First Look at Money in the House and Senate Elections," 6 November 2008, accessed at <http://www.cfinst.org/pr/prRelease.aspx?ReleaseID=215>, 27 January 2009.

FIGURE 9  
*House and Senate Campaign Committee Receipts Through Mid-October*



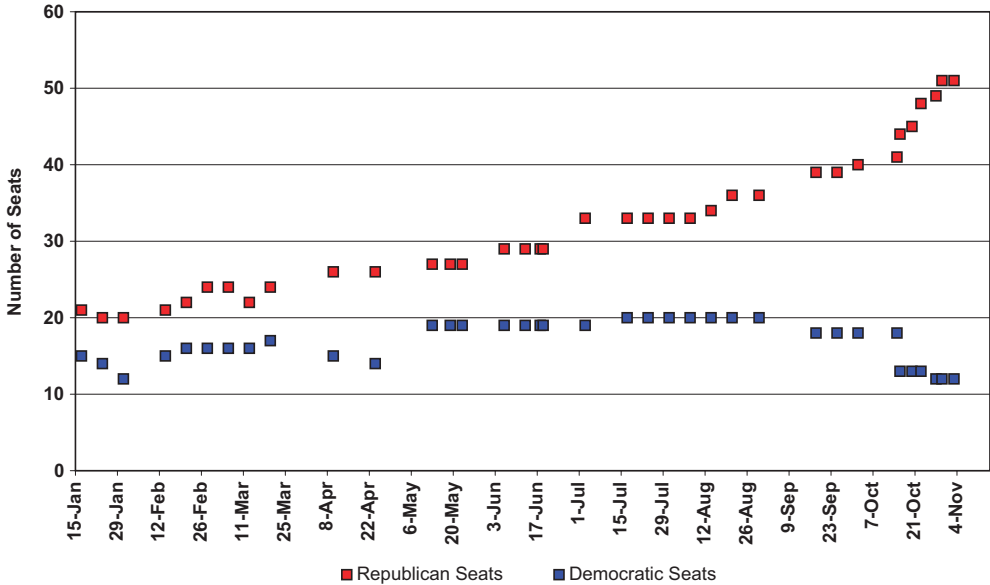
Source: Federal Election Commission; at <http://www.fec.gov/press/press2008/20081029party/20081029party.shtml>, accessed January 27, 2009.

eficiaries of their Party's independent spending, which averaged more than \$1.3 million for these candidates, increasing the average total amount spent to elect them by 63 percent (from \$2.1 million to \$3.5 million). Of the 16 Democratic House challengers who won at least 45 percent of the vote but fell short of victory, 7 were helped by major independent party spending efforts and another 3 were well-funded by other sources. The remaining 6 had campaigns costing less than \$1 million, and at least a couple of them must be considered missed Democratic opportunities.<sup>40</sup> Overall though, in 42 of the 48 districts where the major party vote ended up in the 45–55 percent range, the Democratic candidates had their campaigns financed to the tune of at least \$1 million.

On the whole, then, the DCCC invested shrewdly, keeping pace with a field of opportunities that kept expanding during the campaign, exemplified by the data in Figure 10, which displays trends in the number of competitive House districts (those with races rated as tossups, leaning to one of the parties, or likely to go to the rival party) according to the Cook Report's periodic pre-

<sup>40</sup> William Hedrick won 48.8 percent of the vote against Ken Calvert in California's 44<sup>th</sup> district despite spending only \$191,466; Joseph Larkin won 46.9 percent of the vote against Thaddeus McCotter in Michigan's 11<sup>th</sup> district despite spending only \$28,957; neither was treated to any independent party spending.

