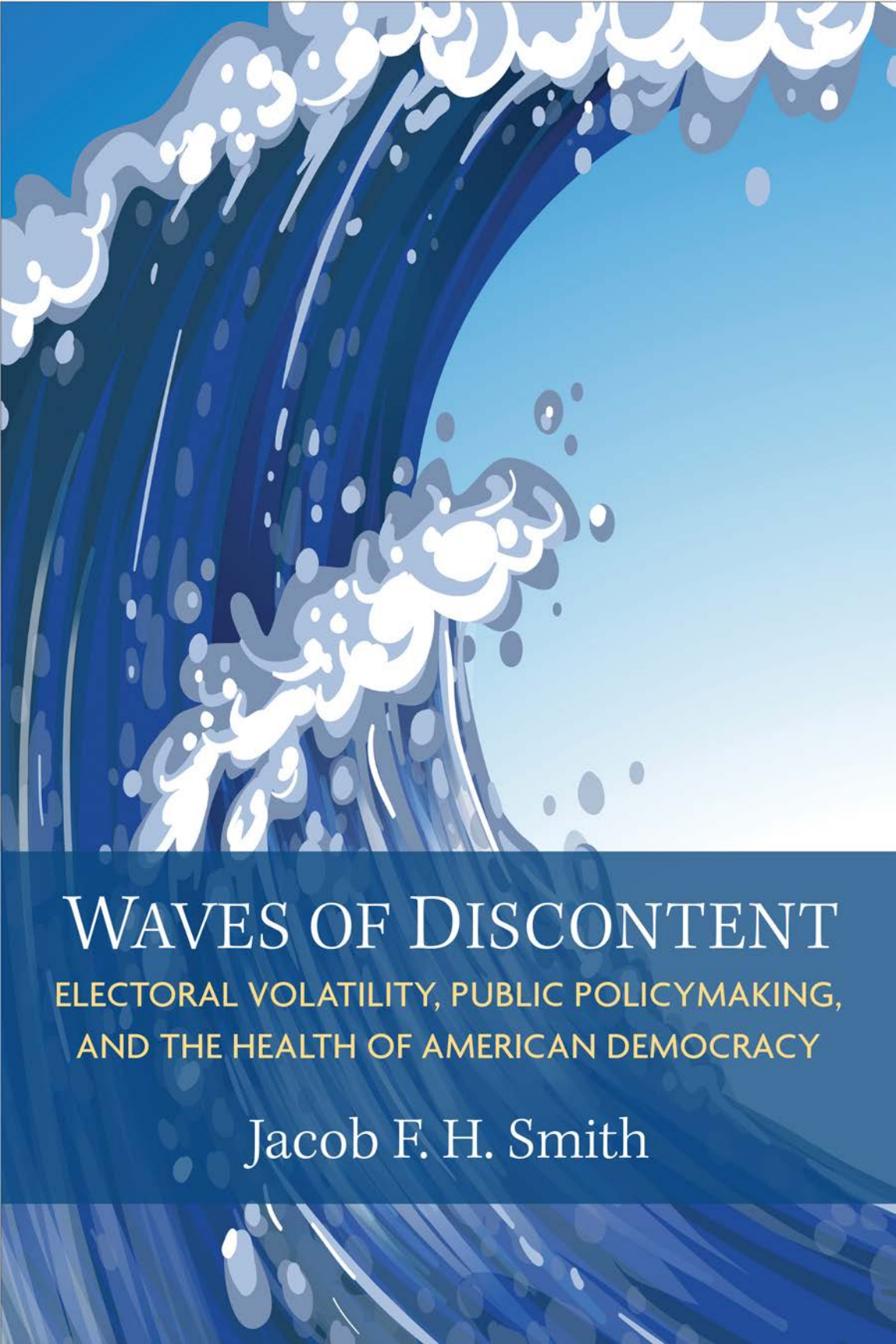

Waves of Discontent

Electoral Volatility, Public Policymaking, and the Health of American Democracy

Jacob F. H. Smith

Waves of Discontent

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JACOB F. H. SMITH

University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

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Published in the United States of America by the
University of Michigan Press
First published August 2025

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-472-07780-9 (hardcover: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-472-05780-1 (paper: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-472-90538-6 (open access ebook)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12824932

The University of Michigan Press's open access publishing program is made possible thanks to additional funding from the University of Michigan Office of the Provost and the generous support of contributing libraries.

Authorized Representative: Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com

For my darling Tony.

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Digital materials related to this title can be found on the Fulcrum platform via the following citable URL: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12824932

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Waves of Discontent is a project that grew out of my undergraduate senior honors thesis, so really I have been working on it for more than a decade. I wrote that thesis between 2011 and 2012, so many of the elections I analyze here had not yet taken place. All errors are my own, but there are many individuals I want to acknowledge for their support along the way. First, I greatly appreciate the extensive feedback I received from John Elliott, my honors advisor, as I began my study of wave elections. I also received excellent feedback from Michael Brady of Denison University, who served as my outside examiner for my honors project.

I was inspired to write this book, with a particular focus on discontent in the American electorate, after I presented my definition of wave elections at the 2022 Midwest Political Science Association conference and was encouraged to think more broadly about the wave phenomenon. I also appreciate the feedback I received from my colleagues at Fordham when I presented Chapter Three at a virtual brown bag in October 2023. I also received a number of excellent suggestions from Daniel Klinghard from the College of the Holy Cross, who served as the discussant for the virtual brown bag. More broadly, I greatly appreciate the collegial environment that Fordham has provided as I have completed this project. Many individuals at the University of Michigan Press played an important role along the way, but I particularly want to acknowledge the contributions of my editors Elizabeth Demers and Madison Allums, who were critical in helping with the review process.

I also appreciate the support of my parents, Monica and Forrest Smith, and siblings, Joey and Heidi Smith. I greatly miss my father, who died as I was working on this book project. I also greatly appreciate the support of my friends in academia, in particular Jonathan Spiegler, Simon Hoellerbauer, and Josh Jansa, who provide both feedback on my writing

and serve as a sounding board whenever I need their perspective. I also greatly value the support of friends outside of academia who help me stay grounded, particular those on Election Twitter/BlueSky and in Big Apple Kickball. My students, both current and former, also provide insights that makes my writing better, and more generally make being a professor the best job in the world. And finally, this book is dedicated to my darling Tony Choi—I love you forever!!

CHAPTER 1

The Rise of Electoral Volatility

From Stable to Volatile: Congressional Elections in the Early 2000s

Ahead of the 2006 midterm elections, Rahm Emanuel felt the need to manage expectations. The second-term Democratic representative from Illinois had been elected chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), and it was his responsibility to direct Democrats' efforts to win the House majority. The 2004 election cycle had been disappointing for Democrats, with George W. Bush defeating John Kerry by a 286–251 margin in the Electoral College and by around three percentage points in the popular vote.[1] Democrats also lost a net four seats in the Senate and three in the House, falling to the lowest number of seats held by the party in the lower chamber since after the 1946 election.[2] While midterm elections traditionally presented an opportunity for the party out of power to gain seats, the past two midterm elections saw the president's party actually *gain* House seats, and of the previous five midterm elections going back to 1986, only the 1994 Republican Revolution saw the sort of double-digit seat gain that Democrats would need to win back the majority in 2006. Indeed, soon after being named DCCC chair in December 2004, Emanuel felt it necessary to tell Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to temper expectations, advising Pelosi that "rather than keep telling people we're going to take back the House, we have to start realizing this is a two cycle process," in effect arguing that they could not realistically win back the majority in 2006 (Bendavid 2007, 14). The 15 seats they needed to win back the majority just seemed like too heavy a lift for one election cycle.

However, Democrats won those 15 seats and then some, gaining double that number to realize a 30-seat net gain, attaining a majority as large as the one that Republicans had won just two years earlier.[3] Democrats won

Republican-leaning seats such as Ohio's 18th District, where Zack Space (D-OH) won an open seat left open when incumbent Bob Ney (R-OH) retired in the midst of a scandal, as well as longtime competitive seats such as the 2nd, 8th, and 9th Districts of Indiana, won by Democrats Joe Donnelly, Brad Ellsworth, and Baron Hill respectively.[4]

The House was not the only national institution in which the early expectations of Democratic leaders were much more pessimistic than the reality of Election Day. On the Senate floor in April 2005, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) declared that it would take a "little miracle" for Democrats to win the Senate majority the following year (Giroux 2006). Yet, despite this early pessimism, Senate Democrats also gained the six seats they needed to flip the upper chamber. Gains in the US Senate included seats that had appeared to be winnable all cycle such as Pennsylvania, where State Treasurer Bob Casey, Jr. defeated Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA). Democrats also won some more surprising seats such as in Virginia, where Democrat Jim Webb, a Reagan-era Navy Secretary, narrowly defeated Senator (and prospective 2008 presidential candidate) George Allen (R-VA) in a state that had not voted Democratic for president since Lyndon Johnson's landslide in 1964 (PBS NewsHour 2006).

While Rahm Emanuel's initial prediction about 2006 far underestimated Democrats' gains, there was a kernel of truth to his words. The 2008 election became the second part of a "two step process" that began in 2006 (Bendavid 2007, 14). However, the second step was not winning a bare majority; instead, 2008 lifted Democrats to 257 seats in the House, 59 seats in the Senate, and saw Barack Obama flip party control of the presidency (Staff Writer 2012). Yet just two years later in the 2010 midterm elections, Democrats lost their House majority, falling to fewer seats than they had held before 2006. Democratic giants like Representatives Ike Skelton (D-MO) and Jim Oberstar (D-MN) in the House and Russ Feingold (D-WI) in the Senate lost reelection in that year's Republican wave (Smith and Martin 2010). An age of stagnation and minimal change in House elections had become one of electoral volatility.

Starting with the 2006 elections, the United States began to experience a series of highly competitive and volatile national elections. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, by some measures the electoral volatility since 2006 is the greatest since the late 1800s in the period from the second midterm of the Ulysses S. Grant presidency in 1874 until the election of William McKinley in 1896. Since 2006, the United States has seen at least one of the

House, Senate, and presidency flip party control (often in dramatic fashion) in every election other than 2012. The House and Senate seat swing in some of these elections has rivaled that of elections of decades past, before Mayhew (1974a) wrote of how marginal seats in Congress were "vanishing," and stands in strong contrast what experts expected just before the 2006 election.[5] In an age of polarization where there are increasingly few competitive House seats, American elections are hardwired to have low levels of electoral volatility, and yet the reality has been just the opposite. The goal of this book is to explain this puzzle of rising electoral volatility in a period where structural factors make the electoral stability of the late 1990s and early 2000s a more likely outcome, and to examine the consequences of this renewed volatility.

I begin this chapter by discussing previous accounts of electoral volatility and subsequently demonstrate how an array of measures of the concept demonstrate electoral volatility has risen after a period of historically low electoral volatility in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Next, I discuss barriers that exist to electoral volatility and how present levels of volatility are even more extraordinary given the prevalence of these barriers in contemporary electoral politics. Finally, I discuss my plan for the book and present a sketch of my theory for why volatility has increased and what its consequences have been for American democratic politics.

Previous Academic Research on Electoral Volatility

The concept of electoral volatility is one that is often associated with the study of party systems and electoral change in Western Europe. In a widely cited 1979 paper, Mogens Pedersen developed a now-prominent measure for electoral volatility that he designed specifically for party systems in this region. For Pedersen, electoral volatility represented the "the net change within the electoral party system resulting from individual vote transfers" (Pedersen 1979, 3). In Western Europe, where electoral systems often resulted in multiple parties competing for votes (and thus, seats), a new measure was needed to account for the change between parties from one election to another. Previously, Rae (1967, 53–58; see also Vayrynen 1972) had developed an index of fractionalization that sought to measure the "proportion of pairs of members in a [party] system which contain persons who have voted for (or belonged to) different parties in the last previous

election." Pedersen (1979, 3) argued that measures such as Rae's were not appropriate for his purpose of measuring and comparing change across party systems in Western Europe because previous measures did not always apply equally well across different political systems. Instead, Pedersen developed a new measure, now called the Pedersen Index, that took the absolute change in national vote percentage for one party from one election to another for each party, added all these values together, and then divided that value by two (Pedersen 1979, 4). Importantly, Pedersen took the *absolute* change because he was interested in the flow of support between parties, and subsequently dividing the sum of changes by two accounts for the fact that one party's gain will be another party's loss (or parties' losses). In Western Europe, where many countries used some form of proportional representation and the number of seats is directly related to the percentage of the national vote received by a party, it followed that one should use the national vote percentage change for each party. One could, however, also apply this measure to seat swings by adding up the absolute change in *seats* and then dividing by two. The Pedersen Index has enduring relevance, remaining in use decades after its initial development, and has been applied beyond the original Western European context to study electoral volatility in "consolidated democracies and consolidating democracies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa" (Powell and Tucker 2013, 124).

While originally developed to measure electoral volatility in party systems in Western Europe where there were usually multiple parties competing for representation in government, Pedersen's measure also relates to the "net partisan swing" discussed by Mayhew (1974a). For Mayhew, the net partisan swing represented the increased number of seats going to the gaining party, of the two major parties, in an election. In the American context, where the vast majority of seats held in Congress (if not every seat) are held by either Democrats or Republicans (or independents who typically caucus with one of the two major parties such as longtime Vermont Representative and now Senator Bernie Sanders), it made sense to focus on just the flow of seats between Democrats and Republicans. Implicitly, Mayhew's measure calculates the net partisan swing in the same manner as the Pedersen Index, albeit for seats rather than votes. For example, in the 2020 congressional elections (as compared to 2018) Republicans gained 13 seats and Democrats lost 13.[6] The net partisan swing here would take a value of 13; similarly, a seats-focused Pedersen Index would add together 13 gains for Republicans and 13 losses for Democrats to obtain a value of 26 and then

divide by two to also arrive at a value of 13. In the American system it also followed for Mayhew to focus on net seat swing rather than the vote swing because America's first-past-the-post electoral system favors the two-party system (e.g., see Riker 1982). Specifically, Mayhew looked at the "swing ratio" and expressed worry at Tufte's (1973) finding that the translation of vote swings into seat swings was ever decreasing. For Mayhew, it followed to focus on how vote swing turned into seat swing as his study particularly focused on how electoral volatility could lead to shifts in political power.

In this chapter, I also consider the frequent majority shifts that have occurred between the parties. In her seminal work on this topic, Frances Lee (2016) argues that the competitiveness of the Senate majority since 1980 and the House majority since 1994 has had profound impacts on the nature of American politics. Using a variety of measures ranging from partisan identification in the electorate to seats held in Congress, Lee (2016, 19–31) demonstrates the competitiveness and close division that exists in American politics today. An upshot of the closeness margins that exist in Congress today is that even a small shift in the voting of electorate can produce a majority change. And indeed, this period has seen multiple elections with relatively large shifts in the electorate that have seen the minority party gain 40 or more seats in Congress. Lee (28–31) also examines news coverage that focuses on the *perception* that congressional majorities are competitive. Lee's measure of news coverage of the perception of competitiveness begins to increase after Republicans won control of the Senate in 1980 and the House in 1994. Crucially for my study, however, all four of the years in which there was the greatest amount of news coverage of competitiveness as documented by Lee have occurred since 2005. Only 2008— a year in which the only real question was by how much Democrats' congressional majority would increase— saw a low level of news coverage (in this case, zero articles) discussing the competitiveness of congressional majorities. Thus, consistent with Lee's work, I also consider the frequency of majority shifts among the measures of electoral volatility I discuss below.

Finally, while seat or vote swings are a frequent metric used to conceptualize electoral volatility, American journalists and scholars alike also use the wave election metaphor in the American context in order to quantify electoral volatility. Essentially, the wave metaphor is used to conceptualize a large win for the gaining party, although the magnitude of gains required to constitute a wave varies considerably from one author to another—or indeed from one writing to another for the same author. For example,

political scientist-turned political journalist Stuart Rothenberg (2011) wrote that wave elections occur "where one party experiences a net loss of at least 20 House seats and the other party has minimal losses."[7] Three years later, however, Rothenberg (2014) abandoned this standard, arguing that—like Justice Potter Stewart and obscenity—he would know a wave when he saw it. Political scientists including Jacobson (2009), Abramowitz (2010), Campbell (2010), Fraga, Shah, and Juenke (2020), and Fowler, Franz, and Rideout (2020) have also used the wave metaphor to quantify or speculate about impending electoral volatility. However, political science scholarship tends to rely on ad hoc definitions for waves, if applying a standard at all. Indeed, the cited Abramowitz piece is entitled "How Large a Wave? Using the Generic Ballot to Forecast the 2010 Midterm Elections," but does not offer a specific standard for when seat gains would reach a cutoff for being classified as a wave in 2010. It is useful to have a metric such as the wave metaphor by which one can classify an election as having considerable electoral volatility, but it is also important to have a consistent standard to use when categorizing elections. Thus, in addition to looking at seat, vote, and majority swings, I offer a definition that can be used to conceptualize and then operationalize wave elections in a manner that can be applied consistently, but is also flexible enough to be used throughout American history.

Measures of Electoral Volatility and their Variation, 1856–2022

Seat and Vote Swing

This book uses a variety of measures to quantify levels of electoral volatility. As with Lee (2016, 19–31), using a variety of measures here to quantify electoral volatility increases the robustness of my conclusions. Here and throughout the book, my main focus is on House elections, but later in this chapter, I also discuss volatility in Senate elections. First among my measures of volatility in House elections is the seat swing or "net partisan swing" that Mayhew (1974a) wrote about nearly half a century ago. Since this book looks at House elections over an extended period of time when the size of the House of Representatives varied substantially, I convert the number of seats held by each party in the House to the *percentage* of seats held by the major parties and then look at the change in the percentage of seats held by the parties from one election to another.[8] To simplify my analysis, and

since almost all—if not all—seats are held by the two major parties, I look at the two-party percentage of seats and classify independents who caucus with a party, such as former Representative Bernie Sanders (I-VT), as being a member of the party with which they caucus.[9] As with Pedersen (1979), since I want to quantify how much change takes place between the parties rather than the shift to any one party, I calculate the absolute level of change in support between the parties. For example, if Democrats had a two-party seat share of 51 percent of seats in the House before an election and 53 percent of the seats after, the absolute seat swing would take a value of 2 percent of seats. Similarly, if Democrats fell from 51 to 49 percent of seats—and thus Republicans gained the majority by growing from 49 to 51 percent of seats—this measure would also take on a value of 2 percent of seats.

In order to quantify volatility within periods of American political history, I rely on a rolling average of volatility of the previous decade of elections (i.e., the previous five congressional elections). Using a rolling average ensures that a single election—either one that is especially volatile or one that is particularly static—will not have an outsized impact on the characterization of electoral volatility in a specific period. I provide both a rolling mean and a rolling median because means are more sensitive to outliers and thus elections with an especially large seat swing affect means more than medians (such as 1894). These two measures of average seat swing allow for a characterization of typical electoral volatility in different periods of American history. Using the previous five elections (i.e., the elections from 2012–2020 for the 2022 elections) instead of four or six elections is somewhat arbitrary, but my results were broadly similar if I used one of these cutoffs instead of the five-election cutoff I employ here.

I display my results in Figure 1.1 below in the subfigure on the left.[10] This figure incorporates data since the mid-1800s here when the Republican Party first emerged and joined the Democratic Party as one of the two major parties. I begin my analysis by comparing the seat swing in the 1858 midterm election as compared to the 1856 election. I then take the seat swing for the next four congressional elections as compared to the previous election (i.e., 1860, 1862, 1864, and 1866) and average these five seat swings together. This means the first year in Figure 1.1 is a rolling average of the five elections before the 1868 election. Beginning here allows for comparisons of electoral volatility between the current period and the late 1800s. However, caution should be used when interpreting the first several elections in this time series due to states seceding from and then reentering

the union during the Civil War and immediate postbellum period, which affected the balance of power in Congress. The data here extends through the average volatility ahead of the 2024 elections (i.e., the average seat swings from the 2014–2022 elections).

The late 1800s were a period of especially high volatility in terms of the average seat swings that took place between the parties. Frequently, the mean seat gain for the winning party represented more than 10 percent of all House seats and this measure reached its zenith in the 1890s with a value of more than 18. The 1890 and 1894 midterm elections during the Benjamin Harrison and second Grover Cleveland administrations were particularly volatile. Democrats saw a gain of 27 percent of all House seats in 1890 before losing more than 36 percent of all House seats four years later in 1894. Because of how extraordinarily large these seat swings were, the elections including 1890 and 1894 in the rolling average have the greatest divergence between the rolling mean and rolling median. After 1894, Democrats remained in the minority for several decades as the Republican Party became dominant on the national stage. Seat swing volatility settled at a rolling mean of around 10 percent of House seats for the next half century approximately, before rapidly decreasing after the end of World War II. In the post-World War II period, Democrats became a seemingly permanent majority party and Republicans functionally did not compete for many of the seats held in the "Solid South" (Connelly and Pitney 1994, Lee 2016).

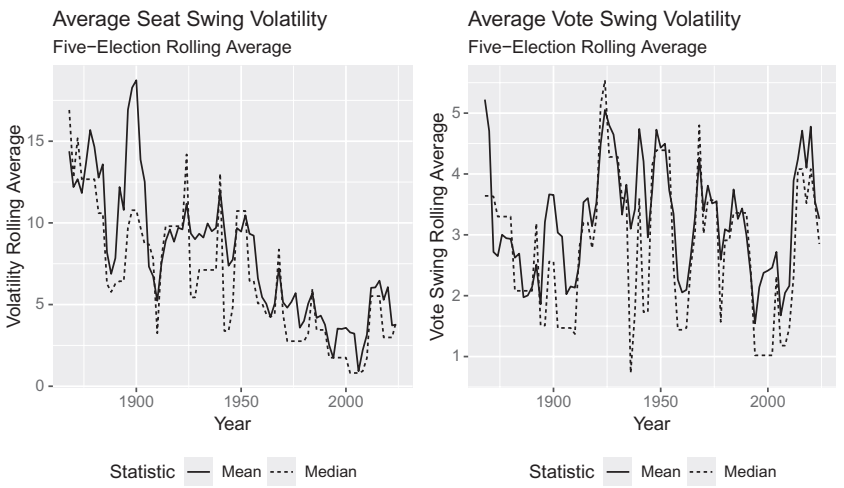

Fig. 1.1. Average Vote and Seat Swing Volatility, 1868–2024

While Republicans gained more than 50 House seats in the Republican Revolution of 1994, most other elections in the latter part of the 20th century saw historically low seat swing volatility. Seat swing volatility reached an all-time low of 0.92 in the rolling mean (and 1.02 for the rolling median) for the four elections from 1996 to 2004 ahead of the 2006 midterm election.

It was with this historic low volatility in mind that Rahm Emanuel warned Nancy Pelosi not to overstate Democrats' likely gains in 2006 (Bendavid 2007). Yet, starting with 2006, seat swing volatility began to rise again for the first time in almost a century. Starting with the five-election average that includes the elections from 2002 to 2010, the rolling mean seat swing volatility rose to above five percent of House seats for the first time since the early 1980s. In this period, average seat swing volatility has often taken a value above five percent of House seats and is sometimes even above six percent. The rolling median has also risen to around 3.5 to 4 percent of House seats, also noticeably higher than in the previous period. While the most recent measurement ahead of the 2024 election, which includes the 2014 to 2022 elections, is slightly lower than others in the post-2006 period, this is a result of unusual dynamics in the 2022 election that resulted in a smaller seat gain for Republicans which I explore in the concluding chapters. Recent midterms have generally seen higher seat swings than presidential years, but notably, two of the four presidential elections in the period (2008 and 2020) saw a double-digit seat gain for the winning party, a first since the 1980s.

While striking by itself, the increasing average seat swing in recent elections becomes even more noticeable when placed in a broader context. Thus, I also examined average volatility in terms of *vote swings*, the original way in which Pedersen (1979) measured this concept, using data made available by Rusk (2001) for elections from 1856 until 1998 and the C.Q. Voting and Elections Collection (n.d.) for more recent elections. As with seat swing, I provide both a rolling mean and a rolling median, also over five elections, in the subfigure on the right in Figure 1.1 above. Interestingly, while many of the elections of the late 1800s saw large seat swings, the average *vote* swing in this period was actually often quite modest. As Michael Barone (2000, 2001, 2002) noted in his analysis of American politics at the turn of the 21st century in his famous piece "The 49 Percent Nation," in terms of changes in vote share, the 1880s was a period of stasis in terms of the vote share received by each party in congressional elections. Indeed, in this period, sometimes the vote swing and seat swing went in opposite

directions. For example, in the 1876 election Democrats saw their two-party vote share grow by 0.14 percentage points even as their two-party seat share *declined* by more than nine percentage points. After this period, vote share volatility grew in the 1910s and 1920s and remained generally high—with some variation—over the next several decades. As with seat share volatility, vote share volatility was generally lower in the 1980s and 1990s and started increasing again after the 2006 election. Like seat share volatility, what is especially distinctive about the current period is that vote share volatility has mostly *persisted* at higher levels. That the current period has increased levels of both of these measures of volatility lends further credence to the notion that current period is one of especially high electoral volatility.

Frequency of Changes in Party Control

The implications of electoral volatility can be observed by looking at how frequently elections result in the flip of partisan control of national elective political institutions (Lee 2016). On their own, switches in partisan control are really a measure of *competitiveness* rather than electoral volatility. For example, partisan control of a legislative chamber can switch parties frequently even if only a few seats change between the parties, as happened in the House in 2022. When put alongside the large seat and vote swings in the present period, however, frequent switches in partisan control can demonstrate that the instability present in the electorate also results in volatility in which party controls national political institutions, or put differently, potential *policy volatility*.

In Figure 1.2 below I display the percentage of time in the previous five elections that national elective political institutions (i.e., the House, Senate, and presidency) flipped partisan control. The dotted line below includes both chambers of Congress and the presidency, while the connected line measures only the percentage of time majorities in either chamber of Congress flipped in the previous five elections. Even when congressional majorities were uncompetitive during the 40-year Democratic majority in the House of Representatives from 1955–1995, partisan control of the presidency remained competitive. Since Dwight D. Eisenhower ended 20 years of Democratic control of the presidency in the 1952 election, only once—when George H.W. Bush won the 1988 presidential election—has the presidency remained with the same party for more than two consecutive terms.

