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Death of the Swing Seat



Democrats face twin struggles as they seek to retake the House majority they lost in 2010. First, the chamber has largely sorted itself out. With 96 percent of Democratic House members representing districts carried by President Obama and 94 percent of Republican House lawmakers representing districts won by Mitt Romney, each party pretty much has the seats God intended. The House simply doesn't have much elasticity right now. Substantial gains would either require Democrats winning a bunch of Romney districts or Republicans capturing a lot of Obama districts. Given this sorting out and the almost parliamentary-style voting we're seeing these days, either party would require one heck of a head of steam to pick up a lot of seats from the other side.

But there is a second reason why there is less elasticity in the House. As House Editor David Wasserman of *The Cook Political Report* points out, notwithstanding all the Democrats in Obama districts and Republicans in Romney districts, the chamber has fewer swing districts altogether. Using *The Cook Political Report*'s Partisan Voting Index, which ascertains how the presidential voting patterns in each congressional district differ from the national average, we took a look at the 2004 and 2008 presidential-election results in congressional districts (the final PVI incorporating the 2012 results will be available in the next month or so), and compared them with previous years. In 1998, there were 164 swing districts, which we define as a district with a Democratic or Republican PVI of 5 points or less. The swing districts outnumbered the 148 solid "R" districts where Republicans had an edge of more than 5 points, and the 123 solid "D" districts where Democrats had an edge of more than 5 points.

The number of swing districts dropped from 164 in 1998 to 132 by 2000, to 111 in 2002, then to 108 for two elections (2004 and 2006). The 2008 and 2010 cycles both had 103 swing districts, and the total slipped to 99 in the 2012 cycle. Currently, 190 districts have a Republican PVI over 5 points, 28 seats short of a majority; 146 districts have a Democratic PVI over 5 points, 72 seats short of a majority. This PVI analysis points to the inherent presidential voting patterns on a congressional-district level and ignores the strengths and weaknesses of individual candidates.

The point of all of this is not to suggest that it is impossible for Democrats to retake the House under these current district lines, only that it would be extremely difficult. These data also ignore the historic pattern of the party holding the White House typically losing a lot of House and Senate seats in the second term's midterm election; it's happened in five of the past six such "six-year-itch" elections. Of course, the natural tendency for voters to get tired of the president's party after six years could be offset in 2014 by problems with the Republican brand; so, in that sense, this will be a contest of history versus current circumstances.

A Wall Street friend used to frequently ask me, "Charlie, if you are wrong, why are you wrong?" It's always useful to question assumptions to make sure they really hold water. If Republicans somehow lost the House in 2014 and I had to come up with an explanation, it would be either that they simply overreached and overplayed their hand in Congress to an enormously destructive degree, or that Democrats mounted a massive voter-registration campaign, particularly in GOP-held districts with large numbers of Latinos, other minority voters, or young people. More

likely, the answer would be some combination of those factors.

Renowned Emory University political scientist Alan Abramowitz said as much in a recent article he wrote on the Crystal Ball website run by the University of Virginia's equally renowned political scientist Larry Sabato. Abramowitz used his midterm-election forecasting model to look at various House seat changes that would kick in at various levels of Democratic and Republican advantages in the generic congressional ballot test asked in national polls. As I have also noticed over the years, Abramowitz found that Democrats would need an advantage of 4 points on the generic-ballot test to pick up just one additional seat. Even with a 6-point advantage, which would equate to a fairly serious wave, the Democratic Party would end up with only a five-seat net gain, based on this model.

While I am certainly not a political scientist or a statistician, Abramowitz's model seems to jibe with my more subjective sense of the state of play in the House. It would take a lot to flip the chamber to a Democratic-controlled body.

What this all means is that, to a certain extent, the 2014 and 2016 elections—but primarily the 2018 and 2020 gubernatorial and state legislative elections—will be enormously consequential, in that the winning side in those elections will be drawing the next decade's electoral maps. Those maps are what will determine whether this decade's Republican hegemony in the House will continue into the next.

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