FIGURE 10  
*House Seats at Risk According to the Cook Report*



Source: [http://www.cookpolitical.com/charts/house/competitive\\_2008-11-03\\_17-12-33.php](http://www.cookpolitical.com/charts/house/competitive_2008-11-03_17-12-33.php).

election assessments of the races. The number of seats in play grew gradually from January through the end of August, with Republicans always defending the larger number. After that, however the number of at-risk Republican seats rose steeply, from 36 in August to 51 in November, while the number of Democratic seats at risk dropped from 20 to 13. The banking crisis and the ensuing economic turmoil is the obvious explanation for these developments. Democrats ended up winning 26 of the at-risk Republican seats—more than were classified as being at risk at the beginning of the election year.

The NRCC did not have the money to keep up with the DCCC, which outspent it in 37 of the 40 Republican-held districts where the Democrats won at least 45 percent of the vote and both parties funded independent campaigns. Most of the money the NRCC did spend was deployed defensively; 66 percent of its independent expenditures were aimed at holding Republican seats, whereas 72 percent of the DCCC's much larger independent spending budget was invested in taking them away. Republican incumbents facing serious challenges were, as is almost invariably the case, amply funded;<sup>41</sup> for example, 13 of the 14 losers had received more than \$2 million in contributions and independent campaign help as of 15 October, and half had received more than \$3 million. The remaining Republican incumbent's funds were listed at \$1.3 million

<sup>41</sup> Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 46–51.

in the preliminary data. Republican losses, then, could not be attributed to a shortage of campaign money.

The NRCC invested in substantial independent campaigns for only 12 Republican challengers (sums ranging from \$200,000 to \$1.3 million), 10 of whom were trying to take back seats the Republicans had lost in 2006 or in subsequent special elections. Of the 10 targeted freshman Democrats, eight represented districts where Bush had won more than 53 percent of the vote in 2004. The Republican challenger succeeded in winning 3 of the reddest of these districts (Kansas 2<sup>nd</sup> and Louisiana 6<sup>th</sup>, where Bush had won 60 percent of the vote in 2004, and Texas 22<sup>nd</sup>, where he won 65 percent) as well as retaking Florida's 16<sup>th</sup> district from a freshman Democrat undone by a sex scandal and winning Louisiana's 2<sup>nd</sup> district in a December runoff against William Jefferson, under federal indictment for corrupt activities. NRCC officials distributed their funds at least as efficiently as their DCCC rivals, but their opportunities to take Democratic seats were severely constricted by the political climate, and their more-limited resources were devoted mainly to damage control.

### *Senate Campaigns*

Democrats also pursued Republican Senate seats aggressively. The roster of Democratic contenders for the 12 Republican Senate seats that were listed at any time during the election year as being in play by the Cook Political Report included two governors, a former governor, two U.S. representatives, three state legislators, and the mayor of a state's largest city. Only two of the twelve were novices, one of whom was comedian Al Franken, who won a hair-breadth victory in Minnesota. Other Democratic victors included Governors Mark Warner (Virginia) and Jeanne Shaheen (New Hampshire), U.S. representatives (and cousins) Mark Udall (Colorado) and Tom Udall (New Mexico), state legislators Kay Hagen (North Carolina) and Jeff Merkley (Oregon), and Anchorage mayor Mark Begich (Alaska). In contrast, nine of the twelve Senate Democrats seeking reelection faced Republicans who were political amateurs, as did 5 of the 11 Republicans whose states were never considered in play.

The competitive Senate candidates of both parties were amply funded, but Democrats enjoyed a modest advantage because the DSCC raised so much more money than the NRSC. Republicans held a small edge in spending by the candidates' campaigns in contests for the 10 seats in which the winner's margin was less than 55 percent (9 held by Republicans, 1 by Democrat Mary Landrieu of Louisiana), but once party independent spending is added to the mix, the advantage belonged to the Democrats (Table 3). Independent party spending accounted for 43 percent of the funds spent for Democrats in these races, 24 percent for the Republicans. The Democrat won 7 of these contests. Note that the winners enjoyed a huge spending advantage in the lopsided races and that independent party spending occurred almost exclusively in the close contests (more than 99 percent of each party's total).