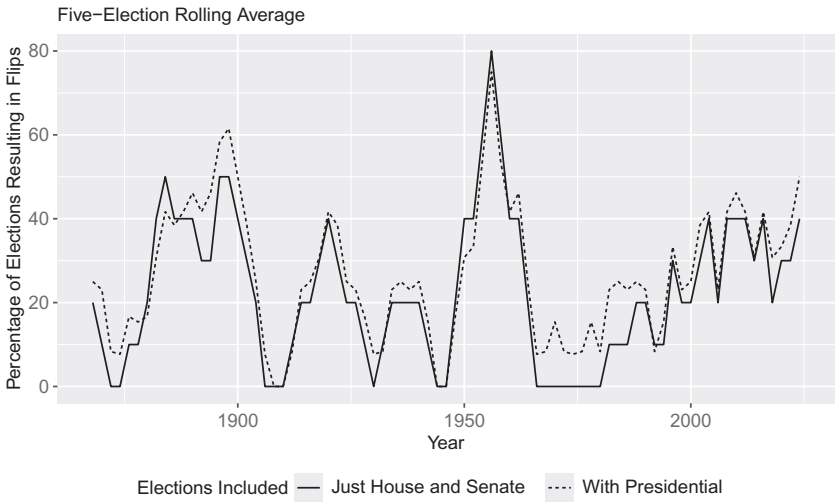

Fig. 1.2. Percentage of Elections Resulting in Flips

Consistent with the large number of seats that swung between the parties, control of political institutions also changed frequently in the late 1800s. In this period, there was a change in partisan control of institutions roughly 40 to 60 percent of the time that such a change could take place. Competition then declined after Republicans won the House majority back in 1894 and William McKinley began four consecutive Republican presidential victories in 1896. Competition remained relatively low for much of the early 1900s, with a few bursts of competition such as when Democrats held the presidency and Congress for a relatively brief period of time during in the 1910s during the Woodrow Wilson administration. Competition then rose rapidly in the 1940s and 1950s. Control of Congress switched frequently between the parties in the Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower administrations. In the rolling average containing the elections from 1948 to 1956, control of the presidency and Congress flipped 75 percent of the time.[11] As Democrats maintained consistent control of Congress for four decades, the value of this measure dropped. Once the Senate majority became competitive again in 1980 and the House in 1994, this measure began to grow. Since 2006, the Congress and presidency combined measure has always taken on a value of at least 30, while the measure including only the House and Senate has dropped below 30 only once.

As with the measures of volatility discussed previously, what is especially noteworthy here is the persistence of relatively high levels of this

metric. While the value of this indicator in recent elections is nowhere near as high as in the mid-1950s, it has persisted at a relatively high level for much longer. Furthermore, these majority flips become more important when paired with the high level of volatility in this period. It is not just that there are high levels of both seat and vote swing volatility, or that we are seeing partisan control of institutions switch frequently, but rather that we are seeing *both* at the same time. The current period is one of volatility in vote choice, volatility in seat share, and volatility in the partisan control of institutions.

Frequency of Wave Elections

Finally, I also measure volatility by looking at the frequency of wave elections. A popular metaphor for electoral volatility in both journalism and academia today, wave elections are generally thought to be an immense win for the gaining party in a congressional election that sweeps into office a new class of legislators who change the country's course.[12] However, there currently is not a common definition or a way to measure the concept. Reflecting this general understanding of waves as being a metaphor for substantial gains for the winning party, I define a wave election to be a congressional election that produces the potential for a political party to significantly affect the political status quo as the result of a substantial increase in seats for that party. In other words, in waves, *seat swing volatility* brings about potential *policy volatility*.

To operationalize this volatility, I begin by looking at what constitutes substantial potential policy volatility. For a wave to achieve the "potential for a political party to significantly affect the political status quo," I argue that a party must either take over the majority in Congress or reach a level of seats in Congress that is greater than its average number of seats in the previous five elections. Second, in looking at *seat swing volatility*, to meet the conditions for a "substantial increase in seats for that party," the seat swing in a wave should be greater than the average seat swing in the previous five elections. In order to be classified as a wave, an election must satisfy the criteria for both parts of the definition.

The first part of my definition is based on the change in the balance of power that results from the outcome of an election, or, in other words, the newfound potential for a particular political party to significantly affect the political status quo. Wave elections are not occurrences

unto themselves— they often have significant political and policy consequences. In other words, waves are big wins not only electorally, but are also meaningful in terms of the potential for the changing balance of power to affect policy in a meaningful way. Mayhew (1974a), in discussing the "net partisan swing," notes that Democratic Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson were able to achieve significant changes in social policy only through the election of new, unusually large Democratic majorities. In addition, waves can also affect the political status quo by blocking the passage of new policy, as was the case in 1994, 2006, and 2010 after Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama lost control of Congress, resulting in divided government for the remainder of their terms.

Importantly, this part of the definition focuses on the *potential* for significant policy consequences and not the actual consequences which result from a wave. I use this conceptualization of *potential policy consequences* for several specific reasons. First, policy consequences may come about simply as a result of the occurrence of the wave itself. Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson (2006) note that in response to what they call "mandate elections," the overall voting record of Congress shifts in the direction of the party winning the mandate for at least a short time after the start of a new Congress and that this is a function of the outcome of the election.[13] This effect of mandate elections may translate to some waves. Additionally, the blocking of new policy—as is common as a result of waves—is more difficult to measure than the passage of new policies. Finally, from a practical standpoint, if the *actual* policy impact of a wave is required to define this concept, then it is impossible to assess whether or not an election is a wave until years after an election occurs.

There are three scenarios in which a political party could achieve a more favorable balance of power in a congressional election. First, a party could win an outright majority in the House if it were the minority party coming into the election as was the case for Democrats in 2006 and Republicans in 2010. This would give the party all of the benefits of majority party status in Congress, among them majority control of committees, scheduling authority on the floor, and (at least in theory) an ability to pass or reject bills put before the body. Second, a party already in the majority could win a larger majority and therefore be in a better position to pass significant pieces of legislation. An example of this sort of outcome happened in the 1964 election, which allowed President Lyndon Johnson to pass significant

parts of the Great Society. Third, a party could remain a minority, but could *reduce* the ability of the majority party to pass significant policies by substantially narrowing the balance of power. An example of this potential outcome occurred following the 1966 election, which frustrated an even greater expansion of the Great Society in the final two years of the Johnson administration. The idea of an equilibrium, or typical level, of seats for each party is important when considering the typical balance of power of the House of Representatives. While Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman (1986) indicate that congressional elections usually result in a return to the equilibrium number of seats held by a party within a specific era, sometimes a party wins more seats than the equilibrium suggests they should. By comparing the number of seats that a party wins to the mean balance of power for the previous decade, it is possible to capture the importance of what happens when a minority party reaches a higher-than-normal number of seats in Congress, even if they do not win a majority.

The use of a decade-long rolling average allows for a comparison of the balance of power resulting from a given election with what has been typical in recent election cycles, thus allowing for a determination of whether the result of an election is truly noteworthy for that party in the context of the somewhat recent past. As with the rolling averages I constructed when looking at seat and vote swings, others could reasonably come to different conclusions about the number of elections that should be included in the rolling average, but I selected five elections because of how this length of time seems to correspond to the normal cycles of American politics. As Stimson (1999, 31) notes, "regular cycling is associated with peaks and troughs of roughly similar size." Stimson's examination, given the availability of public opinion data, focuses on the period from the early 1950s to the present. In the post-Civil War era, there have been three election sequences (Democrats from 1906–1912, Republicans from 1914–1920, and Democrats from 1928–1936) in which a party has gained House seats in four consecutive elections. Including five elections in the rolling average is the minimum number necessary to make sure that the recent high (or low) point for each party is part of this average. Under this standard, a balance is achieved between short-term electoral fluctuations and long-term trends.

The second part of my definition addresses the broad idea that waves represent one-sided electoral volatility, in other words a big *electoral* win. Nearly all of the journalistic definitions I have found define waves based

solely on a seat swing, which reflects the partisan electoral volatility represented by the wave concept (e.g., see Topaz 2014). Seat swing should be part of a definition—just not, I argue, the only part. Therefore, a substantial partisan seat swing, which represents increased partisan volatility, is the basis for the second part of my definition. When combined with the first part of the definition on seat level, the inclusion of a component related to seat swing supplies a definition that fully captures the common understanding of wave elections as big wins both electorally and in terms of potential policy impact.

To quantify how large a seat swing must be for an election to count as a wave, I rely on a shared observation of both surge and decline theory and exposure theory. Both of these electoral theories posit that there is a regular amount of turnover in congressional elections, a sort of natural tide (Campbell 1960; Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986; Waterman, Oppenheimer, and Stimson 1991). As shown in Figure 1.1 above, this tide differs depending on the amount of political volatility in a decade. Some decades, like the 1880s and 1890s frequently featured large seat swings, while the late 1990s and early 2000s saw only single digit seat swings between the parties. In especially volatile periods, the "tide" will be larger because big wins lead to losses that cause a return to the seat equilibrium, thus increasing the average seat swing for the previous decade. In contrast, less electorally volatile decades have a low average seat swing for the included time period (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986). Whatever the volatility happens to be in recent previous elections, it follows that the seat swing in an election should exceed the mean net partisan seat swing from this time period in order to be considered a wave.

As with the first part of the definition, I rely on a rolling average, in this case of seat swing volatility in the previous five elections. Using the previous five elections remains consistent with the usage of five elections in the rolling average for the first part of this definition, as well as earlier in this chapter when looking at seat and vote swing volatility, and the reasoning used to justify the decision to use the five previous elections in the rolling average applies here as well. As discussed previously, seat swing volatility has varied considerably throughout American history (see Figure 1.1 above). This high level of variability speaks to the fact that what might be normal at one point in time (for example a 30-seat swing in the 1940s) may represent unusually high volatility at another point in time (for example, the 2000s).

Table 1.1. House Waves, 1868–2022

Democratic House Waves	Republican House Waves	Non-Waves
1870, 1874, 1882, 1890, 1906, 1910, 1912, 1930, 1932, 1948, 1958, 1964, 1974, 2006, 2008, 2018	1894, 1920, 1938, 1942, 1946, 1966, 1980, 1994, 2010	1868, 1872, 1876, 1878, 1880, 1884, 1886, 1888, 1892, 1896, 1898, 1900, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1914, 1916, 1918, 1922, 1924, 1926, 1928, 1934, 1936, 1940, 1944, 1950, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1960, 1962, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1978, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022

In using my definition, I classify elections from 1868 in Table 1.1 above. As with my previous analyses, one should be cautious in interpretations when the rolling average of elections includes those that took place during the Civil War. However, in this period, the two elections that count as waves are the elections of 1870 and 1874, both of which experienced seat swings of more than 15 percent of seats in Congress and far exceeded the cutoff for being a wave. In total, waves were relatively common in the late 1800s. Other elections from the late 1800s that my definition classifies as waves include 1882 and 1890 for Democrats and 1894 for Republicans. Waves also occurred on a fairly regular basis in the first part of the 20th century, with ten waves in the 25 congressional elections taking place from 1900 until 1950. Waves became less common after the late 1960s. In fact, there were only three wave elections—1974, 1980, and 1994—between 1968 and 2004. Since 2006, however, there has been a resurgence of waves, with 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2018 counting as waves under my definition.

In total, my analysis of the occurrence of wave elections provides further evidence of increased electoral volatility in recent elections. As with the other measures of volatility, a pattern of electoral instability in the late 1800s and early 1900s turned into lower volatility in more recent decades and was then followed by a resurgence in volatility since the 2006 election. What is also notable about the current period is that there is increased volatility in all four measures presented in this chapter: seat swing volatility, vote swing volatility, the frequency of flips of partisan institutions, and the occurrence of wave elections. While the late 1800s saw high seat swing volatility, vote swing volatility was relatively low compared with later

periods. Vote swing volatility in the current period is among the highest in the entire time series, while seat swing volatility—while higher than the immediately preceding period—still has not yet returned to the levels of previous decades of high volatility. Next, I explore structural barriers to seat swing volatility in the present period, as well as examining electoral volatility in the context of the Senate.

Barriers to Electoral Volatility: Gerrymandering, Sorting, and Staggered Senate Seats

A number of structural barriers exist that can diminish levels of electoral volatility. In the current period, increasingly aggressive gerrymandering—combined with geographic sorting and the nationalization of congressional elections—has diminished electoral volatility (Wasserman 2023). In documenting the rise in barriers to electoral volatility in recent elections, I begin by considering the decline in the number of truly competitive House seats. In his famous 1974 piece "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," David Mayhew used the percentage of the vote received by congressional candidates to determine the marginality of a seat, using two cutoffs for vote share to define marginality. For Mayhew, seats in which winning congressional candidates received under 55 or under 60 percent of the vote were considered marginal seats. Seats that feature a close divide between the candidates in the previous congressional election often—but not always—are the most likely to flip parties in the next elections (e.g., see Jacobson 1987), so the percentage of seats that count as Mayhew Marginals is one good proxy for what percentage of House seats are truly competitive. In the subfigure on the left of Figure 1.3 below, I display the percentage of House seats in each election that count as Mayhew Marginals under the 55 percent cutoff.[14] A large percentage of House seats—nearly half in some elections—counted as Mayhew Marginals in the late 1800s. This number fell in the early 1900s before settling to a pattern of around 25 percent of seats through the 1960s. As Mayhew (1974a) noted, the percentage of marginal seats had begun to fall even more in the 1970s. Indeed, since the late 1990s, some congressional elections have seen fewer than 10 percent of congressional seats with a two-party margin in the single digits.

A result of the declining number of marginal seats is that fewer seats are in play in recent wave election years than in those of the past. To be

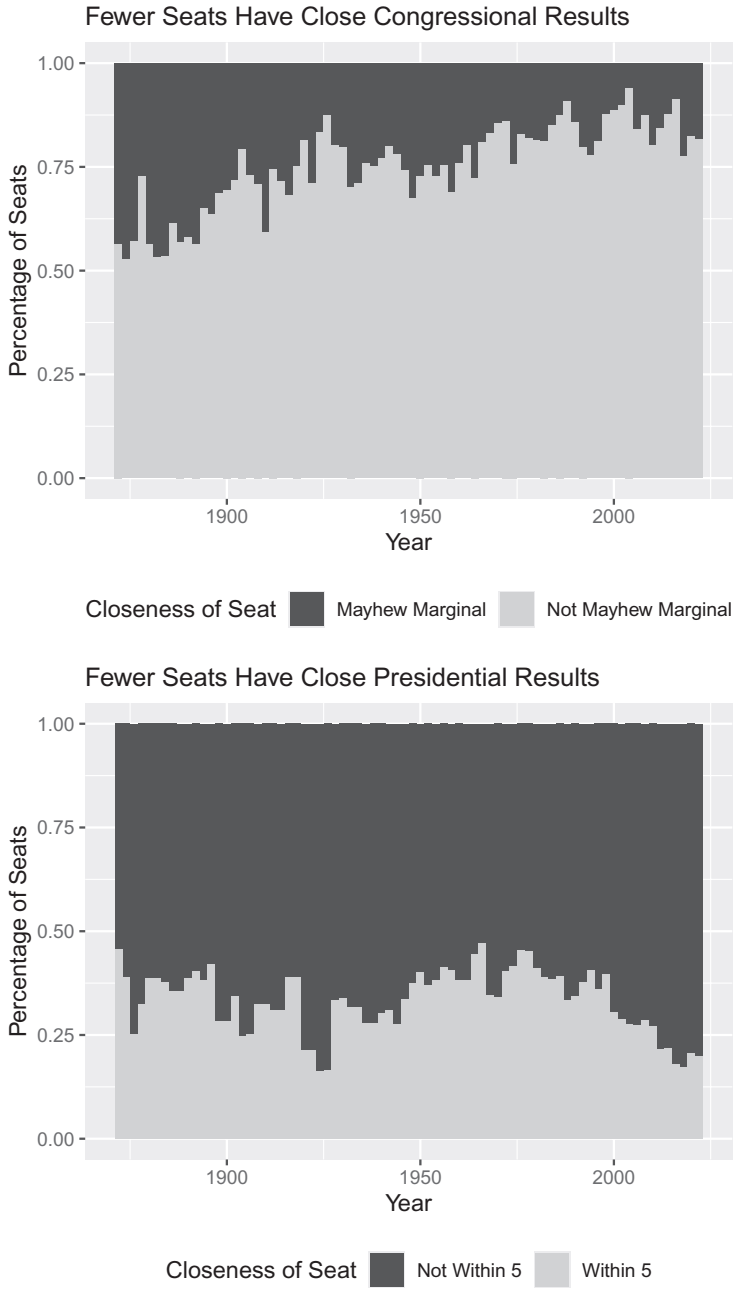

Fig. 1.3. Percentage of Close Seats, 1868–2024

sure, sometimes seats that were not in play in the previous election cycle often come into play in wave election years.[15] Recent wave election years like 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2018 saw a noticeably larger percentage of seats classified as Mayhew Marginals than less volatile recent election years such as 2004, 2012, and 2016 (see Figure 1.3 above). Broadly speaking, however, the same seats tend to be competitive from one election cycle to the next. The 2018 election—the year with the highest percentage of marginal seats in recent elections—still saw a smaller percentage of seats count as Mayhew Marginals than every congressional election from 1872 until 1900. With fewer competitive seats, a huge seat swing is far less likely. That recent elections have seen an increase in the average seat swing even as the playing field of competitive seats has diminished substantially is a testament to the amount of *vote* swing volatility that exists in the electorate today. Despite factors like gerrymandering and the nationalization of elections making a high seat swing less likely, volatility in the electorate still has found a way to break through these barriers in these elections.

Another way to look at the competitiveness of congressional results—at least in eras when elections are especially nationalized—is to examine the percentage of districts where the presidential vote closely mirrors the national presidential vote. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, presidential and congressional results often closely matched each other with a decreasing number of House seats voting for one party for president and the other for Congress (Carson and Roberts 2013, 73). In contrast, congressional elections in the 1970s sometimes featured a House-presidential correlation as low as 0.5.[16] Since the 1970s, congressional elections have become increasingly nationalized, and in recent elections the correlation between presidential vote is consistently above 0.9 (Jacobson 2021). In today's politics, if a seat is close presidentially, its congressional result is likely to be close as well. Thus, in eras like the present one, presidential vote determines which House seats will be competitive.

In the subfigure on the right of Figure 1.3 above, I display a bar chart of the percentage of House seats from 1872 until 2022 by year in which the two-party vote share for the Democratic candidate was within five percentage points of the national Democratic presidential vote (and thus, the two-party vote share for the Republican would also be within five percentage points of the national Republican presidential vote).[17] To illustrate my calculations here, if the national presidential vote was tied at 50 percent for both the Democratic and Republican candidate, congressional districts

in which the Democratic presidential candidate received between 45 and 55 percent of the presidential vote are classified in this most competitive category.

Before the 1930s, typically between 25 and 40 percent of congressional seats had a presidential vote that closely mirrored the national presidential vote. In closely contested presidential elections in this period, such as those from 1876 until 1892, a large number of congressional districts also featured a narrow presidential margin. In the 1920s—when presidential elections were uncompetitive—the percentage of congressional districts that mirrored the national presidential vote dropped below 25 percent of districts for several elections before rising back to typical historical levels in the 1930s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the era that featured an especially low correlation between presidential and congressional results, a large number of districts matched the national divide between the presidential candidates. Recently, as the correlation between presidential and congressional election results has increased, the number of seats that closely match presidential results has decreased substantially. Following the 2000 congressional redistricting, the percentage of House seats within 5 percentage points of the national presidential vote dropped from around 35 percent of seats in each election to around 25 percent of all House seats. The percent of districts declined further after the 2010 congressional redistricting to between only 15 to 20 percent of all House seats.

The decline of truly competitive House seats means that large swings in vote share for a party in House elections have a smaller effect in terms of the swing in seat share for a party. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, when there was a strong correlation between presidential and congressional results and a large number of House seats were close to the national presidential vote, a large number of House seats would swing between the parties even when there was a relatively small—or no—swing in the national popular vote. In Figure 1.4 below, I display the percentage of presidentially competitive seats won by each party by election year. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a huge inter-election variation in terms of what percentage of these seats were held by each party, with large swings from one election to the next. This variation decreased somewhat in the mid- and late 1900s before increasing again in recent election cycles. For example, the 2018 election saw Democrats increase their share of the closest presidential seats from about 40 percent of seats after the 2016 election to almost 80 percent of seats after the 2018 election. If there were as many presidentially competitive seats

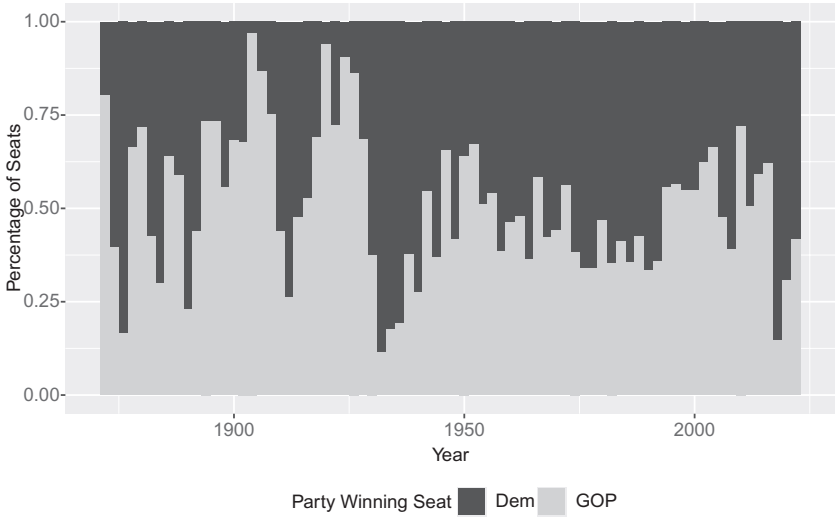

Fig. 1.4. Party Winning Seats Close to the National Presidential Vote

today as existed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, we may once again have seen seat swings like the more-than-100 seat gain that Republicans saw in 1894 in recent waves like 2010 and 2018. Even with fewer presidentially competitive seats, however, volatility in the electorate has powered large shifts in the percentage of these most competitive seats held by one party from one election to the next, translating to large seat swings like that which occurred in 2018. The declining number of competitive seats has worked against electoral volatility in the present era, but has still been unable to entirely prevent a rise in electoral volatility.

The United States Senate

For numerous reasons, volatility is easier to measure in House elections than in Senate elections. Only a third of the Senate is up at any one time, meaning that typically only 33 or 34 states have a Senate election each cycle unless there is a special election to finish a Senate term. The six-year term that senators enjoy is also itself a barrier to electoral volatility. Any change in what happens in a given Senate election year will be in response to what happened in the election two years earlier, as well as what happened in the election six years earlier. For example, 2018 featured a good national environment for Democrats, but the class of senators who were up for reelection had last

been up in 2012, a relatively good year for Democrats nationally. Indeed, this class of senators had seen *three consecutive cycles* of gains for Democrats in 2000, 2006, and 2012 and Democrats held 26 of the 35 seats up in 2018.[18] Furthermore, five of the Democratic senators from this class—Joe Donnelly (D-IN), Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), Joe Manchin (D-WV), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Jon Tester (D-MT)—represented states that Mitt Romney had won in 2012 and Donald Trump had won by large margins in 2016. Five other Democratic senators, Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Bob Casey (D-PA), Bill Nelson (D-FL), and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), represented states that had voted for Barack Obama in 2012 and then cast their electoral votes for Donald Trump four years later (Smith 2018).

In 2018, Democrats ultimately had a net loss of two Senate seats compared to before the election and a net loss of one seat as compared to the 2016 election.[19] In terms of vote share, Democrats received 57.76 percent of the US Senate two-party vote in 2018, up slightly from the 56.12 percent of the two-party vote share that Democrats had won with this class of senators in 2012.[20] However, this increase was somewhat deceiving, as no Republican advanced to the general election in California's Senate election in 2018 under their top-two primary system. In 2012, even as she received under 40 percent of the vote against Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Republican Elizabeth Emken received over 4.7 million votes. The fact that states each have equal representation in the US Senate also means that small-to-medium shifts in large states can overwhelm larger shifts in smaller states in terms of overall vote share, even as the latter trend has greater implications for representation. For example, in 2018 Democratic Senate candidate Rep. Beto O'Rourke increased Democrats' two-party vote share in Texas from 41.85 to 48.71—winning approximately 850,000 votes more than Democrat Paul Sadler had six years earlier—but not netting Democrats anything in terms of seat gains. Meanwhile, Democrats lost Senate seats in Missouri, North Dakota, and Indiana, three states which *combined* cast more than 3 million fewer votes than Texas did that year.

In total then, the seat swing in Senate elections can sometimes obscure volatility in voter preferences. Figure 1.5 below displays the average seat swing volatility in Senate elections going back to the start of the Republican Party in the subfigure on the left. Importantly, the universal direct election of Senators did not begin until 1914. This means that in elections before this period, seat swing volatility measures volatility in state legislative elections rather than shifts in voter preferences for Senators (although the two were

often related to one another). As with House seat swing volatility, the figure below shows generally higher volatility earlier in the period, with a decline after World War II. Unlike for the House, the mean seat swing volatility did not precipitously drop in this period, instead settling into a pattern of having a typical average seat swing between 2.5 and five Senate seats per election. The median seat swing did drop to historical lows in the late 1990s before it, and the mean seat swing rose after the turn of the century. The values of these statistics both peaked at around 6 Senate seats after the 2014 Senate elections before starting to drop off again. After the 2014 Senate elections, which saw Republicans gain nine Senate seats, the subsequent four elections have seen little change in net seats, with Democrats having a net gain of two seats in 2016, Republicans having a net gain of one seat in 2018 (or a two-seat gain if one does not count the Alabama flip in 2017), and Democrats having a net gain of three seats in 2020 and one seat in 2022. Increasingly, senators match the party of the presidential candidate who carried their state in the most recent election, with only six senators from a different party than the presidential candidate who carried their state following the 2020 presidential election (DeSilver 2021b).[21] As a result, there are fewer realistic opportunities for party gains outside the most volatile of election years.

