

Voter behavior can explain midterm mood shift

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Based on news accounts predicting Republican gains in both houses of Congress and more energized GOP voters in Tuesday's midterm election, it appears as though the nation's political landscape could change again -- just two years after the Democrats won sweeping victories while promoting change on the campaign trail.

So why the potential shift among the American electorate? Dave Peterson, an Iowa State University associate professor of political science and researcher on voter behavior, has seen the country's political mood change for a variety of reasons.

"The Democrats in 2008 did about as well as they could have possibly imagined," said Peterson, author of a 2009 American Journal of Political Science study on campaign learning and vote determinants. "In 2006 and 2008, their success rate was ridiculously high and they won basically every winnable district in America. And so at some point, there has to be a sort of regression to the mean -- a give back to the Republicans -- just because it's unsustainable to have a string of elections that are that one-sided.

"Top it off with a really bad economy where the incumbent party's going to get blamed, and then they (the Democrats) are in a lot of trouble," he said.

How expectations influence voters

Some political pundits have suggested that expectations were too high for President Obama to fix the nation's serious [economic problems](#) so quickly, resulting in the current backlash against the party in power. Zlatan Krizan, an Iowa State assistant professor of psychology, studied the expectations and preferences of student voters heading into the 2008 presidential election in a study he published earlier this year in [Psychological Science](#). The paper looked at how expectations and preferences interrelate among voters over time prior to the election.

"And basically what the paper shows is that over the last month, when the final sorting occurs, people's expectations end up neatly falling in terms of where their preferences are -- controlling for their prior preferences," Krizan said. "So it would stand to reason that in this election, people's expectations are higher for some of the Republicans because there's a perceived disappointment with their recent Democratic choices."

Another reason the Democrats may be in trouble with voters, according to Peterson, is because some of their brightest stars may have strategically chosen not to run.

"A lot of what determines the shape of Congress is which side gets better candidates for open seats, or better challengers. And these people choosing to run are strategic," Peterson said. "And so if you were a Republican on the fence in 2006 or 2008, running and losing makes you less viable as a future candidate in some respects. So to a certain extent, you have some people waiting until the time is better.

"By contrast, every Democrat who was thinking about running for Congress ran in 2006 and 2008," he continued. "So in addition to the two massive waves giving the Democrats all the empty seats, it also emptied the bench, so to speak, because everyone who thought about running should have chosen those two years. And the Republicans have been

holding back and not running as much, and so this is the year where every good candidate for the Republicans should come out of the woodwork and challenge those Democratic incumbents."

Optimism in the face of defeat

Regardless of their strategic reasons for running, the campaign still may not go as planned for some candidates. Krizan says voters remain optimistic about their candidate's chances, even when polling numbers suggest defeat. And he theorizes there may be a couple of reasons for that:

1. Pre-existing knowledge on the candidate. "This knowledge may lead you to like the candidate more and also lead you to conclude that other people will like the candidate more and be more likely to vote for them," he said. "That's why you expect the candidate to win."

2. The biased sampling idea. "People tend to gravitate to other people who think like them, so when they try and extrapolate how they think the general public will vote, they use their like-minded acquaintances as their basis," Krizan said. "We sort of correct for that and realize that other people are not like people we know, but we tend to under correct. So we still get a skewed picture of how other people are likely to vote."

But by Tuesday night, the nation will get a clear picture of where voters currently stand.

Provided by Iowa State University

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