TABLE 3  
*Money in the 2008 Senate Campaigns*

<i>Competitiveness (Democrat Vote)</i>	<i>Party of Candidate</i>	<i>Average Campaign Spending (\$ Million)</i>			<i>Percent from Party</i>
		<i>Candidate's Campaign</i>	<i>Party Independent</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Less than 45% (12)	Democrat	1.6	0.1	1.7	6%
	Republican	5.0	0.0	5.0	0%
45%–55% (10)	Democrat	9.1	6.9	16.0	43%
	Republican	11.1	3.6	14.8	24%
More than 55% (13)	Democrat	6.6	0.0	6.6	0%
	Republican	1.1	0.0	1.1	0%

*Source:* Data are from the Federal Election Commission.

*Note:* Some candidate reports are incomplete and the party spending figures are those reported through 6 November, so final totals will be higher.

In sum, the party operatives who controlled campaign resources followed strategies that reflected the political conditions prevailing in 2008. Money flowed to Democrats competing to take House and Senate seats away from Republicans. Democratic committees and candidates were able to raise unprecedented sums because their activists were eager to change the national regime and optimistic about their chances of doing so. Republican committees and candidates faced bleak prospects at the polls and gloom at the grass roots; they spent their money largely in defense of threatened incumbents and seats opened by Republican retirements. The most such a strategy can accomplish is to limit the damage.

As in 2006, Democratic gains in the Senate depended to a large extent on the favor of independent voters (Table 4). According to the exit polls, the Democrat won all 6 of the 10 closest races where they won the larger share of independents, but lost 3 of the 4 where they did not (North Carolina was the exception). Of the 34 contested Senate elections in 2008, the winner had an advantage among independents in 32. Not surprisingly, winners also usually attracted more partisan defectors than losers, doing so in 30 of the contests, with two ties.

### *The Obama Effect*

How did the presidential contest affect the congressional races? Although the causal mechanisms are difficult to untangle, the electoral fates of Obama and Democratic congressional candidates were clearly linked. Obama won the White House by carrying all of the states that had voted for John Kerry in 2004 plus 9 that had voted for Bush. To a remarkable degree, Democratic gains in the 2008 congressional elections coincided with Obama's victories (Table 5). In the House elections, Democrats picked up 4 seats in states won by Bush and

TABLE 4  
*Partisan and Independent Voting in the 2008 Senate Elections (Percentages)*

		Loyal Republicans	Loyal Democrats	Independents Voting Democratic
<i>Competitive Races</i>				
Won by the Democrat				
<b>Alaska</b>	Stevens (R) vs. Begich (D)	77	87	53–40
<b>Colorado</b>	Schaffer (R) vs. Udall (D)	86	93	55–40
<b>Louisiana</b>	Kennedy (R) vs. Landrieu (D)	84	87	51–45
<b>Minnesota</b>	Coleman (R) vs. Franken (D)	85	79	38–33
<b>New Hampshire</b>	Sununu (R) vs. Shaheen (D)	91	91	55–41
<b>North Carolina</b>	Dole (R) vs. Hagan (D)	89	90	39–53
<b>Oregon</b>	Smith (R) vs. Merkley (D)	88	83	48–43
	Average:	86	87	48–42
Won by the Republican				
<b>Georgia</b>	Chambliss (R) vs. Martin (D)	92	91	40–54
<b>Kentucky</b>	McConnell (R) vs. Lunsford (D)	86	76	42–58
<b>Mississippi</b>	Wicker (R) vs. Musgrave (D)	89	84	40–59
	Average:	89	84	41–57
	<i>Safe Democrats (Average of 12)</i>	75	93	62–37
	<i>Safe Republicans (Average of 12)</i>	91	77	35–62

Source: Exit Polls reported at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main>.