Looking at average vote swing volatility, the pattern in Senate elections follows that of House elections much more closely. Because Senate

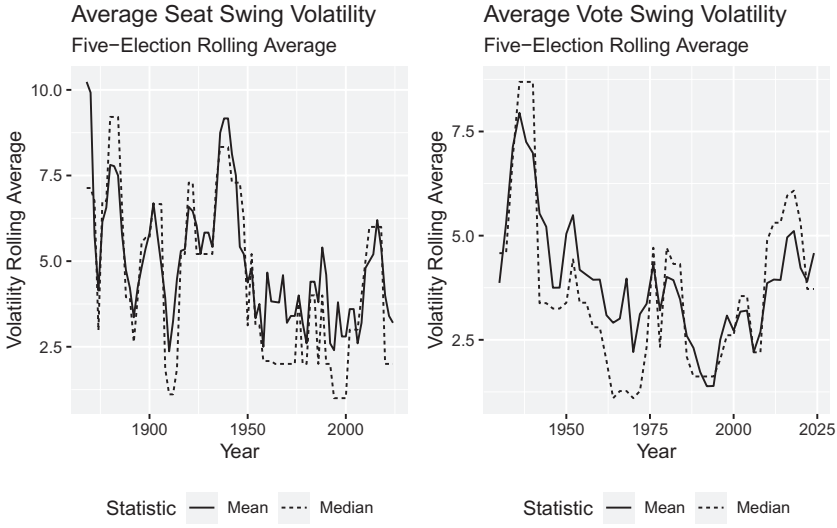

Fig. 1.5. Senate Seat and Vote Swing Volatility

elections occur every six years and a different class of senators is up every two years, in calculating average vote swing volatility I compare each year's national Senate vote to that from the election that occurred six years earlier instead of the one that took place two years prior. Additionally, since the universal direct election of senators began in 1914, the analysis presented in the right subfigure in Figure 1.5 above begins by comparing national popular vote support to the first Senate elections conducted in this manner (i.e., by comparing 1920 to 1914). Here, one can observe vote share volatility decreasing after World War II and then bottoming out heading into the 1994 election before starting to rise again. Since then, 1994, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014, and 2016 have seen the highest vote share volatility, with a change of at least 5 percentage points compared to the previous election. Large seat swing volatility does not always produce high seat swing volatility—in 2016 Democrats saw a 6.73 percentage point increase in their vote share as compared to 2010, but only gained a net of two seats. The staggered nature of Senate elections also means that Senate volatility does not always match House volatility. For example, the 2014 Senate elections saw Republicans gain 9 seats and have a 7.31 percentage point increase in vote share compared to 2008, in large part because the Senate class that was up for reelection was last up in a very good Democratic year. House gains for Republicans that year were much more modest.

The mismatch between Senate and House volatility can be seen most clearly when comparing which elections count as Senate waves to those I classified as House waves. Applying my House wave definition presented earlier in this chapter to Senate elections, the elections listed in Table 1.2 below would be classified as Senate waves. Some election years such as 1994, 2006, and 2008 feature waves in both chambers, while others like 1986 and 2014 are Senate-only waves. The institutional structure of the Senate means that volatility in the electorate will not translate into the large seat swings that become waves in the same way as in the House. The more direct representative linkage that exists between the people and their representatives in the lower chamber means that the analyses I do in future chapters will focus more on the House of Representatives, but I will at times also return to discussing volatility in the Senate. The 2014 Senate election in particular serves as a good example of how discontent in the second half of the Obama administration was related to increased volatility in the electorate and the outcomes of Senate elections in states such as Iowa and West Virginia foreshadowed what was to come in the next presidential election.

Table 1.2. Senate Waves, 1868–2022

Democratic Senate Waves	Republican Senate Waves	Non-Waves
1874, 1876, 1878, 1892, 1910, 1912, 1914, 1926, 1930, 1932, 1934, 1958, 1974, 1986, 2000, 2006, 2008	1888, 1894, 1896, 1898, 1918, 1920, 1928, 1942, 1946, 1950, 1968, 1980, 1994, 2004, 2014	1868, 1870, 1872, 1880, 1882, 1884, 1886, 1890, 1900, 1902, 1904, 1906, 1908, 1916, 1922, 1924, 1936, 1938, 1940, 1944, 1948, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1978, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2018, 2020

Theoretical Sketch and Plan of Book

Political Discontent and the Rise of Electoral Volatility

Juxtaposed alongside the recent increase in electoral volatility, the years since the mid-2000s have also featured a deeply and consistently dissatisfied public. As Campbell (2018, 9) notes, we are in a period of enduring "discontent, angst and anxiety" among the American public. In the next several chapters, I present and then test a theory arguing that this discontent has resulted in the increase in electoral volatility. A dissatisfied public taking out their frustrations on an unpopular president (or that president's party), but then seeing their mood improve when they perceive conditions as having improved, is a normal state of affairs in American politics. What we have seen in the post-2006 period is quite atypical however, both in terms of the *persistence* of the public's dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the United States, and how the public has continually taken out their frustrations in elections.

Numerous measures used by political scientists and pollsters to measure satisfaction with government and the political system in general show the depths and endurance of the nation's sour mood and how this departs from usual patterns. Since the late 1970s, the Gallup Poll has frequently asked respondents if they are "satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time" (Gallup n.d.). Historically, this indicator fluctuated, but it has remained in negative territory for over two decades. In fact, the last time more registered voters have told Gallup that they were "satisfied" than said they were "dissatisfied" was in a Gallup

survey taken from December 11th to 14th of 2003, which was in the field when Saddam Hussein was captured by US forces in Iraq. In this survey, 50 percent expressed satisfaction and 48 percent expressed dissatisfaction. Since the 2006 midterm elections, the "satisfied" number has only reached even 45 percent once, in early 2021 right after the inauguration of President Joe Biden in a Gallup survey fielded from February 3–16, 2021. Since the mid-2000s, the "satisfied" number has typically been in the 20s or 30s and has even dipped below 20 percent on several occasions, registering values below 10 percent in several surveys taken in the midst of the financial crisis in late 2008, and 11 percent in a Gallup survey in early 2021 that was in the field during the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol. Other indicators, such as the classic question popularized by Ronald Reagan's pollster Richard Wirthlin asking respondents if they feel the country is going in the "right direction" or if it is off on the "wrong track," also indicate a deeply dissatisfied public (Cook 2020). Similar to Gallup's satisfaction question, in both surveys from public pollster and in the American National Election Studies (ANES), this number fluctuated historically, but has been negative since the mid-2000s (Zitner and Dougherty 2020).

Causes of Electoral Volatility

I begin this study by examining the *causes* of electoral volatility. In Chapter Two, I focus specifically on how political dissatisfaction affects vote choice. In this chapter, I theorize that the persistently high levels of political dissatisfaction we have seen in the electorate have resulted in the high volatility that existed in the 2006–2018 midterm elections. For independents, I argue that dissatisfaction makes a voter more likely to support the presidential out-party in the subsequent midterm election as they blame the president for the state of affairs in the country. For partisans, discontent supercharges turnout among frustrated out-party partisans while depressing turnout among frustrated voters from the president's party. Notably, there is a small, but meaningful share of voters in recent elections who approve of the president, but are dissatisfied with the direction of the country, allowing this analysis to build upon studies of the effect of presidential approval in midterms.

In Chapter Three, I examine the historical linkage between political discontent and seat swings. The current period of electoral volatility has numerous similarities to that of the late 1800s, between roughly 1874 and

1896. Notable similarities exist between these eras in terms of polarization, as well as in the prominence of issues including economic inequality and actions to combat that inequality, efforts to achieve racial equity and the racist reaction of white political leaders who perceive a threat to their social status, and immigration and xenophobic reactions, particularly to increased non-Western European immigration. Each of these issues has the potential to cause direct actions such as strikes, protests, and sometimes even riots, which in turn feeds into social unrest and then spills into electoral politics. The close balance between the parties and high levels of polarization also drives people to participate in elections and can cause large swings between elections. Drawing on a method developed by Barrett et al. (2020) for IMF Working Papers to quantify social unrest from media coverage, I conduct a content analysis of *New York Times* articles to measure social unrest that allows me to test my theory using a macro-level model of electoral volatility since the late 1800s.

Consequences of Electoral Volatility

Electoral volatility also has significant *consequences* for the health of American democracy, which I focus on in the second half of the book. In Chapter Four, I begin to examine the micro-level ramifications of electoral volatility in terms who enters Congress and who these new members replace. Potential wave elections are likely to see shrewd politicians run who see political conditions as potentially favoring their party (Jacobson and Kernell 1983), but also present an opportunity for political amateurs to win (Canon 1990). In both instances, those who win are unlikely to make a career of Congress, either because they want to move up the political opportunity structure or because they are likely to lose reelection since they initially won seats that often lean against their party in an unusually bad year for their party. I also find that these less-experienced new members are less legislatively effective than their predecessors, which has potentially negative effects on Congress's ability to govern.

I next turn to the macro-level consequences of electoral volatility on policymaking. In Chapter Five, I draw on existing studies on political behavior, the policy process, and spatial voting in legislatures to build upon existing theories of lawmaking. I contend that the main consequence of these wave elections, which generally produced divided government, was (mostly) increased gridlock in Congress.[22] Subsequently, I argue that the

policy outcomes of highly volatile elections in the present era itself feeds into higher volatility and causes a kind of "policy doom loop." I contend that fickle independent voters are likely to be dissatisfied with the results of wave elections, being frustrated both by gridlock and the rare major policies that do pass like the Affordable Care Act or tax cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, but were passed with the support of only one political party. At the same time, partisans from the president's party are often disappointed with the outcome of wave elections. I posit that the "Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency" (Nyhan 2021)—where people think the president has almost superhero-level powers to achieve policy change—feeds into unrealistic expectations, particularly among partisans, and causes a cycle of volatility, policy stagnation, and then volatility again. Thus, I argue, the consequences and causes of electoral volatility are inextricably linked to one another.

Finally, in Chapter Six I offer some initial thoughts about the relative lack of electoral volatility in 2022. Here, I examine the role of the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Supreme Court decision and voters' reaction to the January 6th insurrection in the 2022 election. Among independents, the belief that former President Trump held at least some responsibility for the events of January 6, 2021 in particular related significantly to a Democratic vote in the midterms. Anger among Democrats about the events of this day, as well as the *Dobbs* decision, played a partisan turnout gap that existed in previous midterm. I also find that anger about the *Dobbs* decision moderated the effect of government ineffectiveness that both results from and subsequently causes the policy doom loop.

In the rest of this final chapter, I conclude by reflecting on how the policy doom loop has degraded the state of American democracy. America's standing as a democracy has fallen in democracy scores ranging from Freedom House to V-Dem (Freedom House 2020, Varieties of Democracy n.d.). Competitive elections are the lifeblood of a democracy— indeed, one of the subindicators on Freedom House asks "Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?" on which the United States scores a perfect 4/4— but electoral volatility can also feed into political dysfunction. In 2022 and 2023, America lost a point on Freedom House's measure due to a decline in a question that asked if "the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government" (Freedom House 2022 and 2023). This was in part because "partisan polarization and obstruction in

Congress has repeatedly delayed appropriations bills." In America's constitutional system where "ambition [is meant] to counteract ambition" (Madison 1788), electoral volatility (particularly that in midterm elections) has typically resulted in increased gridlock in an era of extraordinary polarization, making it difficult for the government to even carry out its most essential responsibilities. I then close by offering a series of potential solutions to end the policy doom loop in which the country finds itself. Drawing upon evidence from the states, the reforms examined here include Alaska's new top-four ranked-choice voting system, Colorado's Give a Vote to Every Legislator (GAVEL) reform that allows minority party legislators to see some of their proposals come to a vote (Clark 2015, 7–8), and Nevada's ballot option allowing voters to cast a protest vote for "none of the above." These reforms seek to achieve a healthier balance where electoral volatility can serve as a periodic instrument to punish an in-party that the people view is out of touch or not serving their interests, rather than nearly every election exhibiting high levels of volatility.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that multiple measures show that electoral volatility has increased in recent years, particularly for the House of Representatives. After declining over the course of the late 20th century into the start of the 21st century, average seat swings have increased in House elections. Vote swing volatility, the focus of the Pedersen Index (1979), has risen to near-historic average highs. These large vote swings are not turning into the gigantic seat swings of the past because the nationalization of House elections, combined with increased partisan gerrymandering in an era of polarization, means that only the decreasing number of House seats that feature a relatively even divide between the parties are truly competitive. The large vote swing that many recent House elections experienced somewhat increases the number of seats in play and the winning party often wins upwards of 75 percent of competitive seats in waves, allowing the average seat swing to increase, if not reaching the historic highs of the 1800s. Having established that electoral volatility has risen, the next step is to provide a full account explaining this increase. In the next chapter, I present an explanation that focuses on the role of political discontent on turnout and vote choice.

CHAPTER 2

Political Discontent and the Roots of Electoral Volatility

> *"I want to speak to you first tonight about a subject even more serious than energy or inflation. I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy.… It is a crisis of confidence."*
>
> —President Jimmy Carter, July 15, 1979

On July 15, 1979, President Jimmy Carter delivered what came to be known (often derisively) as the "malaise speech."[1] America was facing a series of crises, including high inflation and energy shortages, but Carter chose to speak on a much broader topic: the confidence of the American people. In this speech, Carter (1979) argued that Americans were losing faith in American ideal of progress and argued that the aspiration "that the days of our children would be better than" those of the current generation was now imperiled. Furthermore, according to Carter, Americans as democratic citizens no longer felt that they had the ability to positively shape the future of the country in order to return to a future they could believe in. With a stagnant Congress that often would not act to address critical challenges, Carter sought to reinvigorate change that would begin with the American people themselves.

Public opinion data bore out the "crisis in confidence" that Carter diagnosed as being present with the American people. In February of 1979, Gallup began asking a now-frequently asked question regarding whether people were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States. In this first poll from Gallup, 26 percent of Americans stated that they were satisfied, compared with 69 percent who were dissatisfied (Gallup Poll n.d.). Gallup was actually in the field with a survey during Carter's speech the

second time they asked this question and the results were even more negative. In this Gallup Poll, conducted July 13th to 16th of 1979, only 12 percent of Americans said that they were satisfied, with 84 percent saying that they were dissatisfied. Despite the call to action that Carter made in his speech, poll numbers remained broadly the same in subsequent surveys. Carter's own public approval numbers saw only a slight bump from 29 percent in the Gallup Poll fielded during the speech to 32 percent in the next Gallup Poll conducted several weeks later. Historian Kevin Mattson also notes that although Carter initially received positive phone calls and letters, he soon burned this new goodwill by firing several Cabinet officials (NPR 2009, Mattson 2009). Similarly, the Gallup satisfaction number grew only slightly to 19 percent satisfied (with 77 percent dissatisfied) the next time the firm polled this question in November 1979 (Gallup n.d.).

In 1980, Carter—whose approval grew back into positive territory in late 1979 and early 1980 due to a rally-around-the-flag effect in the early days of the Iran Hostage Crisis before dropping back into the low 30s—lost reelection by an overwhelming margin to former California Governor Ronald Reagan.[2] What was perhaps most notable about Carter's loss, however, was the large seat swing against Democrats NPR that took place in both the House and Senate. With Republicans gaining 35 in the House seats, Democrats fell to a 243–192 majority, tied for the second smallest majority held by the party since they won control of the majority in 1954. While still a minority, Republicans were able to join with conservative, mostly southern Boll Weevil Democrats to win some votes, such as to pass President Reagan's first budget in 1981 (Rohde 1991, 60–63). Even more dramatically, Republicans won control of the Senate for the first time since 1954 with a gain of 12 seats, an outcome that Lee (2016, 34) said was even more traumatic for Democrats than losing control of the presidency. In other words, Carter's negative popularity—combined with general dissatisfaction with the direction of the country— had consequences both for himself and his party. While Gallup did not poll the satisfaction question at all in 1980, a final reading in the last days of the Carter presidency in January 1981 was similar to the 1979 numbers: 17 percent satisfied and 78 dissatisfied.

It was with this backdrop that President Reagan took over in January 1981. While Gallup's first reading during the 40th President's first term saw the number at its highest level in the history of the poll to that point—33 percent satisfied and 61 percent dissatisfied—the indicator soon fell back into the 20s (Gallup n.d.). With Democrats gaining 26 seats in the 1982

midterms, it seemed like Ronald Regan could be another Jimmy Carter (or Gerald Ford)—an unpopular one-term president whose party also lost a significant number of House seats. After a poor performance in the 1982 midterms, however, Reagan saw his fortunes improve and his approval rating and Americans' satisfaction with the direction country both grew. Over the next several decades, both presidential approval and the Gallup satisfaction number fluctuated.

While the "crisis in confidence" that Carter diagnosed in 1979 abated, this speech and its broader political context nonetheless has crucial lessons for the politics of today. Unlike in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the dissatisfaction indicator has remained persistently low since George W. Bush's second term and has not rebounded, even when presidents have sometimes seen their individual approval ratings exceed 50 percent. Throughout the history of Gallup polling this question, low levels of satisfaction with how things are going in the country correlate with high electoral volatility. Historically, electoral volatility has often returned to lower levels when Americans were more satisfied with the direction of the country and volatility too has declined. Since 2006, however, dissatisfaction has endured at a high level amidst crises ranging from the financial crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic and electoral volatility has been typically high, particularly in midterm elections.

In this chapter, I connect these two phenomena to one another. I begin by examining prior accounts of the role of political discontent on electoral volatility. I then draw a distinction between political discontent and presidential approval and theorize that discontent in the electorate can result in a large seat loss for the president's party even when presidential approval is not particularly low as dissatisfied voters seek *somebody* to blame for the state of the country. I examine the role of political discontent in the four midterms from 2006–2018 by using individual-level survey data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES, now CES), Washington Post/ABC News polls in 2006, 2010, and 2014, the Syracuse University 2018 CCES module, and the 2018 Voter Analysis Survey (see Ansolabehere 2010, Washington Post/ABC News 2006, Washington Post/ABC News 2010, Washington Post/ABC News 2014, Fox News/Associated Press [AP Votecast] 2018, Gadarian 2020). Finally, I conclude by examining discussing differences in the role of discontent on congressional elections in midterms and presidential election years.

Macro-Level Political Dissatisfaction and Presidential Approval

Previous Accounts

A vast literature exists on the connection between political discontent, presidential approval, and electoral volatility. As seat swings are typically greatest in midterm election years, much of this literature focuses on presidential approval and its effect on midterm seat swings.[3] Tufte (1975, 817) built a model of midterm House election outcomes that had two independent variables: presidential approval and the "yearly change in real disposable personal income per capita." This simple model achieved a large R^2 value of 0.912, indicating that more than 90 percent of the variation in the amount of midterm seat swing could be explained by just these two independent variables (the highest possible value would be 1.0).[4] Since then, many models of congressional elections have employed these two types of variables, with much of the debate focusing extensively around which economic variable to employ. For example, Lewis-Beck and Rice (1984, 478) use "the growth rate in real GNP per capita in the quarter nine to six months model—including both presidential and midterm congressional elections—achieves an R^2 of 0.8. Decades later, this general framework still does relatively well at predicting congressional election results. For example, in the lead up to the 2018 midterms, a piece published by Lewis-Beck and Tien (2018) in *PS: Political Science and Politics*' regular election forecasting issue includes a model with presidential approval and the change in real income as its economic variable, as well as a third (dummy) variable indicating whether the election was taking place in a midterm year. While the R^2 value here is lower, at around 0.6, they demonstrate that these factors are still relevant even as Congress has gone from being solidly Democratic to highly competitive. Other recent models of congressional elections that also include an approval variable, such as one produced by Abramowitz (2019) for *Sabato's Crystal Ball*, are even better at predicting outcomes. Abramowitz's model, which incorporates approval alongside a measure of the number of seats held by the president's party, a measure of how well the president's party performs in the generic ballot, and a midterm dummy, achieves an R^2 of 0.81. In total, existing research demonstrates a clear link between presidential approval and the magnitude of seat gains, typically for the opposing party.

Previous accounts also explain why presidential approval—the factor driving these seat swings—rises and falls. Presidents usually start with a high approval early in their presidency in the "honeymoon period" before approval starts to fall (Brody 1991, Stimson 2015a). Stimson (2015a, 132) argues that presidents have an equilibrium-level approval rating of about 50 percent.[5] However, outside events can affect a president's approval, causing it to move either above or below that level. First among these effects is the economy, with presidents being more popular when the economy is good and less popular when conditions are poor (Stimson 2015a, also see Beck 1991 and Burden and Mughan 2003). Second, crises can also cause a president's approval to move up initially at first due to a "rally-around-the-flag" effect (Mueller 1973, Stimson 2015a), but long-term crises, particularly wars with high casualties can have the opposite effect and bring down approval. Finally, presidents who seek to move policy to an ideological extreme that falls outside the public's "zone of acquiescence" are likely to experience a thermostatic effect where the public's policy preferences move in the opposite direction (Stimson 2004, 22). Thus, a president seeking to move policy too far to the left might see policy preferences become more conservative (and vice versa), which can sometimes have a residual effect on presidential approval. For example, President Trump's persistently low approval rating was at its lowest in late 2017, after efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act had failed and congressional Republicans were in the process of passing the Trump tax cuts, which were also quite unpopular (Scott 2018). These are certainly not the only factors to affect presidential approval, but are ones that are consistently important over time. A bad economy, a war or other crisis that is going badly, or unpopular policy each represent sources of dissatisfaction among the public that translate into a lower approval rating for the president.

A Recent Disconnect Between Presidential Approval and Political Discontent

These previous accounts suggest that political discontent and presidential approval are closely correlated, perhaps even one and the same. If these two indicators are indeed synonymous, examining the specific role of political discontent on electoral volatility may not be a particular novel or fruitful endeavor. To examine the extent to which political dissatisfaction and disapproval correlate with one another throughout recent American political

history, I used data from Gallup going back to 1979, when the organization started polling the satisfaction question. Gallup did not ask this question as consistently in some periods as they did in others, presenting a challenge (for example, Gallup polled the question three times in 1979 but not at all in 1980). In this endeavor, Jim Stimson's wcalc6 software helps to fill in these gaps (Stimson 2015b). Stimson's software allows one to input survey marginals and then obtain an estimate of the percentage of respondents holding a certain opinion on a regular basis, such as in yearly, quarterly, monthly, or even daily intervals. Using Stimson's software, I employ Gallup data to generate quarterly estimates of both presidential approval and satisfaction with the direction of the country and display these two separate time series in Figure 2.1 below.

In this figure, there is a close connection between these two measures throughout much of this period. The gap between the levels of each is often quite small and when one measure increases, so too does the other. However, around when dissatisfaction began its descent to its recent perpetually low level, this measure appears to decouple from presidential approval. An examination of the specific correlation between these two measures bears out this pattern. Overall, in the entire period, the correlation (Pearson's r) between these two measures is 0.76; however, this overall correlation belies

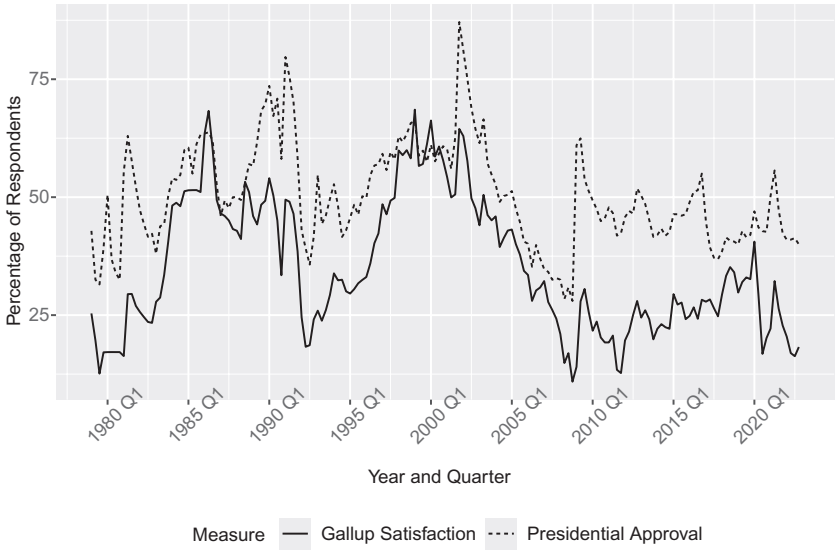

Fig. 2.1. Presidential Approval and Satisfaction

the change that happens around the start of the second term of the George W. Bush administration. From the first quarter of 1979 until the last quarter of 2004, the correlation between these two measures is a quite strong 0.772. From the first quarter of 2005 until the last quarter of 2022, this correlation drops to 0.16. This data demonstrates that, at least at the macro-level, these two measures have largely decoupled over the past several decades. In later chapters of this book, I examine the cause of this decoupling more closely, focusing especially on the role of unrest in society and negative feedback from the policymaking process. First, however, I must establish a clear link between political discontent and high electoral volatility that occurred in midterm elections from 2006 until 2018.

A Short Note on Discontent vs. Political Trust

Before examining the linkage between political discontent and electoral volatility, I briefly must discuss the similarities and differences between political discontent and political trust. Hetherington and other scholars have published a number of studies on political trust and its importance to the functioning of American democracy since his 1998 article on the topic in the *American Political Science Review* (e.g., see Hetherington 1998, Hetherington 2005, Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). In this article, Hetherington (1998, 791) draws on the work of Stokes (1962) and Miller 1974) to defines trust as "a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people's normative expectations." There are clear similarities between (mis) trust in government and political discontent. A voter who does think that governmental operations meet their aspirations is inherently more likely to express discontent with that government. For most voters, their answers to questions about trust and satisfaction are likely to align. At the same time, a voter might not trust the government, but begrudgingly express satisfaction if economic circumstances are good or if the voter believes the government has done a good job at keeping the country safe.

An example of a potential disconnect between trust and satisfaction comes from a voter in an ad run by Governor John Kasich (R-OH) in his reelection campaign in 2014 after a tumultuous first term. After winning a narrow victory over Governor Ted Strickland (D-OH) in 2010, Kasich and Republicans in the legislature moved to immediately restrict collective bargaining for all public employees, including police officers. Opponents

of the collective bargaining ban used a provision in the Ohio Revised Code that allowed them to collect signature to place the collective bargaining ban in front of voters in the November 2011 election (McGraw 2016, Ohio Revised Code n.d.). A broad coalition including teachers, firefighters, and police officers organized against the ban and ultimately 62 percent of Ohio voters sided with them to repeal it (Weiner 2011). With his approval at 36 percent in an early November 2011 Quinnipiac University Poll, Kasich sought to move back to the center and show he had learned something from the issue's defeat (Quinnipiac University Poll 2011). In the aforementioned ad, a police officer seated in a diner begins "When John Kasich became governor, he shook things up and upset working people including me," a clear reference to the collective bargaining issue. The ad continues with the police officer stating, "Kasich's tough, but he listened" before listing a series of accomplishments such as the number of jobs created during Kasich's term.[6] This particular voter understands that the reason Kasich did not continue to pursue the ban on collective bargaining is because he was constrained by the voters. This voter almost certainly did not trust Kasich not to pursue it again were public opinion to change, but at the same time was satisfied with the overall direction of policy in Ohio since the start of the Kasich administration.

