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Explaining Success and Failure in the 1998 Midterm Elections: Comparing the Influence of Swing Voters and Core Party Supporters

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In the aftermath of a disappointing showing in the 1998 midterm elections, Republican party leaders and strategists have been debating what went wrong on November 3, and what the party needs to do differently in the future. Two competing explanations for the election results appear to be emerging from this debate (Berke 1998).

According to one explanation, favored by party moderates, Republicans lost ground in 1998 because moderate and independent swing voters were alienated by the party's conservative image and by the partisan tone of the presidential impeachment inquiry. The lesson to be learned from the 1998 elections, according to the proponents of this theory, is that the GOP needs to move toward the center and seek compromises with moderate Democrats.

In sharp contrast, some conservatives attribute Republican losses in the midterm elections to their party's failure to energize its partisan and ideological base. In order to be successful, these conservatives argue, the GOP needs to mobilize a larger proportion of its base by taking clear positions on issues and aggressively pursuing a conservative agenda.

One way to test the validity of these competing theories is to examine data from the 1998 voter exit polls. These polls were conducted in every state holding a Senate or gubernatorial election except Alaska and Hawaii (CNN 1998). In this

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TABLE 1
Comparisons of Winning and Losing Republican Senate Candidates in 1998

	Republican Winners (n = 15)	Republican Losers (n = 17)
Support by Independents	65.2%	37.9%
Support by Moderates	57.0%	29.6%
Republicans in Electorate	38.7%	34.4%
Conservatives in Electorate	34.8%	33.1%

Source: CNN (1998)

study, I will focus on the 32 Senate contests for which exit poll data are available because the Senate results were especially disappointing to the GOP.

Prior to the 1998 elections, Republicans had high hopes of substantially increasing the 55 Senate seats they held in 105th Congress and perhaps even attaining a "filibuster-proof" majority of 60 seats. Democrats held 18 of the 34 seats at stake in 1998, and far more of their seats appeared to be vulnerable. When the votes were tallied, however, Republicans failed to make any gains in the Senate elections.

How crucial to the success of GOP candidates in the 32 Senate races I studied was the support of moderate and independent swing voters compared with the turnout of Republican and conservative identifiers?

Republican candidates won 15 of these 32 contests. The data in Table 1 show that winning Republican candidates received much greater support from both independents and moderates than losing Republican candidates. The average winning Republican candidate received 65% of the independent vote and 57% of the moderate vote; the average los-

TABLE 2
Regression Analysis of Vote for Republican Senate Candidates in 1998

Independent Variable	B	(S.E.)	Beta	Significance
Support by Independents	.214	(.097)	.249	.05
Support by Moderates	.597	(.104)	.688	.001
Republicans in Electorate	.167	(.110)	.077	NS
Conservatives in Electorate	.309	(.103)	.137	.01
Constant	-2.346			
Adjusted R ²	.966			

Source: CNN (1998)

ing Republican candidate received only 38% of the independent vote and only 30% of the moderate vote.

In contrast, winning Republican candidates did not benefit from a substantially larger turnout of core party supporters than losing Republican candidates. In races won by Republican candidates, Republican identifiers comprised an average of 39% of the electorate and conservatives comprised an average of 35% of the electorate; in races lost by Republican candidates, Republican identifiers comprised an average of

34% of the electorate and conservatives comprised an average of 33% of the electorate.

A multivariate analysis of the exit poll data confirms these conclusions. The results of a multiple regression analysis, displayed in Table 2, show that moderate support was by far the strongest predictor of Republican electoral success, while turnout among Republicans and conservatives had much less influence on the outcomes of these contests.

My analysis of the 1998 exit polls clearly demonstrates that the disap-

pointing Republican showing in the 1998 Senate elections was due to weak support by moderate and independent swing voters, and not to low turnout by core party supporters. Republicans will be defending 19 of the 33 Senate seats at stake in the year 2000. These results indicate that the GOP's ability to maintain its position as the majority party in the Senate in the year 2000 and beyond will depend mainly on the party's ability to reach beyond its core constituency and attract the support of moderate and independent swing voters.

References

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