McCain but also lost 4, for no net gain. They picked up 9 seats in states that were blue in both presidential elections but did even better in states that switched from Bush to Obama, netting 12 seats (their only loss in any of these states resulted from the sex scandal in Florida). The Democrat took all 4 Republican Senate seats in states that switched from Bush to Obama and 3 of the 4 seats in the consistently blue states. Their only victory in a consistently red state came in Alaska, where Senator Ted Stevens's felony conviction for corrupt behavior shortly before the election no doubt made the difference.

What is the source of this connection between the presidential and congressional election results? On its face, it looks like a classic coattail effect, with the victorious presidential contender pulling his party's down-ticket candidates into office on the strength of his popularity. On the other hand, Obama ran behind the successful Democratic Senate candidates in Alaska, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Virginia and ran clearly ahead only in New Hampshire and Minnesota. Data on individual voters from the 2008 CCES provide some insight into this relationship as well as the basis of the congressional voting more generally. Table 6 reports the results of logit models estimating the House and Senate votes as a function of the candidates' incumbency status and the respondent's party identification, ideology, assessments of Bush's job performance, and presidential vote. As in Table 2, the columns to the right display estimated effects of each variable or combination of variables, measured as the difference in the probability of voting for the Democrat moving from their highest to lowest values, with the remaining variables set at their means.

TABLE 5  
*Democrats' Success in Campaigns for Republican-held Seats, 2008*

<i>House</i>						
<i>Election Results, 2004 and 2008</i>	<i>Number of States</i>	<i>Number of Republican Districts</i>	<i>Taken by Democrats in 2008</i>	<i>Lost by Democrats in 2008</i>	<i>Net</i>	<i>Net Percentage Gained</i>
Won by Bush and McCain	22	83	4	4	0	0.0
Won by Kerry and Obama	19	62	9	0	9	14.5
Won by Bush and Obama	9	54	13	1	12	22.2

<i>Senate</i>				
<i>Election Results, 2004 and 2008</i>	<i>Number of States</i>	<i>Republican Senate Seats Up</i>	<i>Taken by Democrats in 2008</i>	<i>Percentage Gained</i>
Won by Bush and McCain	22	15	1	6.6
Won by Kerry and Obama	19	4	3	75.0
Won by Bush and Obama	9	4	4	100.0

Source: Compiled by author.

As in the presidential vote equation (Table 2), party identification had by far the largest effect on the House and Senate vote, and the effects of partisanship and ideology combined were very large indeed. As usual, the impact of incumbency was greater in House than in Senate races; incumbency provided Senate Democratic candidates only a small advantage, but mainly because the Democrats running for the open Republican seats did so well. They received 57 percent of the vote in this survey, compared to 63 percent for Democratic incumbents. Evaluations of Bush also had a significant effect, but the presidential vote choice was a much stronger predictor of House and Senate voting. Approval of Bush and the presidential vote are of course highly correlated (at .64 in this survey), and, as noted in Table 2, the presidential vote was strongly conditioned by evaluations of Bush. Thus, when the presidential vote is omitted from the equations, the estimated effect of opinions on Bush more than doubles. Both the presidential vote and views of Bush are of course strongly related to partisanship and ideology, but their effects remain substantial when these variables are controlled.<sup>42</sup>

Although it is abundantly evident that voters supporting Obama were also, other things equal, more likely to vote for congressional Democrats, the basis of the relationship remains ambiguous. Voters could have responded to the

<sup>42</sup>I replicated these analyses with data from the Advance Release of the ANES 2008-2009 Panel Study and got very similar results, except that the effects of approval of Bush and a vote for Obama were more evenly balanced. Matthew DeBell, Jon A. Krosnick, Arthur Lupia, and Caroline Roberts, *Advance Release of the 2008-2009 ANES Panel Study* (Palo Alto, CA and Ann Arbor, MI: Stanford University and the University of Michigan, 2009).