Next, to more closely examine the quantitative relationship between trust and satisfaction at the national level, I again use Stimson's wcalc6 to generate a quarterly time series for political trust from the first quarter of 1979 through the end of 2022 (see Figure 2.2 below). Helpfully, the Pew Research Center has compiled polling data from political trust from its own polls, those from other firms, and from the ANES that allows me to generate this time series, displayed in Figure 2.2 below. A similar over-time pattern to that I observed between approval and satisfaction exists here. Throughout the entire period there is a relatively strong 0.77 correlation between the two measures. However, that correlation is much stronger before the start of George W. Bush's second term (0.50 from Q1 1979 to Q4 2004) than since the start of 2005, where it is a much weaker 0.26. The level of both trust and satisfaction dropped dramatically in the early 2000s, but the specific fluctuations of these measures have not always aligned. For example, a gap between these two measures developed during the end of the Obama administration and start of the Trump administration as the country's economic conditions finally began to noticeably improved from lows of the Great Recession. Satisfaction, while remaining well below historical

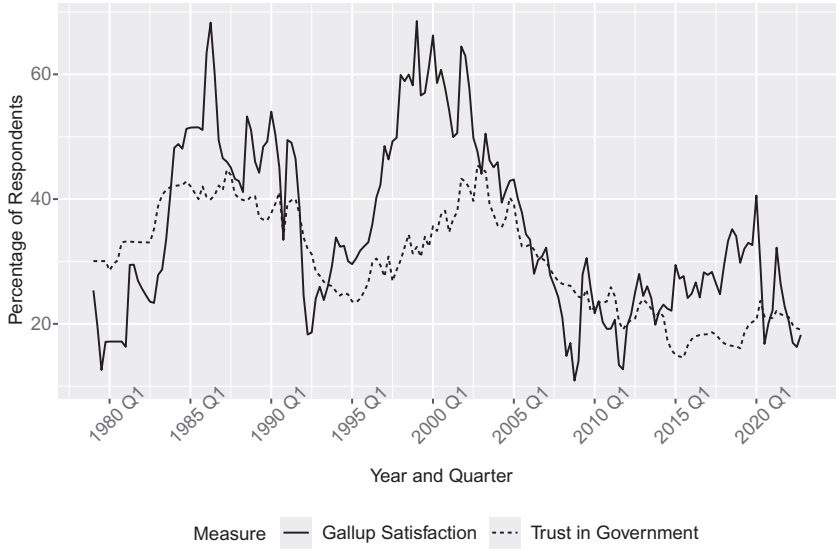

Fig. 2.2. Political Trust and Satisfaction

levels, rose somewhat while trust remained perpetually low.[7] In total, these two measures while similar— are increasingly distinct from each other. I thus return to considering the causes of discontent.

Micro-Level Political Dissatisfaction and the Rise of Electoral Volatility

A voter who is dissatisfied comes to the ballot box with a different outlook and different motivations than one who is generally content with the direction of the country. I posit that dissatisfaction has different effects on the electoral behavior of political independents and on partisans, but that each of these effects can result in electoral volatility that harms the president's party. Subsequently, I test this theory using survey data from the 2006 CCES, as well as pre-election polls from the ABC News and the *Washington Post* and public data from Syracuse University's 2018 module on the CCES. I focus here on these recent midterm elections because they exhibit particular volatility, but persisting dissatisfaction could also cause a high seat swing in a presidential election, as happened in 2008.

For independents, political dissatisfaction affects vote choice, making them less likely to support the president's party in the next midterm. As Fiorina (2017, 111) notes, political independents are the "marginal

members of an electoral coalition." These independent voters are often not nearly as supportive of the president and their agenda as are the partisans of the president's party, perhaps even viewing the presidential candidate they vote for as the "lesser of two evils." Two years after the president's victory, as the realities of governing set in and the president has had to make unpopular decisions, these already-doubting independent voters—who also often like the idea of divided government in theory (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2004)—shift their support to the other party. In recent elections, events such Hurricane Katrina and rising casualties in Iraq before 2006, continued economic struggles leading up to 2010, problems with the rollout of healthcare.gov and worries about Ebola ahead of 2014, and actions ranging from the erratic (e.g., frequent turnover in the White House staff epitomized by the 11-day tenure of Anthony Scaramucci) to malicious (e.g., his speech after Charlottesville) by Donald Trump in the years before 2018, cause independents to direct their frustration towards the president, even when they indicate they approve of the president. Since the president is not on the ballot in the midterm, independents take out their frustration on candidates from the president's party, and its candidates are hurt by the partisan tide of that election (Campbell 1960, 400).

Dissatisfaction from independents in recent years does not always overlap with disapproval of the president. While partisans to at least some extent frequently shift their answer to the Gallup satisfaction question based upon the party of the president, since 2006, independents—even when presidential approval is relatively high— are just generally dissatisfied (e.g., see Brennan 2022). This dissatisfaction provides an additional impetus to vote against the party of the president that builds on existing accounts that focus only on presidential approval. A majority of independents in midterms tend to disapprove of the president, so being dissatisfied is likely to make them *even more* likely to want to change party control in Washington. Even those independents who are dissatisfied with the direction of the country, but still approve of the president—as many as 25 percent of all independents in recent elections— may still take out their frustration on the president's party. In 2006, 2010, and 2018, the president's party controlled both houses of Congress heading into the midterm election, so it follows for a frustrated independent to blame the party in power. Even in a circumstance like 2014 when Democrats controlled the Senate and the presidency, but not the House, independents—who are relatively less likely to know which party controls Congress than are partisans—are likely to take out their

frustrations on the president's party, which they see as the party of government (Saad 2014).[8] Therefore, I expect to find a link between dissatisfaction with the state of the country and voting against the president's party among independents in recent midterm elections, which has subsequently caused a substantial amount of vote share volatility that has been translated into seat share volatility in recent midterm elections.

Among partisans, the effect of dissatisfaction is more likely to be seen in terms of engagement in the electoral process than in vote choice. If dissatisfaction is high, the president's party may see some of their partisans shift to the other party and partisans from the other party may vote for candidates from the other party at even higher rates than usual. However, the effect of political dissatisfaction is particularly likely to appear in other forms of political engagement. Political engagement can take a variety of forms, including volunteering for a candidate, going to rallies, donating money, or casting a ballot for a preferred candidate on Election Day.

While my theory would apply to a variety of forms of engagement, I focus here on the decision to vote. Voting is not a costless activity (i.e., the "c" term of Riker and Ordeshook's classic 1968 model), and since the probability of one voter's ballot being decisive in an election is low (i.e., the "p" term), a voter needs to derive some kind of intrinsic benefit from voting (i.e., the "D" term). Partisans from the party that does not control the White House will react negatively to many of the policies proposed and passed and executive actions taken by the president, particularly in a time of high polarization like the current period. As Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) find, electoral loss makes partisans on the losing side particularly angry. These electoral losses may turn into policy losses—or at least the perception of policy losses. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) find that individuals' risk perceptions center more on preventing losses than achieving gains. Thus, it follows that the partisan threat perceived by the party not controlling the White House will motivate them to turn out at higher rates. In contrast, any potential gains for the president's party will serve as far less of an inspiration to cast ballots.

Indeed, even when the president's party does achieve policy gains, they are often seen as not being enough by the party's base. For example, even though President Obama achieved the greatest expansion of the social safety net since the passage of the Great Society during the Lyndon Johnson administration, many progressives were still dissatisfied with the rate of policy change. Books such as *Buyer's Remorse: How Obama Let Progressives*

Down by Bill Press (2016) and "A Crisis Wasted: Barack Obama's Defining Decisions" by Reed Hundt (2019) demonstrate the frustration than can be felt by partisans even in the midst of policy successes that are substantial by historical standards. Consequently, some partisans of the president's party may disengage with politics, such as by not casting ballots in midterm elections. This is not to say that most or even many partisans will do this; however, when coupled with the higher turnout from voters in the other party, a turnout gap can develop that causes further seat losses for the president's party. In total, when dissatisfaction is high, I expect turnout from the party opposite from the president to see higher turnout, while turnout from the president's party decreases.

Political Independents, Electoral Dissatisfaction, and Vote Choice Volatility

I begin by testing my theory for independent voters in midterm elections from 2006–2018. The ANES stopped conducting regular surveys during midterm elections after 2002, so I turn to the CCES here. In 2006, the CCES asked as part of their common content a similar question to the Gallup satisfaction question, specifically asking "All in all, are you satisfied with the way things are going in this country?" After 2006, the CCES stopped asking this question so I turned to other surveys in order to test my expectations. First, however, I include a logistic regression model with just the 2006 CCES data (see Table 2.1 below), focusing on self-declared independent voters, with the dependent variable representing whether the respondent supported the presidential out-party (in the case of 2006, Democrats). In this model, my focal independent variable is a dummy variable for whether the respondent is satisfied with the direction of the country ("1" indicates dissatisfaction, "0" indicates satisfaction). I also include a series of control variables that are likely to relate to vote choice in midterm elections. These controls include presidential approval, a 3-point measure of ideology, and dummy variables for whether the respondent is BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), female, a college graduate, and senior citizen (age 65 or over).

To examine midterm elections after 2006, I turned to other surveys. ABC News and the *Washington Post* have consistently conducted surveys before congressional elections from which the raw data is available from the Roper Center. In surveys just before the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterm elections, the ABC/Washington Post poll asked voters if they thought

things in the country were "generally going in the right direction," or if they believed that "things [had] gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track." While slightly different from Gallup's satisfaction question, this measure taps into the same broad idea. Unfortunately, the ABC/Washington Post poll stopped asking this question in early 2017, so there is not a survey from these organizations ahead of the 2018 midterms. However, Syracuse University asked this question on their 2018 CCES module, as well as including all of the other variables used in this model. The individual sample size for each of these surveys is relatively small—and even smaller when just looking at a subgroup of voters such as independents. Thus, to examine all four of these midterm elections, I combine the three ABC/Washington Post surveys with the Syracuse CCES module into a single model. I make two modifications from the 2006 CCES model. First, I transform the ideology variable so that the ideology associated with the president's party has as the highest value for each year and the ideology of the other party is the lowest value in each year (so, from liberal to conservative in 2006 and 2018, and from conservative to liberal in 2010 and 2014). Second, I include year dummies to account for the fact that individual election years (or the design of the survey conducted that year) may cause a different level of support for the president's party.

Finally, to look more specifically at 2018, I use data from the 2018 Voter Analysis Survey (Fox News/Associated Press [AP-Votecast] 2018). The VAS is a large-sample alternative to the exit poll that is used by the Associated Press and Fox News, and is conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. It differs from traditional exit polls in that respondents are called before Election Day rather than being surveyed at the polls, and the sample includes both voters and non-voters. My model with the VAS uses the same controls as previous models.

Notably, only a moderate *micro-level* correlation exists between political dissatisfaction and presidential disapproval in the surveys I use in my analysis. For example, the correlation between these two variables in the dataset combining the three *Washington Pos*t polls and the Syracuse CCES module is 0.595.[9] This moderate correlation is the result of there being 16.5 percent of respondents who stated that they approved of the president's performance, but were dissatisfied with the direction of the country. As displayed in Figure 2.3 below, this group is the third largest of the four possible combinations of approval and satisfaction. Interestingly, nearly as many respondents answered approve and dissatisfied as answered approve and satisfied.

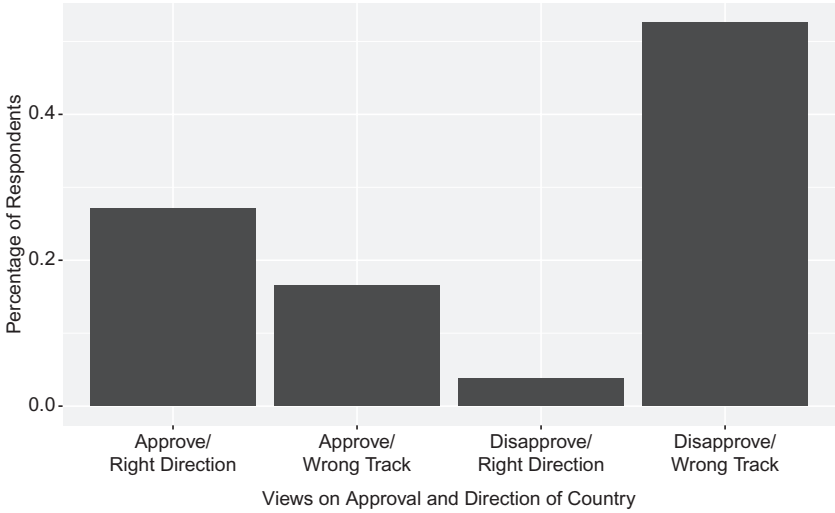

Fig. 2.3. Different Groupings of Approval and Views on Direction of the Country

Besides making up a sizable portion of voters, these approve/dissatisfied respondents are also of normative interest due to the cross-pressures they face when making voting decisions.

I report the results from my vote choice models in Table 2.1 below. In all three models, the dissatisfaction (or right direction/wrong track) coefficient is statistically significant and positive, with those who indicate dissatisfaction being more likely to support the presidential out-party. Presidential disapproval is also statistically significant and positive. My argument here is not that presidential approval does not matter, but rather that discontent is *also* important in explaining recent midterm outcomes. To better elucidate the effect of my focal independent variables of disapproval and dissatisfaction, I calculated the predicted probability of turnout based upon one's answer to the satisfaction and approval questions when other variables are set to their median or modal levels. I provide those estimates in Tables 2.2, 2.3., and 2.4 below.

In the 2006 model, presidential approvers saw their probability of voting Democratic increase from 4.2 percent to 14.7 percent as the answer to the satisfaction question changed from "satisfied" to dissatisfied," with other variables held at their means. Among disapprovers, 77.9 percent of those who indicated satisfaction with the direction of the country voted Democratic, compared to 93.3 percent of those who were dissatisfied. The

Table 2.1. Satisfaction/Right Direction and Independent Voting Behavior in Midterms, 2006–2018[10]

Variable	2006 CCES Satisfaction: Independents Model	2006–2018 Combined Surveys: Independents Model	2018 Voter Analysis Survey
Dissatisfied/Wrong Track	1.38* (0.27)	1.04* (0.27)	1.17* (0.07)
Disapprove of President	4.39* (0.21)	2.64* (0.23)	2.43* (0.04)
Ideology	-2.34* (0.14)	-1.02* (0.16)	-1.29* (0.03)
BIPOC Respondent	0.40* (0.19)	0.08 (0.25)	0.50* (0.04)
Female Respondent	0.07 (0.15)	-0.12 (0.21)	-0.06 (0.03)
College Graduate	-0.23 (0.15)	0.16 (0.21)	-0.01 (0.03)
Senior Citizen	0.20 (0.17)	-0.04 (0.25)	0.14* (0.04)
2010 Dummy	-	-0.30 (0.28)	-
2014 Dummy	-	-0.07 (0.28)	-
2018 Dummy	-	-0.39 (0.35)	-
Intercept	1.47* (0.39)	0.00 (0.48)	0.71* (0.07)
N	3,971	778	34,556
Log-likelihood	-741.88	-311.01	-12,330.73

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures support for presidential out-party

results were similar in the model that includes all four years. Presidential approvers saw an increase in the probability of voting for the presidential out-party from 10.2 percent for those who were satisfied compared to 24.4 percent for those who were dissatisfied. For disapprovers, 61.6 percent of those who were satisfied supported the out-party compared to 82 percent of those who were dissatisfied. A similar pattern also exists in the 2018 VAS data model (see Table 2.4 below.)

In total, these results show a clear link between political dissatisfaction and volatility among vote preferences among independents,

Table 2.2. Probability of Voting Democratic, Independents in 2006 CCES

	Approvers	Disapprovers
Satisfied	4.2 percent	77.9 percent
Dissatisfied	14.7 percent	93.3 percent

Table 2.3. Probability of Voting for Presidential Out-Party, Independents in ABC/WaPo Polls in 2006, 2010, and 2014 and 2018 Syracuse CCES Module

	Approvers	Disapprovers
Right Direction	10.2 percent	61.6 percent
Wrong Track	24.4 percent	82.0 percent

Table 2.4. Probability of Voting Democratic, Independents in 2018 Voter Analysis Survey

	Approvers	Disapprovers
Satisfied	12.8 percent	62.5 percent
Dissatisfied	32.2 percent	84.4 percent

many of whom supported the president just two years before. The 15-to-20 percentage point shift that takes place among independents based upon whether they are satisfied with the direction of the country has an outsized effect on which party wins those seats that are closely divided between the parties, causing large seat swings against the president's party in recent midterm elections. In the survey data from the three ABC polls and Syracuse CCES Module, 92.9 percent of independents who stated that they had supported the losing presidential candidate in the presidential election two years earlier stated that they supported that party's candidate for Congress in the subsequent midterm, compared to 86 percent of those who stated that they supported the winning presidential candidate. This seven-percentage point gap in vote choice may not seem large, but in our current "era of protracted partisan parity" (Lee 2016, 18) such as gap in vote choice can produce outsized electoral consequences.[11] In sum, when most independent voters are consistently dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the country as has been the case since George W. Bush's second term, the result has been the electoral volatility that occurred in the midterm elections from 2006–2018.

The Decision to Vote: Partisans, Differential Voter Turnout, and Electoral Volatility

Next, I examine the effect of political dissatisfaction on partisans, using the same set of surveys as for independents. I make some slight modifications to the models; here, my dependent variable indicates *voter turnout* rather than *vote choice*. In the 2006 CCES model, I use validated vote, where a "0" indicates that the respondent was validated as having *not* voted, and a "1" indicates a validated vote. In the second model, a "1" indicates that the voter had already voted or was absolutely certain they would vote, while a "0" indicates that they were unsure about voting or had decided not to vote.[12] Second, here I interact party ("0" for president's party, "1" for the other party) with dissatisfaction since I expect disapproving partisans of the president's party to be less likely to vote, even as those from the other party see increased turnout.

The results here are also in keeping with my expectations (see Table 2.5 below), with dissatisfaction having the opposite effect on partisans from the president's party as on those from the other party. In all three models, there is a positive, significant relationship between the interaction of party and dissatisfaction, and the decision to vote. Turning to the substantive effect of satisfaction on turnout by party (see Tables 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8 below), the turnout gap that can develop under conditions of high dissatisfaction is clear. For example, in the model that includes ABC News/Washington Post polls from 2006 to 2014, and the Syracuse 2018 CCES module, in-party approvers see their probability of saying they are certain to turn out drop from 78.1 percent for a respondent who says the country is going in the right direction, to 73.5 percent for a respondent who says the country is off on the wrong track. While partisans from the president's party almost always approve of the president at high rates in modern times, a somewhat higher percentage are willing to say that the country is going in the "wrong direction," with just over 40 percent across these five surveys expressing dissatisfaction compared to only 15 percent who indicated disapproval of the president. At the same time, out-party disapprovers see their probability of saying they are certain to turn out increase from 59.7 percent for a "right direction" respondent to 79.7 percent for a "wrong track" respondent. A similar pattern is present in models for the CCES and 2018 VAS.

Combined with the shift in vote choice that takes place among independents, the turnout differential that develops in midterm years due to

Table 2.5. Satisfaction/Right Direction and Partisans in Midterms, 2006–2018

Variable	2006 CCES	2006–2018 Combined Surveys	2018 Voter Analysis Survey
Dissatisfied/ Wrong Track	-0.20*	-0.25*	-0.71*
	(0.09)	(0.16)	(0.03)
Party	-0.41	-0.63*	-0.58*
	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.04)
Wrong Track * Party	0.65*	1.22*	1.51*
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.04)
Disapprove of President	0.02	-0.24	0.14*
	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.03)
Ideology	0.06	-0.18*	-0.00
	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.01)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.21*	-0.44*	-0.18
	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.02)
Female Respondent	-0.02	-0.37*	-0.40*
	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.02)
College Graduate	0.10	0.53*	0.78*
	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.02)
Senior Citizen	-0.25*	0.50*	1.56*
	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.03)
2010 Dummy	-	-0.26	-
		(0.16)	
2014 Dummy	-	-0.57	-
		(0.15)	
2018 Dummy	-	-0.00	-
		(0.18)	
Intercept	0.77*	0.00	1.36*
	(0.18)	(0.48)	(0.05)
N	6,429	2,294	92,779
Log-likelihood	-3,853.31	-1,063.81	-37,477.44

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures turnout (validated turnout in CCES, indication that respondent was definitely or had already voted in polls)

dissatisfaction fuels the volatile elections we have recently seen. With fewer of the president's partisans turning out to cancel out the voters from the other party who vote in higher numbers when dissatisfied—combined with losing the votes independents— the president's party faces especially difficult circumstances in midterms. When considering overall stated turnout intention, in the dataset including the ABC/Washington Post polls combined with the Syracuse CCES Module, 89.5 percent of partisans who

Table 2.6. Effect of Satisfaction on Probability of Turnout by Party in 2006 CCES

	In-Party Approvers	In-Party Disapprovers	Out-Party Approvers	Out-Party Disapprovers
Satisfied	85.9 percent	87.8 percent	44.5 percent	46.4 percent
Dissatisfied	65.6 percent	67.8 percent	88.8 percent	90.7 percent

Table 2.7. Effect of Satisfaction in 2006–14 on Probability of Turnout by Party in ABC/WaPo Polls and 2018 Syracuse CCES Module

	In-Party Approvers	In-Party Disapprovers	Out-Party Approvers	Out-Party Disapprovers
Satisfied	78.1 percent	73.7 percent	64.5 percent	59.7 percent
Dissatisfied	73.5 percent	68.5 percent	83.3 percent	79.7 percent

Table 2.8. Effect of Satisfaction on Probability of Turnout by Party in Voter Analysis Survey

	In-Party Approvers	In-Party Disapprovers	Out-Party Approvers	Out-Party Disapprovers
Satisfied	72.3 percent	75.0 percent	59.4 percent	62.7 percent
Dissatisfied	56.2 percent	59.5 percent	76.5 percent	78.9 percent

supported the losing candidate in the previous presidential election were self-declared certain voters in the subsequent midterm compared to only 80.4 percent of partisans who supported the president.

Discontent and Presidential Election Years

This chapter's main focus has been on midterm years and the turnout and vote choice shifts that occur in part due to political discontent since 2005. As the analyses of survey data presented above demonstrate, there are meaningful differences in vote choice and turnout compared with the election that occurred just two years previously. I demonstrate here that political discontent is an important component when seeking to explain these changes in vote choice and turnout, building upon the myriad other variables such as presidential approval and demographic factors that have been shown to be important in other studies. While the focus here is on midterm years, I also briefly analyze the effect of discontent on vote choice

in congressional election years. Fortunately, I am able to use ANES data in an analysis of the presidential elections from 2004 to 2020 as this survey includes a right direction/wrong track question and equivalent control variables as with the previous analysis for midterms.[13] For both independents and partisans, the relevant coefficients reach significance, but the substantive effect of discontent is smaller than in midterms. In a model of vote choice for independents, among those who approve of the president, there is a predicted 8 percentage point increase (from 39 percent to 47 percent) in the probability of voting for the presidential out-party for Congress when comparing those who think the country is going in the right direction to those who believe it is off on the wrong track (see Online Appendix Table A.4 for specific results). There is an even smaller four percentage point predicted increase in voting for the presidential out-party (from 81 percent to 85 percent) among disapprovers. While the coefficient for right direction/wrong track still reaches significance ($p = 0.01$), it falls short of the substantive effect (typically around a 15 to 20 percentage points) in the models for midterm years.

For partisans and likely turnout, the interaction between likely turnout also attains significance ($p < 0.01$), but the substantive effect is again smaller than in midterms. Among the president's partisans, the predicted probability of likely turnout with other variables held at their means drops from 94 among those who think the country is going in the right direction to 92 percent among those who think the country is off on the wrong track. For the other party, the predicted probability of likely turnout increases from 88 percent among the few who say that the country is going in the right direction compared to 93 percent for those who stated that the country was going in the wrong direction. As with vote choice, the magnitude of these shifts is notably smaller than those in my analyses of midterms.

Several factors may explain the less pronounced effect of dissatisfaction on turnout and vote choice in congressional elections occurring in presidential election years. First, for vote choice, independents who are frustrated with the direction of the country can take out their frustration on the president or their party's candidate for president. Indeed, in all of these presidential election years save 2004 the president's party did not control the House so the only way for a voter to cast a vote for change would be to vote against the president's party in the presidential election.[14] Additionally, when occurring following a wave, the presidential out-party may already be at somewhat of a high-water mark in terms of number of

seats held so a shift in vote choice may not produce a large gain in seats (and indeed, in 2004, 2012, and 2016, the president's party actually *gained* seats). Second, the floor is much higher for turnout in presidential election years compared to midterms. While some turns disparity between the parties still exists, there is a much higher base level of turnout when presidential candidates are on the ballot. As a result, the dramatic variation in turnout between recent midterm cycles is less likely to occur in presidential years. Additionally, since the ANES unfortunately does not have validated vote for these cycle, social desirability bias in admitting that one may not vote may also be raising the floor in reported turnout. With the exception of 2020, the ANES focused especially on in-person interviews and it may be particularly socially undesirable to admit to another person in the same room that that one was not planning to vote in a presidential election (Jackman and Spahn 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrate a clear link between micro-level dissatisfaction in the electorate and the outcomes of the four midterms from 2006 to 2018. These elections occurred in period of perpetual discontent in the electorate. Using data from several surveys, I find that independent voters who are dissatisfied with the direction of the country are more likely to vote against the president's party in midterms than those who expressed satisfaction with the country's affairs. Among partisans, my analyses reveal a link between dissatisfaction and turnout rates. Those in the president's party who are frustrated with the state of the country stay home at higher rates than those who are satisfied, while those who are from the other party manifest their frustration by turning out to vote at higher rates. In total, my results demonstrate that dissatisfaction is an important factor to consider alongside others such as presidential approval and demographic factors when seeking to explain recent midterm election results.

Importantly, the party that was the target of this discontent changed throughout this period in large part due to shifts in which party controlled the presidency. In 2006 and 2008, the large amount of discontent in the electorate was taken out on President Bush's Republicans. After President Obama took office in 2010, Democrats became the target of this discontent in 2010 and 2014, with large swing against the party. Between these two

elections, in 2012, there was a small snap-back to Democrats as Republicans lost some of the seats that they had won two years previously. In 2016, the consequences of discontent were more readily apparent in presidential results with the election of Donald Trump than in congressional results where Democrats once again won back a few seats after a good Republican midterm two years earlier. This pattern flipped parties in 2018 and 2020, with Democrats performing very well in 2018 and Republicans winning back some, but not all, of these seats in 2020. The 2022 result, which does not comport with this pattern, will be the subject of this book's closing chapter.

Although this long stretch of volatile midterm elections in a period of persistently low satisfaction with the direction of the country is unique to the era of public opinion research, this is not the first time in which we have had a long series of highly volatile midterm elections. In the elections from 1874–1894, a period Fiorina (2017, 11) calls the "Era of No Decision" there were frequently large seat swings and House majority control swung five times between the two major parties. While we cannot use survey data to study the similarities and differences between these periods, in the next chapter, I present an alternative method for examining the drivers of electoral volatility that relies on newspaper coverage of political unrest in the *New York Times*.

CHAPTER 3

Examining Political Discontent and Electoral Volatility Before Polling

It was a time of competitive politics. Over a span of just over two decades, control of the House of Representatives changed hands four times, with multiple elections having large seat swings between the parties. The presidency was also closely fought, with most elections decided by only several states. Twice, the presidency was won by the popular vote loser. A defeated president from New York who lost a close reelection bid decided to run for a second non-consecutive term four years later, with his much younger wife telling White House staff that she expected them not to change residence so that it would be the same when her husband returned to office "four years from today" (CSPAN n.d.). This anecdote sounds like it could be about the early 2000s, but instead it describes the late 1800s.[1] The period from 1874–1894, which Fiorina (2017) calls "The Era of No Decision," bears a number of similarities to the early 2000s in terms of the competitiveness of elections for both Congress and the presidency.

In addition to the similarities having to do with the competitiveness of elections, these periods are also similar in terms of the contestation of similar issues and, ultimately, the appearance of high levels of discord in the electorate. In both the Gilded Age and today—sometimes called the "New Gilded Age" by scholars— concerns about economic inequality resulted in contested efforts to unionize (or re-unionize) workers (Grusky and Kricheli-Katz 2012 and Bartels 2017). Similarly, race was a dominant issue in elections that divided the parties with one party (Democrats in the late 1800s, Republicans in the early 2000s) being particularly aligned with white voters who were hostile to changes in the status quo that had advantaged them, while the other party won overwhelming percentages of Black voters (e.g., see Valelly 2004, Kalmoe and Mason 2022, White and Laird 2020).[2]

Additionally, an uptick in immigration to the United States, particularly from outside of Western Europe, became an increasingly contentious issue (National Geographic n.d., Pew Research Center 2015). At first glance, it appears that—like the current period—high levels of political discontent in the late 1800s may have driven political competition in congressional elections. While certainly not the only periods of American history where these issues have been important or where the electorate has been dissatisfied, the many similarities between these two eras is notable and merit investigation.

Despite the similarities between these periods, one key difference that makes it harder to systematically study the role of political discontent in the late 1800s is the fact that scientific survey research did not begin to develop until almost half a century after the end of the late 1800s. Thus, a challenge in this chapter is to develop a measure that allows for a systematic examination of the role of political discontent in the late 1800s. I begin by discussing the role of several critical issues in causing political discontent, and ultimately unrest, throughout American history. I then present a theory of how unrest related to issues such as these can lead to high congressional seat swings in periods of high polarization such as the late 1800s. Drawing upon a method developed by Barrett et al. (2020) for an IMF Working Papers to quantify social unrest from media coverage, I then conduct a content analysis of *New York Times* articles to measure social unrest. In the pre-polling era, I find that high levels of unrest predict a large seat swing away from the president's party when the level of political polarization is high. I then attempt extend my analysis to the present era, finding that the changing nature of protest may have resulted in a generally-low level of unrest being captured by my measure, ultimately causing a lack of significant results in these models.

Similarities in Electoral Competition and Polarization Between the Late 1800s and Today

A number of similarities exist between the late 1800s and the early 2000s, beginning with the fact that both of these eras featured high levels of electoral competition. Furthermore, as Fiorina (2017, 161–162) notes, these elections also resulted in frequently shifting majorities. Here, Fiorina also discusses other similarities between these periods, such as the fact that both eras included presidential elections in which the winner of the popular vote

did not win in the Electoral College, and thus the other major party candidate became president.

Another important similarity in electoral competition between the two periods is the particularly strong sorting of voters into one or the other party's electoral coalition and the low rates of split-ticket voting (e.g., see Burnham 1965). Indeed, Hetherington and Azari (2016, 92–93) note that ahead of the 2016 presidential election, the kind of stability present in presidential elections where 40 of 50 states had voted for the same party in the previous four presidential elections (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012) had not occurred since the late 1800s. The subsequent two presidential elections had somewhat less stability, as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan voted Republican in 2016 for the first time since the 1980s and then Georgia and Arizona voted Democratic in 2020 for the first time since the 1990s. These changes occurred as white voters without a college degree increasingly aligned with the Republican Party and white voters with a college degree increasingly voted Democratic.[3] Nonetheless, when considering the overall electorate, there were still relatively few voters who switched party allegiance from 2012 to 2016. Indeed, Skelley (2017) presented ANES data that showed that among 2016 voters who had also voted in 2012, only 13 percent of Trump's voters had supported President Obama for reelection in 2012 and only 4 percent of Clinton's voters had voted for former Governor Mitt Romney (R-MA) in 2012. As Azari and Hetherington detailed, a similar amount of stability existed in presidential elections in the 1800s; in this period, Republican candidates consistently carried states in the North (and in particular, New England, the West, and Upper Midwest, while Democrats dominated the South (Gould 2014, 66). States such as New York and Indiana served as perennial battlegrounds in this period and were typically necessary for a Democratic victory in the Electoral College.

The stability in presidential results in recent elections has also been present in congressional elections. Given the rise in electoral volatility in recent congressional elections compared to the immediate previous period, the previous sentence may seem to be paradoxical. Despite the recent increase in overall volatility, however, the number of truly competitive House districts has declined substantially, with Wasserman (2023) noting a particularly large drop in the number of House districts with a partisan voting index (PVI) somewhere between D+5 and R+5 around the time of the 2000 election.[4] The number of districts in this range dropped below 100 House seats after districts were redrawn following the 2010 Census and has

remained in double digits since. As it is increasingly difficult for Democrats to win districts with a PVI beyond about R+5 and Republicans to win seats beyond about D+5, the decline of swing seats narrows the playing field of competitive House districts considerably. As I note in Chapter One, however, there have still been a number of recent House elections with large seat swings as the winning party wins the overwhelming majority of House seats in this range. For example, as Democrats gained 41 House seats and the House majority in 2018, the House seat they gained that had voted for Donald Trump by the largest margin in 2016 was New York's 22nd District, won by State Assembly member Anthony Brindisi (D-NY) which had gone for Trump by a margin of 55 to 39 percent (Daily Kos Elections n.d.). Still, Democrats gained a sizeable number of seats in this election by gaining all but three Republican-held seats that had been won by Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. Furthermore, Democrats won the vast majority of seats that were highly competitive, carrying 72 percent of seats that had been decided by a single digit margin in the 2016 election.[5] An increasing alignment with presidential results was also present in the late 1880s (Carson and Roberts 2013, 73); however, there were more split presidential-congressional outcomes then than in most recent years. In part, the greater number of split outcomes in the late 1800s resulted from there being more closely divided seats than today (see Figure 1.5), so a big swing to the other party meant that a relatively large number seats that had narrowly gone to the president two years earlier fell to the other party in the midterm (see also Azari and Hetherington 2016, 96–99 for a discussion of similarities in nationalization in both eras).[6]

Both the late 1800s and the present period have also seen high rates of voter turnout. Writing in the mid-20th century, Burnham (1965) noted that there had been a drop-off in overall turnout starting around the turn of the 20th century, among other measures of voter participation.[7] Quite simply, a large group of potential voters were missing from the electorate. Recently, we have once again seen an increase in turnout; particularly notable are the high rates of turnout in the 2018 and 2022 midterms after the incredibly low rates of turnout in 2014.[8]

Another clear similarity between these two periods of elections is a persistent divide in citizens' voting behavior, as particular interests are aligned with each party. Fiorina (2017, 163) noted that in the late 1800s, Republicans tended to perform more strongly in industrial districts, while Democrats were more successful in agricultural districts. Today, there is

a similarly strong regional divide, but one that is largely flipped since the 1800s, with Democrats doing better in more urban areas and Republicans performing more strongly in rural areas. The regional divide that has occurred in both periods reflects the polarized voting behavior that exists within groups that are geographically clustered. For example, Gould (2014, 64 and 69) details how Democrats tended to win the votes of immigrants, while Republicans' protectionist high tariff message was popular with many workers who had been born in America. Today, exit poll data corroborates that major divides exist in American politics when looking at a variety of demographics including region, education, and the race and ethnicity of the voter (see New York Times 2020).

The polarized voting behavior that exists in both periods is also a result of real differences that exist in terms of what voters think about the major political issues of the times. Some dividing issues, such as the Republican emphasis on temperance in in the late 1800s (see Gould 2014, 64) or the divide between the parties on LGBT+ rights in today's politics are unique to their respective era. Many issues, however, divided the parties in the late 1800s and continue to divide the parties today, albeit with the schism between the parties often being the opposite of what it is today. Foremost among these issues are those of economic inequality and race (Azari and Hetherington 2016 and Fiorina 2017). Immigration is also an issue that is of considerable importance in both eras, although it did not as neatly divide the parties in the late 1800s as it does today (Azari and Hetherington 2016, 94).

In this chapter, I focus particularly on the recurring issues of economic inequality and race, with a brief discussion of immigration. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not only to outline the differences that existed between the parties, but also to connect them to the high amount of electoral volatility in both periods. The main contention of this chapter is that these issues are— in addition to dividing the parties—particularly likely to relate to discontent in the electorate that subsequently can result in political unrest. This unrest can affect the next election in several ways. First, partisans may be galvanized to support their party either in support of their side or to counter the threat they see from the other party. Second, swing voters may also translate unrest into electoral support or opposition to a party in the next election, more often than not blaming the party of the president for not resolving issues that have led to unrest. While true swing voters represent only a small number of voters (Gould 2014, 65 estimates that

independents made up only 5 percent of the electorate in the late 1800s), they have an outsized role on election results and as the "marginal members of an electoral coalition" (Fiorina 2017, 111) are particularly likely to swing between the parties. Unlike partisans who are likely to use motivated reasoning to interpret any event in such a way as to ultimately side with their party (e.g., see Kalmoe 2019, 34–35), the nature of whatever unrest occurs is likely to affect swing voters' overall feeling about conditions in the country to a greater extent and subsequently translate into voting decisions at the ballot box.[9]

Crucially, I argue that unrest is particularly likely to result in electoral volatility under conditions of polarization. If voters do not see any clear difference between the parties, then unrest is unlikely to make partisans make a connection between that unrest and rallying to support their party in the next election. Similarly, swing voters are less likely to blame a party if they are unable to clearly link them to the events that have taken place. The rise of presidents as party leaders in the late 1800s (particularly starting with Grover Cleveland) is important both in terms of developing a policy agenda for the parties, as well as giving voters (and particularly swing voters) who may have low levels of political knowledge a clear idea of what a party stands for as they read about or listen to the rhetoric of the president (see Klinghard 2005 and Klinghard 2010, as discussed by Hetherington and Azari 2016). Before linking unrest to voting decisions, I next theorize why the core issues of economic inequality, race, and immigration are particularly likely to lead to political unrest and how this unrest may then result in electoral volatility.

Sources of Discontent and Unrest from the Late 1800s to Today

Economic Inequality and Unionization Efforts

Previous accounts of electoral competition in both periods focus closely on the role of economic inequality and economic transformation (e.g., see Hetherington and Azari 2016, Fiorina 2017). Both the period following the Civil War and the current period since the early 2000s have been characterized by high economic inequality in the United States. Some dispute exists among economists about the exact nature of the increase in inequality in post-Civil War period, but there is general consensus that the

very wealthiest became even wealthier in the decades after the Civil War. According to Lindert and Williamson (2016, 173), the percent of income share received by the top 1 percent grew from around 9.8 percent in 1870 to almost 18 percent by 1910, although they argue that increases here were concentrated among the very wealthiest of Americans.[10] When looking at wealth inequality, Piketty (2014, 348) also shows that there was a notable increase in the percent of wealth held by the top 1 percent and the top 10 percent of the population and even those who critique his method (e.g., see Sutch 2017, 601, drawing on Saez and Zucman 2016) found that other methods produce same general pattern of an increase in wealth held by the top percentile and decile in this period, even if the level of inequality and magnitude of the increase remains debated.

Due to the overall increase in inequality in the decades following the Civil War—particularly among the very wealthiest—this period became known as the Gilded Age. Inequality then began to fall following the start of the Great Depression in 1929, particularly as President Roosevelt signed New Deal programs designed to redistribute wealth and income from the wealthiest Americans to those who were less wealthy. Income inequality reached its lowest levels in America in the 1970s before starting to increase dramatically in the 1980s as President Ronald Reagan promoted supply-side economic policies that rolled back the Keynesian consensus of the post-World War II Era that had seen high spending on a variety of new social programs designed to decrease inequality. Inequality continued to grow into the early 20th century, particularly beginning to gain the focus of scholars amidst the Great Recession (e.g., Grusky, David B. and Tamar Kricheli-Katz, Bartels 2017).

An important feature of discontented workers efforts to counter the status quo is the role of protests, particularly when workers seek to organize into labor unions. In the original Gilded Age, much of the focus was on the organization of blue-collar workers in an era where modern labor laws did not yet exist. Efforts to unionize were almost always met with hostility by business owners, often leading to violence. For example, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877— right at the start of the "Era of No Decision"—saw 100,000 workers protest working conditions (many of whom were outside of the railroad industry, with around 1,000 arrests and 100 deaths due to violence (Little 2023). Under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor was founded in 1886 as an alliance of trade unions (Gompers 1925). Gompers initially sought to separate his

union efforts from politics (Gompers 1925, 312), but he eventually began to engage in partisan politics in the early 1900s. Gompers and labor as a whole ultimately began an association with the Democratic Party that remains to this day, although he would support pro-union Republicans. Gompers had a generally good relationship with Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed (R-ME), but had a worse relationship with his successor Speaker Joseph Cannon (R-IL), his successor, and Gompers drifted more towards Democratic politics (see, New York Times 1912 and Petterchak 1981). Labor became increasingly associated with the Democratic Party and the National Labor Relations Act was passed into law in 1935 (after the Supreme Court struck down the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act) and signed during the presidency of Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt. This act established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and instituted procedures for interactions between workers and management (National Archives n.d.).

Since the end of World War II, the unionization rate among American workers has declined dramatically. Stagnating and then dropping slowly in the first several decades after the war, the unionization rate fell dramatically in the 1970s and began an even faster descent during the Reagan years as the Republican Party became even more hostile towards labor (Kurtzleben 2014). The decline in this period was particularly notable among private sector unions, as the number of workers in these unions declined to near parity with the number of workers in public sector unions by the early 2010s. Around this time, the Republican Party won unified control of a number of Midwestern states that had a long history with the labor movement. The GOP sought to make more states "right-to-work," whereby employees at union shops would not have to contribute to the costs of the union, as well as seeking to dismantle public bargaining for public employees in a variety of these states. The GOP was successful in a number of cases, but Democrats and their union allies were able to overturn efforts to erode collective bargaining by a vote of the people in Ohio in 2011 and also annulling a "right-to-work" law in Missouri at the ballot box in 2018, as well as repealing Michigan's right-to-work law in 2023 after Democrats won a trifecta there in the 2022 midterm elections (Tavernise 2011, Neuman 2018, Cappelletti 2023). At the same time, the Supreme Court ruled in *Janus v. AFSME* in 2018 that public employees could not be forced to contributed to the costs of maintaining a union, effectively making public sector workers in all states right-to-work (Oyez 2018).

While unions declined over the past several decades, a number of movements have developed designed to counter these unions. For example, the "Fight for Fifteen" movement sought to raise the national minimum wage up to $15 an hour (a cause taken up by Senator Bernie Sanders in his bid for the Democratic nomination in 2016 and then also most other Democratic candidates in 2020). However, the full goal of this movement, as stated on their website is "$15 and a union" (Fight for $15 n.d.). Additionally, workers at individual stores of large companies such as Starbucks have sought to unionize, sometimes even succeeding in states not usually associated with the labor movement such as Virginia and Texas (Yang 2022).[11] Student workers have also sought to unionize at a number of colleges, beginning with dining workers at Grinnell College (in right-to-work Iowa) in 2016. In this case, Grinnell voluntarily recognized the unionization of this segment of workers, but opposed allowing a vote to expand the union to cover other student workers. The NLRB ultimately allowed this vote to take place and the rest of Grinnell student workers voted to unionize in 2022 (Jett 2022). In contrast, Kenyon College in non-right-to-work Ohio opposed efforts among student workers to allow a vote to unionize all student workers, with the case going to the NLRB in 2023 (DeProspo 2023). Although differences certainly exist with the 1800s, in part due to changes in work and workforce since that time, these 21st century efforts show similarities with a widespread dissatisfaction with the economic status quo and an effort of workers to counter them.

Race, Political Power, and the Status Quo

Economic inequality is not the only issue that has the potential to lead to unrest, nor is it the only similarity that exists between the late 1800s and the early 2000s. Another parallel that Hetherington and Azari (2016), among others, point to as a dividing point in American politics both then and now is the role of race. In particular, the role of Black Americans in American society and politics has been a dividing issue throughout American history. Following the Civil War, the Democratic Party sought to minimize the effectiveness of Reconstruction and the rights Black men (this was before the 19th Amendment) had to participate in American political life.[12] The Republican Party, for its part, while generally more favorable towards Black rights after the Civil War, was still divided. Some, such as Representative Thaddeus Stevens (R-PA) and his "Radical Republican" colleagues sought

to immediate expand Black political rights, as well as giving each adult former slave 40 acres of land, after the Civil War (Foner 1993, 148–150). In the period, the Republican Party had a variety of factions, however, with conservative Republicans often siding with President Andrew Johnson's efforts to minimize the extent to which Reconstruction would transform the South and moderates falling somewhere between these two groups (Slap 2007, 77). Despite the divide within the party in terms of ensuring Black political and civil rights, Republicans were more favorable towards Black rights than Democrats and newly enfranchised Black voters cast their votes for the GOP in overwhelming numbers (Fauntroy 2007, 13–38).

In the early days of Reconstruction, Black voters began to win a number of political offices from throughout the South. As Valelly (2004, 3 and 51) notes, there was a swift increase in Black men winning seats in southern state legislators (which at the time, still selected Senators) and a number of Black men also won seats in Congress. This increase in Black officeholding, alongside the overall increase in Black involvement in political life, immediately drew a backlash from white southerners. Greenberger (2022, 653) argues that this increase constituted a "racial threat" to the existing political order in the South that "brought together a wide spate of political actors across the South seeking to reinstate antebellum hierarchies." These actors often resorted to authoritarian means to reclaim power. For example, Democrats infamously sought to suppress Black votes in the 1876 presidential election through intimidation (King 2002, 169). As a result, Republican presidential candidate Rutherford B. Hayes disputed a number of electoral votes and a commission ultimately awarded the disputed votes to Hayes. However, in assuming the presidency, Hayes agreed to end Reconstruction and withdraw troops from the South (Bridges n.d.). Hayes was able to keep federal marshals in the South to still enforce the new voting laws in the 1880 election, but Democrats who controlled Congress sought to withdraw them. Ultimately, Hayes vetoed legislation withdrawing them, but Democrats in Congress zeroed out their funding in the appropriations process and the marshals went unpaid until 1882 (U.S House of Representatives n.d.).

After the start of Jim Crow, a troubling status quo developed where neither party sought to address civil rights for decades. Without federal troops to enforce order and state governments being won back by white Democrats, lynchings against Black Americans more than doubled from fewer than 50 per year in 1880 to more than 100 per year by 1890, with the

vast majority of these lynchings taking place in the former Confederacy (Lindert and Williamson 2016, 186). In this period and until the 1960s, a "bipartisan truce ignoring white supremacy in the South" developed where violence against Black residents by both governments and private citizens was ignored by the federal government (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, 29). Any federal actions that were interpreted as being pro-civil rights received an immediate backlash; for example, when President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dine with him at the White House, there immediate was harsh criticism from those who opposed changing the U.S. social order (Davis 2012). Several decades later, Black voters began to move towards the Democratic Party during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration in response to the New Deal policies (Kondik 2016, 23). While Black Americans were not the envisioned beneficiaries of New Deal legislation, they did benefit from the programs of this era (PBS n.d.). Democrats enjoyed large majorities in this period, but these were built on dominance in the South and Roosevelt did not attempt to bring civil rights legislation to the national agenda.

Civil rights ultimately returned to the national agenda in part as a result of landmark Supreme Court decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*, alongside efforts from civil rights activists. While President Eisenhower enforced the Court's decisions, he sought to avoid the issue of Black civil rights as much as possible (University of Virginia Miller Center n.d.). His successor, President John F. Kennedy, campaigned on civil rights as a moral issue, but was frustrated by the fact that the Democratic Party still had a large southern wing that opposed civil rights (Naylor 2013). After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, newly inaugurated President Lyndon Johnson sought to reinvigorate the late president's agenda on civil rights. Landmark civil rights legislation that passed included that Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. One crucial difference from the late 1800s was that the parties were not particularly well-sorted on this issue; a bipartisan group of northerners, including Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (R-IL), was crucial to passing civil rights legislation (Gittinger and Fisher 2004). This lack of partisan polarization meant that it was not always altogether clear which party's candidate a voter should support if they wanted to support (or oppose) advancing civil rights. Since the 1960s, the parties have sorted on issues pertaining to Black civil rights. In 1964, the Republican Party nominated Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) who had voted against the Civil Rights Act and despite President

Johnson's landslide victory nationally, Republicans did make some inroads in the Deep South. This sorting of the parties on issues pertaining to race took place over the latter part of the 20th century and Democrats still held a number of conservative and rural majority white districts until the 1994 and 2010 wave elections (Elving 2015). At the same time, more than 80 percent of Black voters have supported Democratic presidential candidates since 1964.

With the nomination and election of Donald Trump in 2016, the parties have become even more polarized on issues of race, with racially resentful white voters sorting into the Republican Party and white voters with low levels of racial resentment sorting into the Democratic Party (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). Trump had used racially hostile language throughout his campaign and received political attention in the years ahead of his run by spreading the "birther" hoax about President Obama's birthplace (Keith 2020). The fact that (relatively moderate) Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) went to a Black Lives Matter protest following the police murder of George Floyd in 2016 and said the words "black lives matter" received news attention demonstrated the divide between the parties on issues of race in this area (e.g., see LeBlanc and Barrett 2020).

Immigration and Other Sources of Political Discord

Other issues also have the potential to produce unrest. For example, immigration has often produced a divide in American politics. Gould (2014, 63–64) notes that the years after the Civil War saw an increase in immigration from southern and eastern Europe and the Democratic Party worked successfully to bring these new voters into their coalition. However, American workers who felt their jobs were being taken away often were hostile towards these immigrants, sometimes even targeting them with violence (e.g., see Library of Congress n.d.) Immigration from outside Europe also increased in this period, with immigrants from China making up the largest percentage of immigrants in five Western states by 1880 (Pew Research Center 2015). Violence against these immigrants was common in this period and in 1882 Congress passed and President Chester A. Arthur signed into law the Chinese Exclusion Act (Rotondi 2021). Support for this bill was bipartisan in Congress, however, so unlike with southern and eastern European immigration, there was not a party seeking to naturalize and then bring Chinese immigrants into their electoral coalition.[13]

The example of southern and eastern European immigration in this period and Democrats' attempt to bring these new voters into their coalition does show that this issue can both polarize the parties and potentially lead to social unrest. In other periods of American history, however, immigration has resulted in fissures within the parties rather than between them and indeed until fairly recently, both parties had a large portion of their coalition on each side of the immigration debate. After the election of Donald Trump, who descended down an escalator in Trump Tower to give a xenophobic announcement speech in 2015, the parties have become more clearly divided on this issue (Smith 2020b). Thus, immigration serves as an example of another issue that has the potential to (1) lead to social unrest and (2) divide the political parties. The three issues I focus on here (economic inequality, race, and to a slightly lesser extent immigration) are not the only ones that can lead to unrest, but they are among the most prominent across American history.

A Theory of Unrest, Discontent, Polarization, and Seat Swing

Political unrest related to economic inequality, race, or any other cause may produce electoral volatility when occurring just before an election. For partisans closely tied to one side of an issue, there may be an effect on turnout as a result of a political issue that causes social unrest.[14] These voters are generally loyal to one party or the other, so there is unlikely to be an effect on vote choice, but these voters can be galvanized (or depressed) by the events leading up to an election. Oftentimes unrest will activate partisans on both sides, causing increased turnout on each side to cancel out the votes from the other sides. However, if one side does gain a benefit, it is likely to be the presidential out-party. Extending my findings in Chapter Two, I expect that the president's party will have a more difficult time mobilizing turnout in response to unrest than will the presidential out-party. For the out-party, the message that the president is not successfully addressing an issue where that inaction has subsequently resulted in unrest can mobilize voters to turn out. Such mobilization is most likely to occur under conditions of high polarization because partisans are more likely to see a clear contrast with the objective of the president and their party's policy positions. In contrast, for the president's party, unrest may cause frustration that the president has been unable to address that issue through the political process. Additionally, in some cases the president may have had

to use force to end the unrest, potentially causing disappointment among supporters. For example, after President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops to crush the Pullman Strike, there was a "sense of betrayal" among urban voters who had begun to ally with the Democratic Party (Schneirov, Stromquist, and Salvatore 1999). Cleveland's party went on to lose more than a hundred seats in the 1894 midterm elections, a loss of more than half of their House seats in a single election.

Consistent with Converse (1964), I also expect there to be a large group of voters who are relatively non-ideological and apolitical throughout history. These voters are likely to be relatively ambivalent on issues of economic inequality and race. When unrest breaks out, I expect them to want leadership to restore order, generally blaming the incumbent president for any disorder that they see as interrupting daily life.[15] These voters are unlikely to know the intricacies of what party controls each part of the government nor the exact ideologies of individual members or parties, but they are likely to know which party controls the presidency and blame them if something goes wrong. As Achen and Bartels (2016) found, President Woodrow Wilson saw a decline in vote share in New Jersey "beach counties" in 1916, following a large number of shark attacks, something Wilson had no role in causing.[16] These authors also find that incumbents are often punished for droughts and floods—often regardless of the quality of government response. Governments have more of a role in managing labor unrest and addressing issues of racial inequality than they do in preventing shark attacks, so it is natural to suspect that unrest may lead to voters punishing the party in power.