TABLE 6  
*Logit Model of Congressional Voting in 2008*

	Probability of a Vote for Democrat					
	Coefficient	SE	Variable Setting		Total Effect <sup>a</sup>	
			Low	High		
<b>House elections</b>						
Democratic incumbent (1, 0)	.74***	.09	.48	.66	.18	} .35
Republican incumbent (1, 0)	-.76***	.09	.65	.46	-.19	
Party identification (7-point scale)	.47***	.02	.22	.82	.60	} .86
Ideology (5-point scale)	.59***	.04	.30	.82	.52	
Approve of Bush's performance (5-point scale)	-.28***	.03	.63	.38	-.25	} .64
Voted for Obama (1, 0)	2.01***	.07	.31	.77	.46	
Constant	-1.09***	.09				
Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	15,921.23					
Percent correctly predicted (null = 53.9)	91.2					
Pseudo $R^2$	.61					
Number of cases	18,904					
<b>Senate elections</b>						
Democratic incumbent (1, 0)	.35**	.13	.56	.65	.09	} .28
Republican incumbent (1, 0)	-.84***	.12	.69	.49	-.20	
Party Identification (7-point scale)	.50***	.02	.22	.86	.64	} .84
Ideology (5-point scale)	.49***	.05	.37	.81	.44	
Approve of Bush's performance (5-point scale)	-.24***	.03	.66	.42	-.24	} .72
Voted for Obama (1, 0)	2.72***	.10	.26	.84	.58	
Constant	-.97***	.11				
Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	10,083.00					
Percent correctly predicted (null = 54.3)	92.1					
Pseudo $R^2$	.67					
Number of cases	10,903					

<sup>a</sup>Estimated change in probability with the other variables set at their mean values.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Data are from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (see footnote 16).

Note: The dependent variable takes the value of 1 if respondent voted for the Democrat, 0 if for the Republican. Party identification is scored in the Democratic direction, ideology in the liberal direction; approval of Bush runs from strongly disapprove (-2) to strongly approve (2); the other variables are dichotomous, as indicated.

strongly pro-Democratic national conditions described earlier in casting both their presidential and congressional ballots either with or without consciously linking the two. On the other hand, the extensive work undertaken by the Obama campaign to register and turn out new voters in the battleground states may have brought new voters into the Democratic congressional ranks as well. Analysis of aggregate election data offers some circumstantial support for this idea, revealing a positive and significant relationship between the change in a state's turnout rate and size of the vote swing to the state's Democratic House candidate between 2006 and 2008.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> A one-point increase in turnout is associated with a 0.59 (SE = 0.13) increase in the Democrats' share of the vote; the coefficient remains above 0.5 under a variety of controls.

## THE REFERENDUM: A SUMMARY

Taken with the other evidence examined here, the survey results confirm that popular responses to the Bush administration had both direct and indirect electoral consequences in the 2008 elections. The powerful effect of partisanship underlines the importance of the shift in mass party identification in the Democrats' favor during Bush's second term. Obama's special appeal to younger voters reflected not only his personal qualities, but also the disdain for the President and his Party that had become prevalent among voters under 30 even before Obama's arrival on the scene. Disaffection with Bush was a major force behind the widespread enthusiasm for the Obama candidacy among other ordinary Democrats as well, stoking his campaign's record-setting fundraising, which financed, among other things, the intensive mobilization effort in targeted states that benefited congressional Democrats as well as Obama. The continuing value of incumbency in the congressional contests points to the price Republicans paid for the imbalance of open House and Senate seats left by their incumbents' retirement decisions. Beyond these indirect effects, opinions of Bush's performance continued to have a very large direct effect on the presidential vote and substantial effects on individual House and Senate vote choices as well, which with his approval ratings in the 20s could only add to the Democrats' vote totals. Obama's victory and the Democratic House and Senate majorities, elected in 2006 and enlarged in 2008 through these multiple pathways, are the most consequential political legacies of the Bush administration.

## PARTISANSHIP, THE NEW ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS, AND PROSPECTS FOR 2010

Both Obama and McCain, fully aware of the public's unhappiness with the unrestrained partisanship of the Bush era, sought to portray themselves as leaders who could reach across party lines. But the results of the 2008 election provided little evidence of softening of partisan sentiments or alignments. Party line voting continued at high levels. The correlations between the district-level presidential vote in 2000 or 2004 and the House vote in 2008 were as strong as in 2004 and 2006.<sup>44</sup> The same party won the Senate seat and the presidential vote in 80 percent of the states, the highest incidence of consistent partisan results in at least 50 years; for the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, the number of senators representing states won by their party's most recent presidential candidate also reached a maximum for this period, 77. Thus the trend toward greater partisan coherence in voting for president and Congress that was observed during the Clinton and

<sup>44</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, "Congress: The Second Wave" in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 2008* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009), 115. The 2008 district-level presidential vote is not yet available for analysis.

TABLE 7

*The 2004 Presidential Vote and the Distribution of House Seats, 2004–2008*

	<i>John Kerry's Share of the Major Party Presidential Vote the District, 2004</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Less than 47%</i>	<i>47%–53%</i>	<i>More than 53%</i>	
Number of seats	226	55	154	435
After 2004				
Democrats	29	26	147	202
Republicans	197	29	7	233
After 2006				
Democrats	47	34	152	233
Republicans	179	21	2	202
After 2008				
Democrats	63	42	152	257
Republicans	163	13	2	178

*Source:* Compiled by author.

Bush administrations was not reversed in 2008, a sign that, although the relative strength of the two parties has shifted significantly to the Democrats' advantage, the pattern of partisan division characteristic of the last two decades remains in place.

The durability of the Democrats' gains in mass partisanship remains in question, and the answer will go far in determining whether Democrats can hold on to their congressional majorities in 2010. Going into the 2008 House elections, Democrats already held almost all of the districts whose underlying partisanship was clearly Democratic. Just as in 2006, their pickups in 2008 were concentrated in districts that had in the past leaned Republican (Table 7). I estimate past district partisanship here using the 2004 presidential vote, with districts sorted into three categories depending on whether John Kerry's share of the major-party vote was less than 47 percent (Republican-leaning districts), more than 53 percent (Democrat-leaning districts), or somewhere in between (balanced districts). Republicans held only 7 seats in Democratic-leaning districts after 2004, and lost 5 of them in 2006 and 1 more in 2008. Aside from Joseph Cao, who took Jefferson's overwhelmingly Democratic seat in Louisiana, only Mike Castle, who holds Delaware's single House district, continues to serve as a Republican in a Democratic-leaning constituency, winning 62 percent of the local vote in 2008 while Obama was winning 63 percent.

Democrats added 16 seats in the balanced districts in 2006 and 2008, with their share of these districts rising from 44 percent in 2004 to 76 percent in 2008. But even if Democrats had won all of the Democratic-leaning districts and all of the balanced districts, they would still have fallen short of a majority. They needed to win Republican-leaning districts as well, because Republicans hold a significant structural advantage in the competition for House seats: regular Republican voters are distributed more efficiently (from the Party's perspective)

across states and districts than are Democratic voters. Part of the reason is demographic: Democrats win a disproportionate share of minority and other urban voters, who tend to be concentrated in cities with lopsided Democratic majorities.<sup>45</sup> But it is also the effect of deliberate partisan gerrymanders conducted by the Republicans in states where they controlled redistricting after the 2000 census.<sup>46</sup> Democrats have thus faced an uphill battle in trying to add House seats (Senate seats, too—the same Republican efficiency advantage applies to states). It took two successive elections with strongly pro-Democratic national conditions for them to achieve their current majorities.