Although unaffiliated voters are far less attuned to the intricacies of politics than their more polarized counterparts, they still are likely to have a basic understanding of when there are and are not major differences between the parties. For example, in the modern era, Abramowitz and Saunders (2008, 552) found that the percentage of ANES respondents who perceived differences between the presidential candidates grew from around 50 percent in 1952 to almost 80 percent by 2004 and the percentage who cared who won the election fell from just under 70 percent in 1952 to below 60 percent by 1980 before growing to around 85 percent by 2004. Indeed, even those who were ambivalent about President Bush in 2004 (likely to be the most disengaged voters and those who are unaffiliated with either party) were on average potentially more likely to perceive differences between the candidates and care who won than were all voters on average

in the low polarization 1970s.[17] I assume that a similar pattern was present in the pre-polling era, with there being a large segment of voters who were relatively disengaged from politics, but still able to perceive when real differences exist between the parties.

In total, then, my expectation is that as unrest increases, the seat swing against the president's party will increase, but that this increase is conditional on the amount of political polarization that exists in the electorate. I expect unrest to correlate with large seat swings against the president's party when there is high polarization.

Social Unrest, Political Polarization, and Seat Swing in Congressional Elections

Measuring Social Unrest

To examine social unrest, I begin by constructing a measure of this phenomenon by election year that should be robust throughout the period under examination. I draw upon the work of Barrett et al. (2020) in the construction of this variable. In an IMF Working Papers, these authors build a measure of unrest through the usage of a search string of newspaper articles. While their examination focuses particularly on social unrest since the 1980s, their search string should translate well into earlier periods because the words these authors use in their search string (e.g., protest or riot) have been common in American English for centuries.[18] Thus, I use a slightly modified version of their search string in my analysis, searching for front page articles from the *New York Times* in the two months before the November general election. Further, to make sure that the articles are *actually* about political unrest in the United States, I read and hand coded each article that the search string returned. I provide a more in-depth justification of my coding process in Appendix A.

At first glance, there appears to be a correlation between this measure and large seat swings in the Fiorina (2017) "Era of No Decision." In Figure 3.1 below, I display the seat swing towards or against the president's party since 1872 in the subfigure on the left, measured in terms of the percentage of all House seats.[19] In the subfigure on the right, I show the level of social unrest in the two months before the November general election, as a measure of social unrest on the right, measured as a percentage of

all front-page *New York Times* articles in that period that mention social unrest. A strong correlation appears to be present, with particularly volatile election years such as 1874 and 1894 having a high level of unrest. At the same time, years such as 1880 and 1886 where relatively few articles discussed unrest, saw low levels of electoral volatility or, in the case of 1880, a small seat swing *towards* the president's party.

While there appears to be a correlation between these two measures in this period—and indeed, a Pearson's r value of -0.45 corroborates that there is at least some relationship between these two variables—another key characteristic of this period was an enduring high level of polarization. As I theorize in the previous section, high polarization translates to higher stakes in an election and means that those on both sides of whatever issue relates to the unrest are likely to have a political party to support who allies with their cause. In contrast, in an era of lower polarization (such as the 1960s or 1970s), there may be no clear political party for voters to turn to that they see as natural allies of their cause. Thus, I interact social unrest with polarization in my models (specifically, the absolute difference between the mean Democratic DW-Nominate score and mean Republican DW-Nominate score in the previous Congress), with the expectation that election years that have both high unrest and high levels of polarization will see a high seat swing away from the president's party.

The dependent variable in each of my models measures seat swing towards or against the president's party as a percentage of seats to account

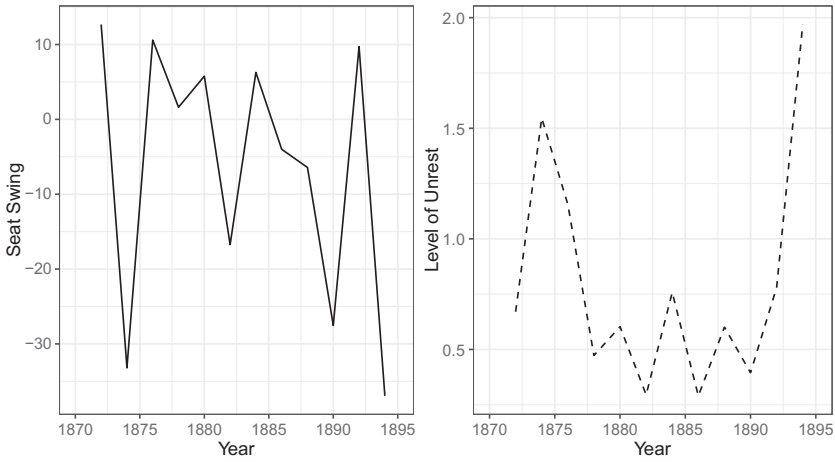

Fig. 3.1. The (Expanded) "Era of No Decision"

for differences in total seats in Congress over time (i.e., a positive value indicates a seat swing towards the president's party and a negative seat swing indicates a swing against the president's party). I measure seat swing in this manner due to the central role that presidents play in congressional elections, including midterm years (e.g., see Campbell 1997).

Before turning to the other independent variables in my models, I also scrutinize the robustness of my measure of unrest by comparing it to another indicator of social discord. This second measure of social unrest counts the number of events listed as taking place the year of each election on the Wikipedia page for "List of incidents of civil unrest in the United States."[20] I do not expect this measure to correlate perfectly with the *New York Times* measure, as it covers a slightly different time period.[21] Additionally, not all incidents of social unrest will prompt the same level of conflict or be covered in the same way by the *New York Times*. Nonetheless, one would expect these two measures to correlate with one another at least fairly strongly and indeed, over the entire period from 1872 until 2018, the Pearson's r correlation between these two indicators is 0.72. Figure 3.2 below further demonstrates that these measures generally rise and fall at around the same points of time. The close relationship of these two measures further supports that the *New York Times* measure actually captures the amount of political unrest in the country in the period ahead of the election. Subsequently, when I carry out my statistical analyses, I also include models where I use the Wikipedia measure of social unrest alongside models that use the *New York Times* measure as a robustness check.

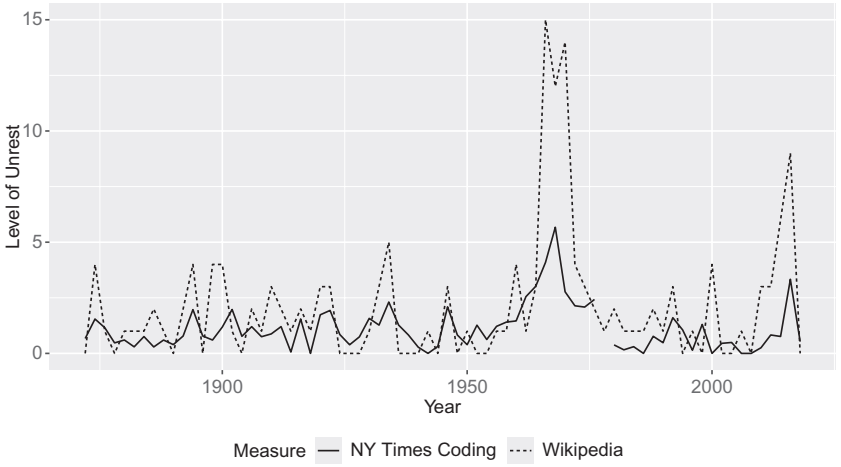

Fig. 3.2. Two Measures of Unrest

Other Variables in the Model

In addition to my measure of social unrest, polarization, and an interaction of these two measures, my models contain several control variables. First, I include a measure of economic growth (or decline); in order to have a consistent measure going back to the start of the period, I use data from the *Maddison Project* where I calculate the change in GDP from the year before the election to the election year (Bolt and van Zanden 2020). Second, I calculate a measure of seat exposure, that draws upon the work of Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman (1986; also see Waterman, Oppenheimer, and Stimson 1991). Specifically, I compute the difference between the seats held by the president's party in Congress ahead of the election and the average number of seats held by the current president's party in that political era.[22] Third, I include a measure of the advantage (or disadvantage) in quality challengers for the president's party.[23] This variable is meant to both capture the advantage in gaining seats from the other party that is likely to come from running more quality challengers, as well as tapping into the overall direction of the political environment as quality potential candidates are more likely to run when conditions favor their party. Fourth, I also include a dummy variable indicating whether the election is a midterm, since especially large seat swings often take place during midterm years rather than presidential cycle. Fifth, to account for any trend over time that might exist in the data, I include a variable representing the year in the election.

Analysis of the Model

The Pre-Polling Era

I begin by looking at the pre-World War II Era of elections, a demarcation point that is often used in congressional elections literature (e.g., see Carson and Roberts 2013, Jacobson and Carson 2019). Thus, the first two models in Table 3.1 below represent the results of congressional elections from 1872–1944. In both the model where I use the *New York Times* measure of unrest and the subsequent model where I capture unrest through a count of Wikipedia events, the interaction between unrest and polarization is negative and significant at the 95 percent confidence level. In other

words, elections under polarization where there is a high amount of unrest tend to see large seat swing away from the president's party, while those with high unrest—but less polarization—are not as likely to see a large seat swing. Additionally, elections that are not occurring after a period of unrest are not as likely to see a high seat swing. The candidate quality advantage control variable also attains significance in both models; the economic variable reaches significance in the *New York Times* model and falls just short of significance in the Wikipedia model.

Next, I extended the models up to the 1978 election. This year serves as another logical cutoff, as 1979 was when Gallup began asking the satisfaction question that was the focus of the start of the last chapter. By this standard, the 1980 election represents the start of the current period whereby dissatisfaction can be directly measured by using polling data and also the start of the current era of party competition identified by Lee (2016). One complication exists in extending the data up to 1980 for the *New York Times* model as journalists at the *Times* and the *New York Daily News* were both on strike from August 10 to November 5, 1978. Thus, the *New York Times* model has one fewer observation than the Wikipedia model, ending in 1976 instead of 1978.[24]

The significant interaction effect persists in these models, the substantive effect of which I display in Figures 3.3 and 3.4 below. For a high level of polarization (represented as a DW-Nominate absolute difference of 0.77), an increase in unrest from the mean level of 1.28 percent of articles to one standard deviation above the mean level of articles (2.32 percent of articles) translates to an increase in predicted seat loss for the president's party from 5.7 percent of all House seats to 11.8 percent of all House seats. In today's House of 435 seats, this would represent an increase in seat loss from 25 House seats at the mean level unrest to 51 House seats when unrest is one standard deviation above the mean. In a highly competitive and polarized era like the late 1800s, narrow House majorities were common and an increased seat swing such as this had the potential to change which party held the majority. In contrast, when polarization is at a lower level of an absolute 0.66 DW-Nominate difference, an increase from the mean level of unrest in *New York Times* articles to one standard deviation above the mean results in a smaller increase in seat swing away from the president's party from 5.3 percent of all House seats to 8.4 percent of all House seats. At the lowest level of polarization represented in Figure 3.3, a DW-Nominate absolute difference of 0.55 between the parties, the predicted increase in

Table 3.1. Political Unrest and Seat Swing in the Pre-Polling Era

Variable	*New York Times* Pre-1945 Model	Wikipedia Pre-1945 Model	*New York Times* Pre-1978 Model	Wikipedia Pre-1980 Model
New York Times Unrest Measure	39.65* (8.91)	-	14.36 (7.67)	-
Polarization	47.05 (38.03)	16.90 (28.13)	30.11 (24.42)	19.89 (20.66)
New York Times Unrest * Polarization	-58.45* (14.39)	-	-26.29* (12.87)	-11.10* (4.74)
Wikipedia Unrest Measure	-	10.78 (5.72)	-	6.10* (2.73)
Wikipedia Unrest * Polarization	-	-16.62* (8.11)	-	11.10* (4.74)
Change in Real GDP	0.37* (0.15)	0.40 (0.20)	0.36* (0.17)	0.40* (0.17)
Exposure	-0.17 (0.14)	-0.11 (0.17)	-0.17 (0.14)	-0.18 (0.13)
Candidate Quality Advantage	0.51* (0.08)	0.46* (0.13)	0.34* (0.09)	0.30* (0.08)
Midterm	-4.19 (2.43)	-5.03 (3.13)	-6.70* (2.32)	-6.38* (2.25)
Year (Time Measure)	-0.07 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.09)	0.03 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)
Intercept	96.13 (259.34)	141.16 (189.47)	-82.89 (144.29)	-43.46 (129.00)
N	37	37	53	54
Adjusted R^2	0.71	0.71	0.64	0.65

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures seat swing, as a percentage of House seats, away from the president's party; standard errors for *New York Times* Pre-World War II model are Newey-West standard errors to account for autocorrelation

seat loss for the president's party as unrest rises is basically flat, with there being only a miniscule increase in seat swing away from the president's party as unrest increases.

A similar effect is present in the Wikipedia model. At the highest level of polarization represented in Figure 3.4 below, an increase from the mean number of Wikipedia unrest articles (4.06 articles) to one standard deviation above the mean number of articles (8.14 articles), translates to an increase in seat swing away from the president's party from 10.10 seats

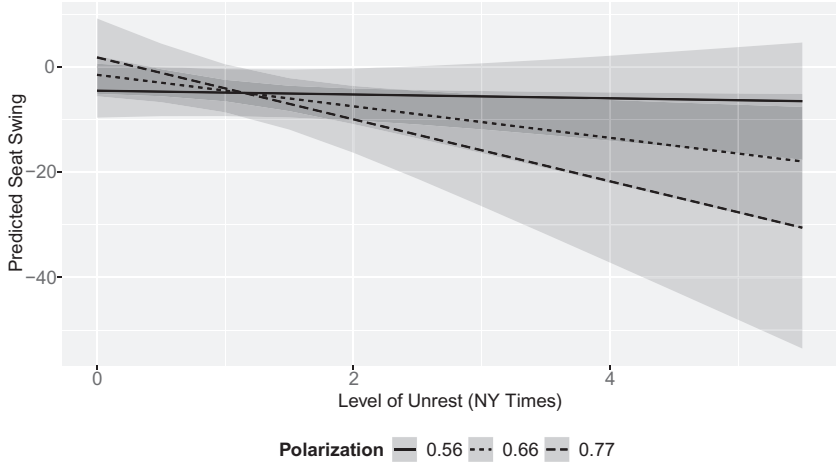

Fig. 3.3. *New York Times* Unrest Measure

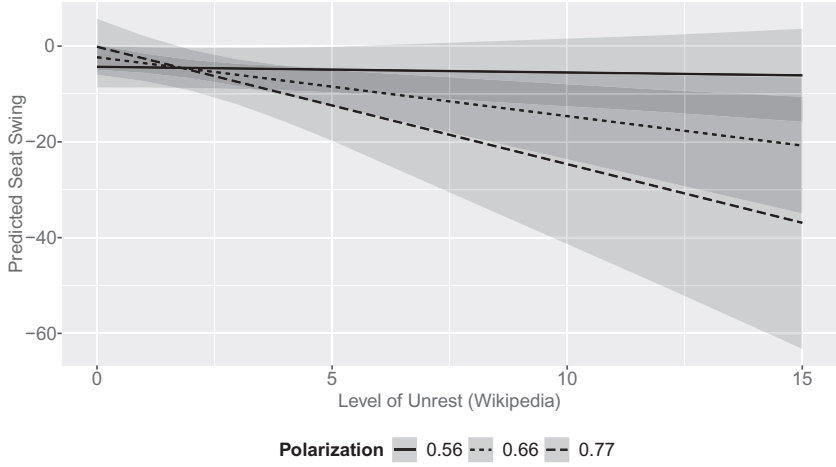

Fig. 3.4. Wikipedia Unrest Measure

to 20.10 seats (an increased seat swing from about 44 seats to about 87.4 seats in a 435-member House). As with the *New York Times* model, the seat swing away from the president's party as the number of Wikipedia unrest articles increases becomes more modest when the level of congressional polarization is at a lower level and the effect almost entirely disappears at the lowest level of polarization included in this figure.

Combining the Pre-Polling Era with the Current Era

My results are less conclusive when I add in data from the current era of high polarization. In a model including all midterm years from 1872 until 2018, the interaction term loses significance and the substantive effect becomes much more modest (See Appendix Table A.8 for results). The lack of overall significance is a result of the fact that in the recent era of high (and increasing) polarization, there is not a strong correlation between unrest and seat swing against the president's party, as there was in the late 1800s. Indeed, there is a weak correlation in the opposite direction of expectations, with the *New York Times* unrest measure correlating with seat swing between 1980 and 2018 at 0.25, although 2016 (a year with high unrest but a seat swing towards the president's party) has an outsized effect here.

In examining the cause of these results, an important feature of this period is a generally low level of unrest despite the high level of discontent that public opinion polls show. Indeed, four of the twenty election years in this period had zero *New York Times* articles that were coded as showing unrest in the public and 12 of the 20 years saw a rate of under 0.5 percent of articles. This low level of unrest does not seem to simply appear to be an artifact of *New York Times* articles or a different method of coverage in recent years as six of these twenty years had zero incidents of unrest listed on Wikipedia, with another six years having only one incident of unrest. People are upset, but this does not seem to be translating to events of political unrest in the same way as in the late 1800s.

To explain this result, I turn to existing literature on social movements and protests. A potential explanation of this result may come from what McCarthy and McPhail (1998) call the "institutionalization of protest." In their study of protests at the 1968 and 1996 Democratic National Conventions in Chicago, these authors noted a major difference between protests at these two conventions. At the 1968 convention, many protestors were arrested and chaos ensued following what a commission referred to as a "'police riot'" took place (McCarthy and McPhail 1998, 83, quoting Walker 1968). In contrast, in 1996 there were few such interactions between police and protestors and demonstrators were often not arrested even after they specifically sought to goad police into detaining them. The cause of this change, according to McCarthy and McPhail (1998, 84), is from what they call the "institutionalization of protest," whereby protest has become a

"normal part of the political process." Part of this institutionalization focuses on the government and how it interacts with protestors in a manner that uses "the minimum necessary force" and arrests protestors as infrequently as possible (McCarthy and McPhail 1998, 100). Institutionalization has also taken place amidst social movement organizations (SMOs). McCarthy and McPhail (1998, 100) note that SMOs increasingly have become professionalized and register with the government. As a consequence, more protestors are associated with groups that try to appear mainstream and do not engage in the sort of tactics of the past that might lead to the sort of unrest that would be covered by the *New York Times* or listed as a major event of unrest by Wikipedia. While McCarthy and McPhail (1998) compare 1968, a relatively later year in my dataset, to 1996, there is evidence to suggest that police interactions with protesters in the late 1800s was more similar to 1968 than to 1996. For example, Harring and McMullin (1975, 13) argue that the development of the Buffalo police force was closely tied to seeking to suppress labor unrest in the area, mobilizing at the "earliest indication of a strike," seeking to "keep the workers from assembling." At the same time, in the Jim Crow South, police often encouraged or cooperated with white lynch mobs and "crucially held Black people to different standards of self-defense" (Gregory 2022, 109).

Many contemporary social movements and protests have also become closely associated with one of the major political parties. For example, as Heaney and Rojas (2015) note the anti-Iraq War movement in the early 2000s was closely associated with the Democratic Party. This close association had the benefit for opponents of mainstreaming opposition to the war and then-Senator Obama's close victory over Senator Clinton in the 2008 primary in part was likely due to his opposition to the Iraq War from the start in contrast with her vote in favor of the vote to authorize the use of military force in Iraq in 2002. However, Heaney and Rojas (2015) also note that the after the victory of President Obama, Democratic activists withdrew from the anti-war movement and anti-war activism among Democratic Party members of Congress declined. While not the main subject of their study, Heaney and Rojas (2015), also note that the Tea Party that formed in opposition to President Obama ahead of the 2010 election soon became an "organized faction" of the Republican Party rather than "a movement outside it." A consequence of the close relationship between social movements and organized political parties is that because parties have a central focus on winning elections, they will not want protestors to take actions

they see as radical (i.e., those that might result in front *New York Times* articles about political unrest or Wikipedia unrest events) as such actions create the risk of negative attention for their party. After a party no longer has such a close association with a movement, as happened with the anti-war movement after President Obama's inauguration, more radical actions may increase. However, Heaney and Rojas (2015, 69) found that coverage of anti-war protests declined after Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress in the 2006 midterm elections and further fell after President Obama took office in 2009. This decrease may in part be due to the focus of the press on covering the parties and their competition for power given that we are now in an era of competitive majorities (Lee 2016). As a result, however, substantial press coverage might not be given to smaller events of unrest that takes place separate from the parties and their struggle for power. At the same time, Tarrow (2022, 4) argues, the party system remains "'hollowed out'" despite increasing polarization. The relative weakness of parties, and especially the Republican Party, makes it harder to channel a social movement to catalyze policy change, as well as making it difficult for a party to control the tactics and foci of movements. In total, the changing nature of protest and social movements provides a potential explanation for the different relationship between political unrest and seat swing in the current polarized era compared to the late 1800s.

Conclusion

In total, this chapter, provides some evidence of my expectation of large seat swings away from the president's party when there is a high level of social unrest, conditional on the level of political polarization that is present at that time. In the era before Gallup started asking the dissatisfaction question, the interaction between the *New York Times* unrest measure and polarization (as well as the alterative Wikipedia measure and unrest) is statistically significant and substantively large. However, this relationship is no longer significant once more recent years are added to the analysis. Drawing McCarthy and McPhail (1998) and Heaney and Rojas (2015), I argue that the changing nature of protest in the late 20th and early 21st century may explain these results in light of the generally small number of events of social unrest in most recent years based on either measure of unrest used in my analyses.

While most recent years had a small amount of estimated unrest, 2016 stands out for the high level of social unrest under both measures. In addition to the high unrest in 2016 (third of all years going back to 1872 in the *New York Times* measure and 4th in the Wikipedia measure), 2012 and 2014 also had relatively higher values than the average for both measures from 1982 to 2018. Surprisingly, 2018 had a low value for both measures, but the overall trend suggests a changing nature of protest in recent years.[25] While protest became more institutionalized and connected with the parties in the 1990s and early 2000s, protests in the 2010s and 2020s particularly related to racial justice on the left (but also some protests on the right) were at least somewhat separate from the party. While the Democratic Party has at least in theory embraced some of the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement, then-candidate Joe Biden specifically criticized some of the actions of protesters in the summer of 2020 that were taken to protest the murder of George Floyd and other incidents of police violence (Bradner 2020). Furthermore, after the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution in 2015 supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, the Black Lives Matter organization issued a statement saying that the resolution did not imply an endorsement by them, arguing that "true change requires real struggle, and that struggle will be in the streets and led by the people, not by a political party" (Lopez 2015). While the 2010s did not see the high seat swings of the late 1800s, in part due to the declining number of swing seats, the potential for protests to lead to unrest deserves further attention going forward (Wasserman 2023). My next task in this book, however, is to examine the consequences for policymaking and democratic governance that can result from high levels of discontent and unrest in the electorate.

CHAPTER 4

Congressional Capacity and the Consequences of Discontent

"I feel kind of like the black sheep in Congress, but here I am."
—Representative Sonny Bono (R-CA), Class of 1994[1]

It was the day after the 2006 midterm election and Democratic National Committee Chair and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean was taking a victory lap at a post-election press conference. Democrats had done very well the night before, gaining more than 30 seats and winning control of the House of Representatives for the first time in the 12 years since they lost control of the chamber in the Republican Revolution of 1994. Democrats did so well in fact that Dean did not remember the name of surprise winner Carol Shea-Porter from neighboring New Hampshire, answering a question about her victory by responding "'The first district of New Hampshire? I can't think of the last part of the hyphenated name. But anyway … Carol'" (Lagorio 2007). Shea-Porter was indeed a surprise victor, having defeated the Democratic Party's favored candidate, State House Minority leader Jim Craig, in the Democratic primary on a groundswell of anti-Iraq War sentiment. After her victory, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee subsequently pulled out of the district and left Shea-Porter on her own for the general election (Gonzales 2010). Yet despite being written off by Democratic leaders, Shea-Porter—whose experience defying others' expectations dated back to when she was advised by a guidance counselor to go to secretary school and she instead earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of New Hampshire—defeated incumbent Representative Jeb Bradley (R-NH) and ultimately served four nonconsecutive terms in Congress (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2007, 1038–1040).

Shea-Porter was not the only surprise winner in 2006. Political science professor Dave Loebsack (D-IA), who did not receive enough signatures to place his name on the primary ballot and had to be nominated by a party convention, was another surprise victor (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2007, 642). Other unexpected winners included chemist Nancy Boyda in Kansas and high school teacher and coach Tim Walz in Minnesota. To be sure, some professional politicians such as former Representatives Baron Hill (D-IN), Nick Lampson (D-TX), and Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), former State Senator Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), and State Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) flipped seats from Republicans (Barone, Cohen, and Ujifusa 2007).[2] However, the relatively large number of political amateurs in the new class of Democrats was notable. The 2006 election was not the first—or last—class elected in a wave year to include a number of surprising winners who flipped seats controlled by the other party, with other examples including Michael Patrick Flanagan (R-IL), who defeated House Ways and Means Chair Dan Rostenkowski (D-IL) in 1994, pilot Chip Cravaack (R-MN), who ended the political career of longtime Representative and Transportation Committee Chair Jim Oberstar (R-MN) in 2010, and lawyer Kendra Horn (D-OK), who in 2018 became the first Democrat in 44 years to win in her Oklahoma City-based district (Camia 2014, Wingerter 2018).

The above anecdotes are meant to illustrate the wide range of winners—and often surprise winners—who win seats in Congress in wave election years. To substantiate the pattern that these individual cases together suggest may be present among wave election winners, I conduct a systematic examination of wave election winners and how they differ compared to those who gain seats in non-wave years and the subsequent effect on Congress as an institution. While the first several chapters of this book examined the overall dynamics of wave elections, this chapter focuses on the *individuals* who win in wave years and the consequences of their election for democratic governance. Here, I focus on the characteristics of those who win seats in wave years and in particular, those who flip seats from the other party. A major focus of this chapter is on the previous political experience (also called "candidate quality," e.g., see Jacobson and Kernell 1983 and Jacobson 1989) of the winners and how their experience compares to those who flip seats in non-wave years, as well as those they replaced in Congress. Although my focus here is on individual members, this examination relates closely to the overall dynamics I considered in prior chapters. If indeed those who win in wave years are less likely to have prior political

experience, this finding would suggest the pervasive dominance of the feelings of discontent present in the electorate in waves, allowing some of those who usually would have little chance of being elected to Congress to be victorious. In this chapter, I particularly consider the impact of waves on the body and, ultimately, the direction of public policy and the capacity of Congress to govern by comparing how effective the new members are compared to their predecessors in the body.