Of the net additional Democratic House seats, 34 came from districts where Bush won more than 53 percent of the 2004 vote, and these districts now comprise a quarter of their total holdings. This circumstance will have the effect of moderating the Democratic caucus, because Democrats representing such districts are, of political necessity, considerably more moderate than other Democrats.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, more than half of the Democratic senators who replaced Republicans in 2006 and 2008 are from states in the South or the Mountain West, and they, too, will have to compile moderate records or risk defeat. These circumstances make a sharp lurch to the left unlikely in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. If Obama's inclination is to govern from near left of center, he will have allies, and if his liberal supporters object, he can point to the real constraints imposed by the configuration of the Democratic House and Senate coalitions.

The same electoral processes that moderate the Democratic caucus in the House make the Republican caucus more conservative. The last two elections have been hard on (relatively) moderate Republicans because they typically represent the kind of district a moderate Democrat can win, at least under favorable circumstances. And of course, circumstances were very favorable to Democrats in the two most recent elections. Even 11-term Connecticut representative Christopher Shays, with the most moderate voting record of any Republican in the House, could not survive the Democratic tide in 2008. With

<sup>45</sup> For example, according to the CBS News/*New York Times* Poll of 20–25 August 2004, Democratic identifiers outnumber Republicans nearly five to one in New York City. See “New York City and the Republican Convention” accessed at [http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/CBSNews\\_polls/nyc.pdf](http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/CBSNews_polls/nyc.pdf), 6 November 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “The Congress: The Structural Basis of Republican Success” in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 2004* (Washington, D.C., Congressional Quarterly Press, 2005), 164–166.

<sup>47</sup> According to Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's standard measure of roll call ideology (the DW-NOMINATE score, based on roll call votes and scaled to a range of 1.0 for most conservative to –1.0 for most liberal), their median DW-NOMINATE score in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress was –.218, compared to –.337 for Democrats from balanced districts and –.480 for Democrats from Democratic-leaning districts. Data for the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress are available at <http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>, courtesy of Keith T. Poole. For an account of the methodology for DW-NOMINATE, see Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–57.

his defeat, Republicans lost their last remaining district in New England, once the most Republican region of the country.<sup>48</sup>

Because the election moved both congressional parties to the right, the influx of moderate Democrats does not necessarily portend a reduction in party polarization. Democrats representing Republican-leaning districts may have to compile moderate records to win reelection, but few Republicans, at least in the House, are under any pressure to do the same; their unanimous opposition to Obama's economic stimulus package is thus not surprising.

Moderation, although essential, may not be enough to maintain the large Democratic majorities in future elections. Democrats have had the wind at their backs in two successive elections, but now that their Party bears full responsibility for the government's performance under the most difficult circumstances faced by any incoming president and Congress since the 1930s, they cannot expect political conditions to favor them a third time running; the contrary is much more likely. Their fates will depend heavily on whether the economy improves sufficiently and on the public's broader evaluation of Obama's job performance, for 2010 will offer voters a fresh opportunity to engage in a referendum on an administration. Democratic prospects will also depend on the durability of the Party's recent gains in mass partisanship; their best hope in this regard is that the youngest cohort of voters, who responded to the Bush era by moving in droves to the Democrats' ranks, will continue to bear the imprint of that political initiation.

The set of seats up in 2010 should help Democrats retain their Senate majority, because only 2 of the 16 seats Democrats will defend are in states won by John McCain, while Republicans must defend 19 seats, 6 in states that went to Obama. On the House side, however, Democrats will have to defend seats in 63 Republican-leaning districts (Table 6), including 16 that had given Bush more than 60 percent of the vote in 2004. The Republicans' structural advantage in House elections—even greater now than it was back in 1994<sup>49</sup>—provides the foundation for a major Republican comeback should the Democratic regime falter.

<sup>48</sup> The median DW-NOMINATE score in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress for departing Republicans was .423, compared to .538 for those reelected to the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress; Shay's score was .241.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobson, "Referendum," 3.