Who Gets Washed to Shore? A Portrait of Wave Babies[3]

A broad literature exists in political science, history, and journalism that examines those who win in wave election years (e.g., Killian 1998, Aldrich and Rohde 1997–1998, Rae 1998, Lawrence 2018). In this section, I draw on this and other literature, as well as my own expectations, to paint a portrait of who wins seats in wave years. I focus in particular here on those wave elections occurring since 1994, beginning with the Republican Revolution that took place that year. I focus on this period because it corresponds closely with the period of perpetual discontent in the electorate that I examine in the previous chapters, although I do draw upon insights relating to previous waves such as the post-Watergate wave in 1974. While I did not focus on 1994 in the immediately preceding chapters, including this year in my analysis allows for a consideration of some of the longer-term consequences of wave elections, as well as providing for a second Republican wave besides to 2010 to be part of my analysis. I begin by considering previous political experience.

Candidate Quality and Wave Elections

A crucial characteristic of new members of Congress to examine is their previous experience in elective office given its potential effects on congressional governing capacity. Dating back to Jacobson and Kernell (1983; see also Jacobson 1989), scholars have used prior experience serving in another elective office as heuristic for candidate quality. These scholars found that quality challengers tend to run when they have the best chance to win. In other words, these challengers are most likely to run when it is likely that a wave will take place that benefits their political party in the next election. Expectations of electoral conditions do not always comport with reality

(for example, there was a wide expectation that Republicans would do incredibly well in the 2022 midterms), but often the fundamentals (e.g., the state of the economy) existing around candidate filing season persist into the fall and quality potential candidates are glad about their perceptive decision to run (or not run) that was made a year or so earlier.

Central to a quality candidate's decision to run for Congress is their ambition to reach higher levels of office. As conceptualized by Schlesinger (1966), a political opportunity structure exists, whereby House elections sit above state legislative offices, but below the Senate, typically most governorships, and the presidency. For a professional politician, running for a higher office carries the risk of a loss that takes them closer to earning the label of being a political loser, and thus they need to balance their own ambitions for high office with the potential risk of experiencing a career-ending loss (e.g., see Rohde 1979).[4] Indeed, many professional politicians have already decided that they want to run for a specific higher office and are just waiting for the right moment to run for that office (Maestas et al. 2006). As one moves up the political opportunity structure, experienced politicians hold an increasing percentage of the political offices in that category (see Canon 1990, 5), so if it is the perceived right moment for a quality candidate, any amateurs who run that year are likely to lose in the primary. Thus, as Banks and Kiewiet (1989) argue, the best time for a political amateur to run might be when conditions are not especially favorable for their party, as quality candidates will stay out and the amateur may have a clear path into the general election. They are still more likely than not to lose in the general, but they are in the right place at the right time, should conditions change or should the incumbent face a scandal.

Given this relationship between candidate quality and electoral success, one might expect quality candidates to fare most strongly in wave years. As long as there was a sufficient signal of the favorability of conditions for a party well enough in advance, these years will feature the most quality candidates, giving them the opportunity to flip more seats than usual. Yet particularly in our increasingly nationalized political climate where the value of incumbency matters progressively less than the partisan alignment of a district, the prior political experience of a candidate may not matter as much as it did in the past in a wave year in which the national mood favors their party (e.g., see Jacobson 2015). Indeed, Jacobson (2019, 24) documents an ever-increasing level of nationalization in each midterm compared to the midterm four years prior over time, but with particularly notable jumps in

waves such as 1994 and 2010. While nationalization means that incumbents in seats that strongly favor their party are safe, incumbents from the president's party in swing seats (or seats that only narrowly lean to their party) are in danger of losing as national conditions get less favorable, even when their opponent is not a quality candidate.

To examine the connection between candidate quality and victory in wave elections, I conducted several regression analyses. I examined House seats in which an incumbent sought reelection, looking at the factors that predict a seat flip from one party to the other. I am especially interested in seats that flipped from one party to the other because these are the seats that result in national seats swings and a change in party control. Since the other party won the seat in the previous election, the party seeking to win it will want to be especially discerning about who they nominate if they view it to be competitive. (Although occasionally, as was the case with NH-1 in 2006, a party misjudges its prospects in the general election for a seat.) I am particularly interested in the interaction between candidate quality and whether an election is a wave to see if a rising tide lifts the boats of non-quality candidates in wave years beyond their chances in non-waves. To account for the role of spending disparities between incumbents and challengers, I include a control variable measuring the difference in real 2022 dollars between the amount of spending for the incumbent and the spending for the challenger. I also include controls for whether the incumbent is a first-term member of Congress (i.e., when an incumbent may be at their most vulnerable), another control for the previous vote for the incumbent party in that House seat in the most recent presidential election to indicate the competitiveness of the seat, as well as a dummy variable indicating if redistricting took place before the election.

I also include a second model that includes all seat flips, adding in flips in open seats where a non-incumbent sought to defend a seat for the party. I omit the first-term variable in this model in order to include cases without an incumbent running. Finally, with the exception of the 2006 midterm where Democrats successfully defended all of their House seats, the losing party in a wave typically gains a small number of seats from the winning party that makes most of the gains. To make sure that these seats are not driving my results, I also include separate models that remove these seat flips that go against the trend.[5]

In three of the four models displayed in Table 4.1 below, the interaction between the wave election dummy variable and the variable indicating

Table 4.1. Candidate Quality Matters Less in Wave Elections for Flipping Seats

Variable	All Incumbent Seat Flips	All Party Flips (Includes Open Seats)	All Incumbent Seats Flips (No Seats Against Wave Trend)	All Party Flips (No Seats Against Wave Trend)
Wave Dummy Variable	0.93* (0.19)	0.75* (0.16)	0.90* (0.19)	0.71* (0.16)
Quality Candidate	1.53* (0.18)	1.59* (0.14)	1.50* (0.18)	1.55* (0.14)
Wave * Quality Candidate	-0.91* (0.30)	-0.43 (0.24)	-0.93* (0.30)	-0.52* (0.24)
First Term MC	0.89* (0.14)	-	0.83* (0.14)	-
Incumbent Party Prev. Pres. Vote	-0.08* (0.01)	-0.08* (0.01)	-0.09* (0.01)	-0.09* (0.01)
Incumbent Spending Adv (Real 2022 Hund Thousands)	-0.03* (0.00)	-0.05* (0.00)	-0.03* (0.00)	-0.05* (0.00)
Redistricted Seat	-0.14 (0.20)	0.24 (0.14)	-0.12 (0.20)	0.23 (0.14)
Intercept	1.03* (0.46)	1.59* (0.39)	1.25* (0.47)	1.87* (0.39)
N	4,992	5,589	4,986	5,575
Log-likelihood	-828.02	-1,154.50	-814.10	-1,123.10

*p < 0.05: dependent variable measures whether the seat flipped between the parties

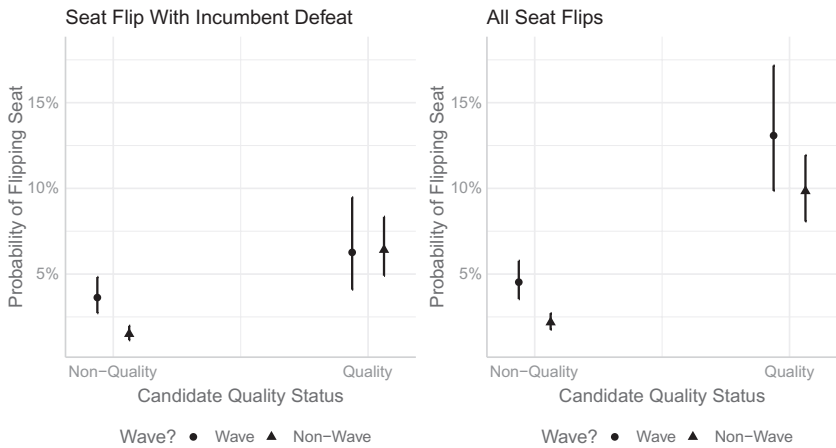

Fig. 4.1. Candidate Quality Matters Less in Wave Years

whether the challenging party candidate had prior experience was statistically significant and negative at the 95 percent confidence level, falling just short in the second model in the table that includes open seats ($p = 0.07$). In total, these results demonstrate that candidate quality matters less in wave years in term of flipping seats than it does in years without such a strong partisan trend. To examine the substantive effect of this trend, I display the predicted probabilities of a seat flip in Figure 4.1 above for the two models in Table 4.1 that remove the seats that flip against the wave trend. For quality candidates, there is little difference between wave years in terms of the probability of flipping a seat held by an incumbent. Holding other variables at their means, there is approximately a 6 percent chance of flipping a seat in both wave and non-wave years, while non-quality candidates see an increase in the probability of defeating an incumbent from around 1.5 percent in non-wave years to 3.6 percent in wave years. Considering all seats, quality candidates have a 13.1 percent chance of flipping a seat in wave years and a 9.8 percent chance of flipping a seat in non-wave years while non-quality candidates have a 2.1 percent chance of winning in a non-wave, compared to 4.5 percent in a wave.

Even in waves, a relatively small percentage of seats flip between the parties, so the change in percentages in Figure 4.1 above look as if they are quite small. Thus, it is also useful to consider the *relative proportion* of new members who flipped seats in wave and non-wave years who were quality candidates. In non-wave years, 53.6 percent of seat flips involving the defeat of incumbents were accomplished by quality candidates, compared to 30.4 percent of seat flips in waves. Looking at all seats that saw a flip between the parties, quality candidates won in 60.4 percent of seat flips in non-wave years compared to 43 percent of seats in wave years.[6] In total, these results support the idea that waves represent a unique opportunity for less politically experienced candidates such as Carol Shea-Porter and Tim Walz to win seats in Congress. While most non-quality (and for that matter, quality) candidates will lose, the evidence presented here suggests that non-quality candidates are relatively more likely to flip seats in wave years than in normal election years.

Ideology, Wave Elections, and Congressional Capacity

Another factor that may matter in terms of congressional governing capacity is the ideology of new members. If a new class is particularly ideological,

the result may be increased congressional gridlock as partisanship increases. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that those who flip seats in wave years may be more ideologically extreme, although this may depend by party. For example, Lawrence (2018, 20) discusses how although there were some "uncompromising liberals" among the Democrats who won seats in Congress in 1974, others were more moderate and did not fit this stereotype of the class. Twenty years later, the Republican Revolution gave the GOP its first majority in 40 years and Killian (1998, 14–16) similarly wrote of the divide between the extremely conservative "True Believers" who won such as Joe Scarborough (R-FL) and Linda Smith (R-WA) and the more moderate "Traditional Politicians" such as Bob Ehrlich (R-MD) and Tom Davis (R-VA). Ultimately, Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) typically sided more closely with the more conservative, pugnacious wing of the party, prompting confrontations with President Clinton that resulted in the government shutting down. Finally, looking at the entire cohort of Republicans who were elected in 2010, Evans (2014) found there was not a statistically significant difference in ideology compared with more senior Republicans.

Here, my goal is to determine whether the conventional wisdom of wave classes being particularly ideological or the accounts that convey more mixed results have more truth to them. Specifically, I examine the ideology of those who flip seats in waves by comparing the absolute first dimension DW-Nominate scores of these members who flipped seats in waves to the scores of those who flipped seats in non-waves. I am again particularly interested in those who flip seats because these are the members who have been elected as a result of electoral volatility and, as a group, their victories can result in a substantial shift in the ideology of Congress. Displayed in Table 4.2 below, I find that the mean ideology of those members who flip seats in waves is more moderate than that of members who flip seats in non-wave years. The difference here is statistically significant, but it is entirely driven by the ideology of Democratic winners. Republicans who flip seats in waves do not have an ideology that is statistically different from their colleagues who are elected in non-wave years. Democrats who win in waves, in contrast, are more *moderate* than their Democratic colleagues who flip seats in non-wave years.

To explain this result, I turn to specific efforts of the Democratic Party to recruit ideologically moderate candidates in years such as 2006. As Bendavid (2007, 18) notes, DCCC Chair Rahm Emanuel's (D-IL) main criteria for candidates was their electability and to Emanuel in 2006, this

Table 4.2. Ideology and Wave Elections

	Non-Waves	Waves
Mean Absolute DW-Nominate (All Flipped Seats)*	0.378	0.314
Mean Absolute DW-Nominate (Democrats)*	0.299	0.248
Mean Absolute DW-Nominate (Republicans)	0.422	0.432

*$p < 0.05$; This table includes seat flips for seats held by incumbents, as well as open seats, and omits seats flipped again the trend in wave years.

meant not using "'an ideological purity test.'"[7] This approach did not endear Emanuel to the party base, which was particularly interested in nominating candidates who strongly opposed the Iraq War. While not all of Emanuel's preferred candidates won primaries and Democrats won some surprise general election victories with candidates like Carol Shea-Porter in New Hampshire and Dave Loebsack in Iowa, many of his candidates were successful. Emanuel's strategy reflected the fact that the maps drawn after the 2000 redistricting were relatively biased towards Republicans, increasing their seat shared beyond the number of seats they would have won with neutral maps (e.g., see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2009, 666 and 678). Democrats realized they would have to win more moderate to conservative voters to take back control of the House of Representatives in 2006 and thus recruited more moderate candidates. The maps drawn after 2010 were even more biased against Democrats (e.g., see Stephanopoulos and McGhee 2014, 28 for one measure of bias) and in 2018 the party again recruited a number of moderate candidates and discouraged some progressives from running (Smith 2020a). In particular, a number of Democrats—and in particular female Democrats—with military backgrounds such as Elissa Slotkin (D-MI) and Elaine Luria (D-VA) who voters may have perceived to be more moderate (and who indeed had moderate voting records in Congress) won seats in Congress in 2018 (e.g., see Schroeder, Best, and Teigen 2023). Additionally, the seats flipped by Democrats in waves favoring their party were more conservative in terms of presidential vote than those flipped in non-wave years. On average, the Democratic presidential candidate received 49.5 percent of the vote in House seats flipped in Democratic waves compared to 54.4 percent of the vote in seats that flipped in normal years. This difference reaches significance at the 0.05 level.

In response to their less favorable districts, these wave Democrats may adopt more moderate voting records in seeking to win reelection.[8]

In total, these results demonstrate that the members who flip seats in wave years, enabling their party to gain control of Congress (or win a notably larger majority, as with Democrats in 2008), are not more ideological than their colleagues who flip seats in normal election years and in the case of Democrats are even more moderate. While the larger total *number* of Republicans (most of whom are quite conservative in this era) who enter Congress following a wave may result in increased gridlock, there is not evidence to suggest that as a group they are more conservative than their Republican colleagues who enter following non-wave years. Rather, the election of these Republicans empowers an already-conservative conference that now has a majority. Although not the main focus here, I did consider the ideology of those won in a wave year, but had not flipped a seat. Here, for both parties, I found little difference in ideology for these first-term wave non-seat flippers compared to their colleagues who initially won in non-wave years. Finally, the impacts of wave classes may go beyond their roll call votes. For example, as Sinclair (1983, 5–8) discusses, the class of 1974 was crucial in supporting changes to congressional procedure that empowered majority leadership and weakened committee chairs (see also Rohde 1991).

Legislative Effectiveness

The number of amateurs and the ideology of wave classes are good initial, albeit indirect measures of how waves might affect congressional capacity. A more direct test of the effect of waves, however, is to look specifically at how effective these new members are as legislators. Here, I draw on the widely used measure of legislative effectiveness produced by Volden and Wiseman (2014). In their measure, lawmakers get credit for shepherding their preferred legislation through Congress, getting credit for actions such as introducing legislation, getting it through committee, and passing it out of the body, with progressively more recognition for actions later in the legislative process (i.e., legislators get more credit for actually having a piece of legislation they sponsored pass than for simply introducing legislation).[9] Volden and Wiseman also examine the factors that predict being an effective legislator. Based upon the previous factors examined in this chapter, several of their significant findings are of particular relevance to the sort

of winners in wave elections. In particular, Volden and Wiseman (2014, 44) find that state legislators coming from a state legislature with a high level of professionalism are more legislatively effective. Given that wave classes include a disproportionately large number of political amateurs who flip seats in Congress, these new members may be less legislatively effective than their more politically experienced colleagues who flip seats in non-wave years.

Additionally, while they do not find significant results for ideology in their main model, Volden and Wiseman (2014, 44 & 182) do list "Be Open to Compromise" as a key habit of effective legislators, so the sort of Democrats who Rahm Emanuel sought to recruit in 2006 may have been suited for working with Republicans in order to succeed in the legislative process. Finally, however, those in safe seats who do not have to focus as much on reelection tend to be more effective legislators. Wave classes tend to include a relatively large number of members who flip unfavorable seats for their party, so members from these classes may be relatively less effective than the usual first-term members from non-wave years.

To examine the legislative effectiveness of wave classes compared to non-wave classes of members of Congress, I draw upon the legislative effectiveness scores made publicly available by Volden and Wiseman. Helpfully, these authors provide a benchmark measure for each lawmaker that considers their seniority, whether they are in the majority, and their status as a chair of a committee or subcommittee. These benchmark scores allow for a more apples-to-apples comparison between members. First, I consider the effectiveness of these new members in their first term as compared to those who they replaced in Congress. As new members, these new legislators are likely to be less effective than the incumbents they replaced given their lack of experience with the legislative process. Indeed, as displayed in Table 4.3, the effectiveness of these new members is 0.27 units lower than that of the members they replaced and attains statistical significance. Their benchmark scores—lower than their predecessors given their inexperience and lack of seniority as first-term members—are not statistically different from those of their predecessors. However, the fact that their *overall* effectiveness scores are lower means that the legislative capacity of Congress has been diminished to a least some extent. While these new members may do relatively well as new members when accounting for their career stage, they do not have the expertise, connections, and experience to be as effective as their predecessors.

Table 4.3. Legislative Effectiveness Compared to Predecessors

	Effectiveness Compared to Predecessor	Benchmark Compared to Predecessor
All Wave Babies	-0.27*	0.06
State Legislator	0.04	-0.02
Professional State Legislator	0.11	0.01

*$p < 0.05$; This table includes members winning wave year for seats held by incumbents, as well as open seats.

In their book, among the various characteristics of effectiveness that Volden and Wiseman (2014) consider is previous service in a state legislative body and in particular in a professional state legislature. Thus, I also calculate effectiveness scores compared to the wave baby's predecessor for those who had previous service in a state legislature. These legislators' effectiveness scores are statistically indifferent from the scores of their predecessors. State legislators who come from state bodies in the top quartile of professionalism, actually have professionalism scores 0.11 units *above* those of their predecessors. This difference is not quite statistically significant ($p = 0.1005$), but the pattern in the data is clear: the vast majority of new wave babies diminish the capacity of the body to legislate, but the few who come from contexts similar to Congress have the potential to enhance it to some extent over time.

Persistence and Legislative Effectiveness in Congress Over the Longer Term

Waves have an impact beyond a single congressional term. Here, I consider how wave babies may affect congressional capacity over the longer term. I conduct this examination in two ways, first by looking at how long these new members serve after elected and second by considering how effective they are on average over their entire careers. Thus, I finally turn to examining how long members of wave classes persist in Congress beyond their initial election, a necessary prerequisite to being an effective representative.

Members who leave Congress can do so for voluntary or involuntary reasons. Among involuntary reasons, losing reelection looms particularly large as a factor that can cut short a congressional career.[10] As a large number of wave classes come from competitive seats, one might expect that the tenure of those who initially win in waves might end up being relatively short as a wave helping the other party, or even a normal election, could

end their career quickly. Additionally, those winning in waves might choose to voluntarily step away from Congress, either to leave politics or to run for higher office. Research has found that those representing non-safe seats are more likely to retire as the grind of having to run a tough campaign every year takes a toll (e.g., see Smith 2021), so wave classes may have an especially large number of members who decide to step away after a shorter amount of time than their non-wave class colleagues. Among Republicans, the "burn it down" attitude discussed relative to legislative effectiveness may also cause these members to not view their service in Congress as a career, but rather a temporary assignment. Additionally, some of these Republicans kept term-limit pledges they had made when they initially ran for Congress (Berman 2016). Finally, Volden and Wiseman (2014, 35) found that those who are less legislatively effective may seek to retire earlier than their more effective colleagues, so those who do not find early success in Congress may retire after only a few terms.

To examine persistence in Congress, I consider the percentage of each wave class that still remains at specific future intervals. As of 2023, some members of Congress still remain from each of the below wave classes other than 1994. For the Republican classes of 1994 and 2010, the percentage remaining after three terms was in the mid-fifties, while for Democrats, this percentage was in the 30s. These two Democratic classes experienced the 2010 Republican wave, causing a number of congressional careers to be cut short after one or two terms. Republicans saw a more substantial decline after five terms. While few Democrats from 2006 and 2008 who were still in Congress after three terms were not there after five terms, a number of Republicans departed in the interval between their third and fifth terms. The class of 2010 saw a number of losses in the 2018 Democratic wave, but there were also a number of voluntary departures of members who voluntarily decided to step away (e.g., see Berman 2016).

For the classes of 1994 and 2006, enough time has passed that I am also able to look at how many legislators remained in Congress after *eight* terms. While the Republican class of 1994 had a higher percentage of members who were still in Congress after three and five terms, more Democrats remained after eight terms. For those Democrats who survived the Republican wave of 2010, as well as any challenges that occurred during more normal years, the general party focus on creating new policy likely served as a pull to remain in Congress that was not present to the same extent among Republicans. As a point of comparison, the more normal election of 2004, which had 25

Table 4.4. Percentage of Wave Class Still in Congress

Wave Class of…	Still in Congress after Three Full Terms	Still in Congress after Five Full Terms	Still in Congress after Eight Full Terms
1994	57.9 percent	42.1 percent	10.5 percent
2006	35.7 percent	35.7 percent	14.3 percent
2008	32.5 percent	25 percent	NA
2010	55.7 percent	30.7 percent	NA

This figure includes only members from the winning party in that wave.

Republican first-term members and 19 first-term Democrats, saw 70.5 percent of its members persist beyond three terms, 52.3 persist beyond five terms and 38.6 percent of its members persist beyond eight-term. At each point, this non-wave class had more longevity in Congress than any of the wave classes represented in Table 4.4 above.

It also matters what a member decides to do with their time in office. Thus, I return to legislative effectiveness scores and compare how effect wave babies are to those elected in more normal election years. Specifically, I can compare those who enter Congress following a wave to those who enter Congress following a normal election by first subtracting the benchmark score from a representative's effectiveness score.[11] Since the benchmark measure evaluates a legislator's predicted productivity relative to their peers at the stage they are in their career, I am able to look compare the productivity of wave babies to those entering following non-waves throughout their careers in Congress rather than just in their first term. Thus, second, I take an average of these scores over a member's entire career and compare the average for wave babies to those elected in more normal election years.

As a group, I find that members initially elected in the five wave years I examined (i.e., 1994, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2018) were on average slightly closer to the benchmark than those who were elected in non-wave years. This difference is quite small, 0.05 units below the benchmark instead of 0.11 units below the benchmark, and it does not attain statistical significance at any conventional level (see Table 4.5 below). Significant differences appear, however, when one examines each party individually. For Democrats, both those elected in waves and those elected in non-waves fall below the benchmark on average, but wave babies fall below this metric by a smaller amount. A statistically significant difference exists here, with Democrats elected in

Table 4.5. Legislative Effectiveness Compared to Benchmark

	Non-Wave Babies	Wave Babies
Mean Effectiveness Compared to Benchmark	-0.11	-0.05
Mean Effectiveness Compared to Benchmark (Democrats)*	-0.448	-0.296
Mean Effectiveness Compared to Benchmark (Republicans)*	0.250	0.089

*$p < 0.05$; This table includes members winning wave year for seats held by incumbents, as well as open seats.

non-waves having an average effectiveness score that falls further below the baseline than those who are initially elected in non-wave years. Among Republicans, both those who are elected in waves and those elected in non-waves have effectiveness scores *above* the benchmark. Those elected in non-waves, however, are further above the benchmark than those who are elected in wave years, with the difference attaining statistical significance.

Specific differences between the individuals who win seats for each party might explain this opposite pattern in divergence from baseline effectiveness among Democrats and Republicans. As discussed previously, the Republicans who won in 1994 and 2010 largely ran on burning down the institution, rather than on trying to pass major new programs. Indeed, Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) argued that the success of the new Republican majority should be judged based upon the new laws they passed, but rather the existing ones that they were able to *repeal* (Klein 2015). In contrast, Democrats who win election to Congress in wave years often run on specific policy goals, in some cases spending decades pursuing that goal. Indeed, several of the Watergate Babies, progressive Democratic members elected in 1974, such as Henry Waxman (D-CA) and George Miller (D-CA) played an important role in passing the Affordable Care Act decades later (Arenberg 2015). In total, however, the results in this section demonstrate that for many of the members who win in waves, their greatest impact is the change in party control (or large increase in the size of the majority as in 2008) that their class's win causes, rather than their own long-term service or effectiveness as a legislator. Indeed, as Rae and Pitney (2014) note, the non-wave class of 1978 included a number of politically important members such as Newt Gingrich (R-GA), Dick Cheney (R-WY), and Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY). However, the impact for these members was

over the longer term based upon their own political skill and entrepreneurship rather than as a result of flipping or swelling the size of a majority.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the individual members who win in wave election years with a focus on how their elections may affect congressional capacity at the micro-level. Most strikingly, those who flip seats in wave years tend to be less likely to have political experience than their peers who flip seats in more normal election years. Additionally, the Democrats who flip seats in wave years tend to be more moderate than their colleagues who flip seats in normal year. While the Republicans who win are not more conservative than their colleagues who win in non-waves, a flip in the congressional majority means that an already quite conservative conference now has the majority. Considering entire classes elected in wave years (i.e., those who flipped seats and also those who won seats already controlled by their party), Democrats in wave classes tend to be *more* legislatively effective (as compared to the benchmark) on average than non-wave classes, while wave class Republicans tend to be less legislatively effective representatives relative to the benchmark than non-wave class Republicans (in some cases, perhaps by choice). However, as these classes contain a large number of political amateurs, these legislators on average have lower effectiveness scores than those of their predecessors. Finally, legislators from wave classes often disappear from Congress quickly as a result of losing reelection, or in the case of Republicans, because they do not want to become career legislators.

Previous chapters revealed how persistent discontent in the electorate drove voters to support candidates who were from the opposite party as the president in recent election cycles. This chapter elucidated the micro-level effects of these voting decisions on congressional capacity as a phalanx of amateurs enters the body. While this chapter focused on the effectiveness of specific members, a logical next question is how diminished legislative capacity affects the institution as a whole. Thus, in the next chapter, I consider the macro-level implications of the large seat swing produced by waves in terms of Congress's ability to address significant policy challenges and, ultimately, how its success or (more often) failure ties back into voter dissatisfaction.

CHAPTER 5

Policy Doom Loop: How Electoral Volatility Perpetuates Itself[1]

"If you put me in a house, I would much prefer a flat
If you put me in a flat, then I'd rather have a house
If you set me on a mouse, then I only want a rat
If you set me on a rat, then I'd rather chase a mouse."
—"The Rum Tum Tugger" from *Cats*

On June 27, 2003, the House of Representatives passed its version of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act by a narrow 216–215 margin, with Republicans having to leave a 15-minute vote open for almost an hour in order to pass this bill greatly expanding the scope of Medicare (Sinclair 2006, 145). Votes broke down along party lines, with only nine Democrats voting "yes" and nineteen Republicans voting against the bill. At first glance, one might expect Democrats to support an expansion of the social safety net, particularly after an endorsement of the bill from the influential American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), but Democrats opposed it because this bill worked to bring private competition into Medicare, because they were largely shut out of negotiations, and since they believed that the benefits in the proposal offered by Republicans were insufficient (Oliver, Lee, and Lipton 2004 and Sinclair 2006, 173). For example, the proposal created a "donut hole" in coverage (also known as a "coverage gap"), whereby the cost of prescription drugs between when a beneficiary qualifies for regular coverage, but before they reach the "catastrophic coverage" stage for especially expensive prescription drug costs (Tufts Health Plan n.d.). Ultimately, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act became law after passing the Senate and achieving bicameral (Republican) agreement in a conference

committee, but not without additional drama in another late night 15-minute vote that extended to three hours and ended with the bill passing 220–215 after several Republicans switched their votes from "no" to "yes" (Sinclair 2006, 174–175). After passing the Senate, President George W. Bush signed the bill into law and Democrats decried both the content of the bill and the process that led to its passage (Oliver, Lee, and Lipton 2004).

Three years later, Democrats took control of the House of Representatives in the 2006 midterm elections. For the first two years of their majority, little progress could be made on policy because of President Bush's veto, although Democrats were able to get some priorities—such as an increase in the minimum wage—signed into law (Labaton 2007). After the 2008 election, in which then-Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) won a landslide victory and Democrats saw their bare majority in the Senate grow substantially, health care policy became a priority of Democrats at the exclusion of other policy challenges such as immigration and climate change (The Maddow Blog and Benen 2012).[2] While much of the focus was on the creation of a new comprehensive plan that would cover Americans under 65 who lacked coverage, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA/now known as Affordable Care Act/ACA) also addressed Medicare prescription drug coverage. While Democrats had decried moves towards private companies having a role in Medicare during the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act debate in 2003, the ACA focused more on modifications and increased regulation to make private plans (known as Medicare Advantage) have a payment structure that was more like that of traditional Medicare. Indeed, despite expectations to the contrary, enrollment in private plans actually *grew* from 24 percent in 2010 when the ACA was signed into law to 33 percent in 2017 and to a projected 41 percent in 2027 (Patel and Guterman 2017). The Affordable Care Act also worked to phase out the "donut hole" in coverage (Cubanski, Neuman, and Damico 2018). President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act into law in March 2010.

That November, Republicans won the House majority on a wave of anti-ACA and anti-Obama sentiment, as well as frustration that many *other* policy problems had gone unaddressed. Notably, the GOP proposal on health care was to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act, rather than working within the ACA's structure (Cohn 2020). Republicans were unable to make much progress in their repeal effort in Congress until after they took control of the Senate in 2014 and Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016, although the Supreme Court's decision in the *NFIB v. Sebelius* case in 2012

did allow states to opt out of the ACA's Medicaid expansion provision without penalty (Rosenbaum and Westmoreland 2012). In 2017, Republicans were constrained in what they could put in their repeal bill by the filibuster, so they had to construct a bill that could go through the simple-majority budget reconciliation process, thus scaling back their ambitions to entirely repeal the ACA (Diamond 2017). The slimmed down "skinny repeal" bill they ultimately put up for a vote in the Senate was famously voted down by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) on the night of July 27, 2017, although Republicans were able to repeal the individual mandate in their tax bill later that year (Scott 2018).[3]

In this chapter, I examine the frustration in the electorate that fueled Republicans repeal-only effort and how the lack of progress on health care (and most other issues) after taking office in 2011 subsequently affected future congressional elections. I argue that displeasure in the electorate about the government's capacity to solve problems—in response to the *lack of progress* on most issues, but also in response to policies where there is *relative progress* like health care— affects voter's behavior in congressional elections. A lack of sophistication in the electorate, I argue, causes this anger to punish the president's party in midterms which, perversely, causes even *more* gridlock and, ultimately, even more frustration in the electorate. The vicious cycle that develops, whereby voters subsequently express anger with government progress on addressing crucial policy problems—but in a way that creates conditions that make it even *less likely* that the government will actually address those problems—results in what I term in this chapter the "policy doom loop." This chapter builds on Chapter Four by considering the consequences of wave elections— albeit at the macro-level instead of the micro-level—but also connects to the first several chapters of this book by arguing that these consequences then feed back into the sense of negativity that pervades politics today, fueling further electoral volatility.

Previous Research on Elections, the Policy Process, and Gridlock

Elections and the Policy Process

Before presenting my theory of the policy doom loop, I first discuss existing theories on the policy process and the role of elections in those studies. I begin with the canonical studies of the policy process by Kingdon (2003)

and Baumgartner and Jones (2009). For Kingdon, policy change—which is usually incremental— involves a policy problem coinciding with a solution amidst the right political circumstances. In his study, however, elections play a limited direct role on the policy process. In his second chapter on participants in government, Kingdon (2003, 61–65) has a subsection on what he terms "elections-related participants." While he notes the importance of election results in years such as the Reagan landslide, Kingdon relays that these elections-related participants, did not play a major role in the interviews and case studies he conducted in having a *direct* effect on policymaking. Nonetheless, Kingdon is still able to discern an important *indirect* effect on policy agendas. One "important, but not overwhelming" effect of elections on policymaking comes from campaigns and the pledges made by politicians, but this effect is not automatic and requires an additional push, such as from "a firm presidential commitment" or constituency pressure (62–63). Another effect comes from political parties, as their ideals and platform affect the policy agenda that the victors of an election consider once inside office (63–65). Notably, Kingdon published this book's first edition in 1984 as America was just emerging from the low partisanship/weak party era of the 1960s and 1970s. Given the increase in partisanship since the time of Kingdon's study, it follows that this indirect source of electoral effects should be even greater today.

While not exactly the same as elections, public opinion also plays an important role in the policy process in Kingdon's theory, either by potentially placing an item on the agenda or by removing it from consideration. Consistent with Mayhew's (1974b) conception of politicians being reelection-focused, Kingdon (2003, 65) argues that a newly popular policy idea may catch the notice of "vote seeking-politicians." Additionally, the unpopularity of an idea with the public may keep a policy solution *off* of the policy agenda due to its disapproval by the public.[4] Kingdon's idea of negative effects that result from public unpopularity and the potential electoral effects of pursuing an unpopular policy goal receives support elsewhere in the literature. For example, Stimson (1999, 22–23) writes about the "zone of acquiescence" for potential policy actions that are neither too liberal nor too conservative for the public, within which a "rational policymaker" tries to remain. Kingdon and Stimson also align in discussing the role of a left-right "national mood" (or as Stimson calls it, "policy mood") on what actions the public prefers the government to take. A change in the national mood can affect policy both through election results and through

the *anticipation* of electoral consequences (also see Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). New politicians who reflect a change in the policy preferences of the public can seek to enact those preferences when elected to government, while reelection-seeking politicians who sense a shift in the electorate may subsequently shift their positions so as not to lose their seat. In certain electoral circumstances (e.g., 1980 election)—what Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson term "mandate elections" (2007, esp. see 106–130)—the change in public mood may create such a partisan gain that at least *some* of the remaining members of the losing party are so shell-shocked that, for a time, they modify their voting records in the direction of the gaining party, causing a brief shift in the direction of policy.

In total, Kingdon (and the complementary studies by Stimson and coauthors) find that elections can have at least an indirect role on public opinion. Kingdon (2003, 148) also briefly discusses the role of a potential "feedback cycle," where a policy passes, issues with it appear, and then changes are made to it (and then the cycle begins all over again). Yet, relative to the role of elections in such a feedback cycle, this path approximates more closely what happened with the Medicare prescription drug benefit rather than with the Affordable Care Act, where the out-party won on a message on trying to outright repeal a major new program. In other words, Kingdon theorizes a *positive* feedback loop, not the vicious cycle we have today. Kingdon also does not focus on lack of policy action and an inability of the government to solve major problems as prompting major upheaval in elections. Indeed, Kingdon (2003, 94–95) writes of how crises often *prompt* governmental attention that ultimately results in a problem being solved. He quotes one interviewee who argues that "the system responds to crisis" and another who argues that "governmental policy [is]… a function of crisis." Decades later, however, even when issues (for example, climate) literally become a "burning issue," the federal government still struggles to provide an adequate response (Kingdon 2003, 95).[5] Thus, while Kingdon's study provides a good starting point for my examination of the connection between policy and elections, additional theorizing is necessary to explain the connection between government inaction and elections, as well the role of the "burn it down" approach taken by Republicans relative to the ACA as compared to the Democrats' modification approach to Medicare Part D that follows more closely with Kingdon's expectations.

Before building upon Kingdon, however, I also consider Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones's (2009) prominent theory of the policy

process. As they preface their theory, these authors note that "system change" is required to achieve a punctuated equilibrium—their idea that major policy change often occurs rapidly—but that "policy punctuations are possible even without the replacement of recalcitrant policymakers through elections" (Baumgartner and Jones 2009, xxiv). Baumgartner and Jones (2009, 33) in particular focus on policy images, defined as how policies are "understood and discussed." Some policy issues might have a different image in the public than in the government and, furthermore, have varying images in different policy venues (e.g., Congress, the states). Drawing on Schattschneider (1960), Baumgartner and Jones (2009, 35–37) note that those who are unlikely to be successful on a policy issue in their current venue will want to appeal to the most favorable setting, so they will seek to expand the scope of conflict of those involved in policymaking on that issue (i.e., go "venue shopping"). Here, elections could be—but are not necessarily—a source of the beginnings of policy change. For example, an election victory in one venue could create a new opportunity to push for policy change, but at the same time, in response to an election victory that seems likely to upset the status quo, the losing side could also appeal to a new venue unaffected by that election outcome in order to *prevent* change.

Sometimes an election result is so sweeping across electoral institutions that it can cause policy change. While allowing for this possibility in exceptional circumstances, Baumgartner and Jones (2009, xvii–xviii) argue that, outside of "mandate elections," other dynamics separate from elections cause policy change. Returning to their consideration of policy image, these authors especially focus on the tone of media coverage, alongside how much attention the issue receives. Baumgartner and Jones consider two main possibilities for policy change. First, support for an existing policy status quo might collapse all at once as the tone surrounding that policy issue becomes increasingly negative, such as with the collapse in support for nuclear power and the subsequent decline in the construction of new nuclear power plants. Second, as was the case with the initial rapid construction of nuclear power plants, there might be a notably positive tone and ample attention to an issue position, which pushes government to act (e.g., with policy helping the nuclear power industry). In positive image cases, such as in the early stages of nuclear power, Baumgartner and Jones (2009, 83) note that "waves of popular enthusiasm" related to a particular issue may "provide the circumstances for policymakers to create new

institutions to create their programs." Here, the implicit assumption is that policymakers want to remain on the same side of public opinion, so they then create these new institutions. In recent years, however, we have seen the federal government fail to act on a wide range of policies that are relatively popular with the public, in large part because the different constituencies (certainly in primaries, but also the general electorate) that different federal policymakers represent have different preferences than the country as a whole. Additionally, politicians themselves may be adamantly opposed to the majority of public opinion and either believe they can withstand public opposition, or are willing to risk holding an unpopular position they believe in strongly. For example, despite widespread support for raising the minimum wage, Congress has not passed a national increase since 2007 and despite the vast majority of Americans supporting higher taxes for millionaires, the Trump administration cut taxes for the wealthiest Americans and the Biden administration—with the narrowest of Senate majorities—was unable to repeal those tax cuts (e.g., see Dunn 2021 and ANES n.d.). Baumgartner and Jones (2009, 288) note that there is a strong status quo bias in American politics, but the degree of stagnation in numerous areas of policy amidst instability in midterm elections from 2006 to 2018 demands further investigation.

Both Kingdon (2003) and Baumgartner and Jones (2009) consider the role of elections— either directly or indirectly through public opinion—on policymaking, but another important area of research considers the opposite pattern, in other words, how policymaking can affect elections. In a review article, Campbell (2012) presents the long history of research on what scholars refer to as "policy feedback," which dates back to Schattschneider (1935), as well as Lowi (1964) and Wilson (1973). The basic idea of these studies was that policies could have an effect on subsequent political behavior (which may then affect future policy).[6] In discussing a specific case, Campbell (2012, 334) notes that Skocpol (1992) attributes the length of time it took for the United States to develop a public pension system to the "early, and corrupt, system of public pensions" that developed for Civil War veterans. Despite generally low levels of attentiveness, Campbell (2012) writes of Pierson's (1993) theory that policies generate " 'resource' and 'interpretative' effects" for ordinary citizens. Distinct from my study, however, this strain of research examines how policies develop feedback effects that may result in future policy change, as opposed to the *lack of policymaking* in a specific area.

In a recent article, Hacker and Pierson (2019, 14–15) recognize the weakened connection between conditions in the world and policy responses in an age of polarization, using the examples of the fact that no House Republicans voted for the 2009 stimulus bill as the economy was in freefall, as well as the case of the failed effort to pass cap-and-trade in the 111th Congress (2009–2010 amidst rising average temperatures. Similarly, voters are increasingly unwilling to support initiatives associated with the other party (Hacker and Pierson 2019, 15). When policies (such as the ACA) do pass, crucial to that policy's success are what the authors term the three "Es…establishment, entrenchment, and expansion" (Hacker and Pierson 2019, 19). Establishment refers to success in mitigating the negative effects of backlash and repeal efforts in the early days of the program, while entrenchment relates to creating a durable program, and expansion denotes to the ability to build upon existing programs (see also Patashnik 2008). After a rocky start to the ACA, where Republicans sought to repeal President Obama's signature program (and, as mentioned above, were successful at allowing states to opt out of Medicaid expansion through the *NFIB v. Sebelius* decision in 2012 and repealed the individual mandate in 2017), the ACA seems relatively stable (although a Republican trifecta could easily change that), but attempts to build upon it have been relatively small in scope. While Democrats were able to expand subsidies under the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021 and then extend this expansion through 2025 in the Inflation Reduction Act, efforts to add a public option to the exchanges or lower the eligibility age for Medicare were unsuccessful (Cox, Amin, and Ortaliza 2022 and Romm and Kim 2021). Hacker and Pierson's piece speaks most directly to the dynamics of policymaking as polarization has risen, thus providing a solid foundation for my own examination of the policy doom loop in the next section of this chapter.

Elections, Gridlock, and Spatial Theories of Lawmaking

Theories of spatial voting, pivotal politics, and gridlock in Congress are also critical to understanding the policy process. These theories focus on the pivotal actors in terms of casting the critical vote to pass legislation or overcome a filibuster and thus overcome gridlock. In defining what it means to be "pivotal," Krehbiel (1998, 23) draws upon *Webster's Dictionary's* definition of " 'a pivot as a person or thing on or around which something turns or depends" (see also Brady and Volden 2006). Sketching out a

unidimensional space from left to right, Krehbiel places actors such as the filibuster pivot (necessary to break a filibuster), the median voter (necessary to pass legislation in the House or a reconciliation bill in the Senate), and veto pivot (necessary to override a possible presidential veto). These theories of pivotal politics relate to the study of wave elections because waves can drastically change which congressional actors are pivotal. Indeed, in their work on pivotal politics and gridlock Brady and Volden (2006, 6) argue that "the main impetus for policy change is electoral change" and if the vast majority of members of Congress are reelected year after year, policy should remain relatively unchanged. A critical aspect of waves is that although most members of Congress win reelection, those who do not win in these elections nearly all come from one party. For example, during the first two years of the Trump presidency, the median House DW-Nominate score was around 0.3; after the midterms, this shifted to around -0.2. Shifting from a representative such as Elise Stefanik (R-NY) to Tom Suozzi (D-NY) being the pivotal actor matters substantially in terms of which policies can pass through the House.[7]

Another important aspect of theories of pivotal politics that relates to the partisan nature of waves is the role of bipartisanship in the legislative process. Given the prevalence of divided government in the past several decades, the various political actors at each of the pivot points often come from both parties and a relatively wide range of ideologies. Similar to the observations of Mayhew (2004), Krehbiel (1998, 6) argues that coalitions that pass legislation are often "bipartisan and greater than minimum sized." Since Krehbiel's writing, however, Congress has continued to polarize. One result of increased polarization has been that when a party has unified control of the House, Senate, and presidency, (Democrats 2009–2011 and 2021–2023, Republicans in early 2001, 2003–2007, and 2017–2019), they often seek to pass reconciliation bills by themselves with few or no votes from the other party (see Brady and Volden 2006, 123–126 for a discussion of the Clinton budget). Democrats also went this route with the Affordable Care Act when they held the filibuster pivot in late 2009.

A second consequence of increased partisanship is that when there is divided government, it is much more difficult to win the support of each of the pivotal actors as they span a wider range of ideologies. Thus, gridlock has gone from being "common, but constant" in Krehbiel's (1998, 5) account to seemingly constant today when there is divided government. For example, Binder (2021) shows a steady increase in the percentage of

salient policies caught up in gridlock in recent years. There was a particularly notable increase in gridlock after Republicans took control of the House following 2010 elections, when the percentage of gridlocked items rose from 44 percent of salient measures in the 111th Congress (2009–2011) to 71 percent of in the 112th Congress (2011–2013).[8] Given the departure from the bipartisan process described by Krehbiel in terms of both single-party coalitions and increased gridlock, a logical next step is to consider how this gap between expectations and modern political reality might affect voter attitudes and electoral behavior.

Electoral Volatility and the Policy Doom Loop

Forces Fueling Electoral Volatility and Frustration with the Functioning of Government

A number of forces fuel volatility in midterm elections, some longstanding in American politics and some specific to recent years. For centuries, presidential unpopularity has likely resulted in large swings against the president in midterm elections.[9] Furthermore, the push to enact policies that the president's partisans support—but that independents do not— causes a backlash in midterm elections (Fiorina 2017). Stimson (1999) documents the fact that policy mood typically moves in the opposite direction as the ideology of the president's party. The public as a whole, Stimson (2015a, 27–28) argues, votes as if to adjust a thermostat, seeking to adjust in the opposite direction of the ideology of the president's party. These features are not new to midterm elections, although polarization and other factors specific to our era have meant that recent presidents have been more unpopular than popular at the time of the midterms, in part due to near universal opposition from the other party. As a result of this opposition and presidents having to rely on their own partisans in Congress, the public perceives the in-party as trying to enact an especially one-sided agenda, which alienates independents. Even when a president is unsuccessful at actually marshalling enough votes to enact much of their agenda, the fear exists of what will happen if the president has unified control after that midterm.

Still other features are unique to our current era. As documented in Chapter Two, the perception that the country is off on the wrong track plays an important role in midterm elections. While this indicator is not new and

Americans have expressed dissatisfaction in other periods, its persistently low level is an important feature of modern midterm politics. Here, I build on my analysis of the right direction-wrong track measure in Chapter Two by arguing that the perception that the government is unable to solve important national problems *also* results in increased electoral volatility. However, this volatility typically does not produce conditions to solve important national problems, but rather *even more* gridlock that results in a vicious cycle of even more electoral volatility (and subsequently, still more gridlock).

The public today has extremely negative views about the capacity of the government to solve important problems. For example, in a July 2022 survey conducted by Siena College for the *New York Times*, 53 percent of respondents indicated that the country was too divided to solve problems, while only 41 percent responded that they believed that America's political system could still address America's problems (Epstein 2022). What was especially notable about this result was that by the same 50–45 margin, both Republicans *and* Democrats expressed the same pessimism about the country's ability to solve critical problems (independents were even more negative). While the two parties undoubtedly disagree about *how* to solve these problems, they agree that they are unlikely to be solved anytime soon.

The public may be onto something, as the reactions expressed in this poll are consistent with the realities of modern American politics and policymaking. In recent years, increasingly fewer bills have passed and become law. A 2021 analysis from the Pew Research Center showed a decrease in both the total number of bills that become law, as well as the total number of substantive laws (i.e., non-ceremonial laws; see DeSilver 2021a). According to this analysis, an average of 429.8 total bills became law in each Congress between 1993 and 2002, compared to 421.2 laws per Congress between 2003 and 2012, and 352.75 laws per Congress between 2013 and 2020.[10] This decline in legislative productivity also happened with substantive legislation. An average of 343.8 substantive bills per Congress became law in the decade from 1993–2002, dropping to 297.4 substantive laws per Congress from 2003 to 2012, and dropping still further to 245.75 substantive laws per Congress from 2013 to 2020. Based on this Pew data, it is not surprising that the public believes that the federal government cannot solve important problems.

At the same time, David Mayhew's analysis of the passage of landmark legislation does not show the same drop in governmental productivity, even as those laws that he designates to be the most important demonstrate a government that increasingly governs by crisis. For his work *Divided We*

Govern, Mayhew (2004) developed a method of classifying legislation as an "important enactment" based upon media reports from major sources such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.[11] While Mayhew does find a decline in the number of important enactments following the Great Society, the average has barely budged over the past three decades. At the same time, the content of the laws designated to be "important enactments" has changed over time, a pattern that particularly appears when examining the small slice of laws designated by Mayhew as "extraordinarily important." In the 1990s, these "extraordinarily important" laws were often efforts to achieve deficit reduction or scale back regulations, while the 2000s saw tax cuts, the creation of Medicare Part D, and a growth of the national security state following the September 11th attacks. By the late 2000s, however, these laws tended to be particularly focused on response to crises, many of which were in part or whole self-inflicted. Legislation related to responding to the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic appear as "extraordinarily important," as do agreements to raise the debt ceiling in order to avoid the default of the United States or to fund the government. To be sure, the more recent period saw the passage of the Affordable Care Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, but the overall content of legislation has shifted towards either responding after an external crisis has already taken place or seeking to mitigate the damage of a self-inflicted crisis. It is natural then for voters to believe that the government is not proactively solving important problems and to then take out that frustration in the next election.

Oh, Here We Go Again: Gridlock and The Reaction to Wave Elections[12]

I theorize that the increased sense that the government is unable to solve important challenges manifests itself through increased volatility against the president's party in recent midterm elections. Consistent with my expectations for independents and partisans in Chapter Two, I expect that this effect will be different for independents and partisans, but that the overall consequence will be negative for the president's party in both cases. For independents, I expect that frustration with gridlock is likely to manifest itself in voting against the president's party. As with my logic for the right direction/wrong track indicator, even though the president is not likely to be solely (or not entirely) responsible for a policy not passing, the president and their party will bear responsibility as the president is the most visible figure of the government. Additionally, as presidential candidates campaign on having a solution

to every problem, voters have unrealistic expectations of what the president can achieve in office, what Brendan Nyhan terms the "Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency" (Klein 2014). Thus, from day 1 of their presidency, presidents are set up for failure as they cannot meet voters' sky-high expectations.

Importantly, I argue here that this frustration is at least somewhat distinct from presidential approval and the right direction/wrong track indicator, also pulling down the fortunes of the president's party in midterms.[13] For partisans, I expect that frustration with the government's inability to solve problems results in differential rates of turnout. For the president's party, a sense of disappointment in what their party in government was not able to achieve can result in lower turnout. Among partisans of the presidential out-party, a combined sense that (1) the president's party is unable to achieve reform in government (and that their party could do better), but that (2) any change that they actually *do* achieve is bad is likely to drive higher rates of turnout. In total, I expect frustration with the government's ability to solve policy problems to result in vote choice dynamics among independents and turnout dynamics among partisans that result in a poor outcome for the president's party in recent midterms.

The result of this volatility is divided government after the midterm, however, which expands the gridlock region and does not create conducive circumstances for policymaking, but rather the opposite. For example, after the 2010 election, Republicans failed to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act and the only two "extremely important" enactments that passed in that Congress were the debt ceiling deal in August of 2011 and the fiscal cliff deal at the end of 2012, both of which were simply last-minute agreements to avoid self-inflicted crises. Using Republicans as a foil, President Obama won reelection in 2012, saw little policy success in the next Congress, and Republicans again gained House seats (and Senate control) in the 2014 midterm election (Associated Press 2011).

Presidential Elections, Unified Government, and the Reaction of Independents and Ideologues

While not the main focus of this chapter, presidential elections also play an important role in the policy doom loop.[14] Midterm elections have only once in recent history, in 2002, produced unified government as an outcome, but presidential elections provide an opportunity to align partisan control and narrow the gridlock region under a partisan trifecta. Indeed, as the

last five presidents (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden) took office, their party had control of both chambers of Congress.[15] Their party had won control of the House (and often the Senate) in a previous midterm.[16] Most these presidents saw some frustration in achieving their agenda and subsequently lost control of one or both houses of Congress in the next midterm. For all but Bush, for whom the September 11th attacks upended political dynamics, these presidents lost control of the House in their first midterm election.[17] Nevertheless, for a brief moment, these presidents had unified control of government early in their term and were able to enact varying levels of their priorities in their first two years. Even here, however, presidents and their party cannot win with voters, as independents have a negative thermostatic response to shifting policy in either a conservative or liberal direction, their own partisans become frustrated with the compromises had to be made to pass the policy, and opposition to the policy activates high turnout among partisans of the presidential out-party. Thus, frustration with *both* the overall lack of governmental action and with the rare opportunities that actually do result in major policy change can result in gains for the other party in the next midterm election, setting up circumstances for more gridlock as the median voter pivot (and often, but not always the filibuster pivot) shifts away from the president's party. The cycle then continues. The overall result here is a "policy doom loop," depicted in Figure 5.1 below, whereby frustration with the government's ability to address crucial challenges, as well as opposition to the rare, single-party legislation that does seek to address major issues, results in electoral volatility. In turn, the government becomes even more gridlocked and even more unable to solve major problems.

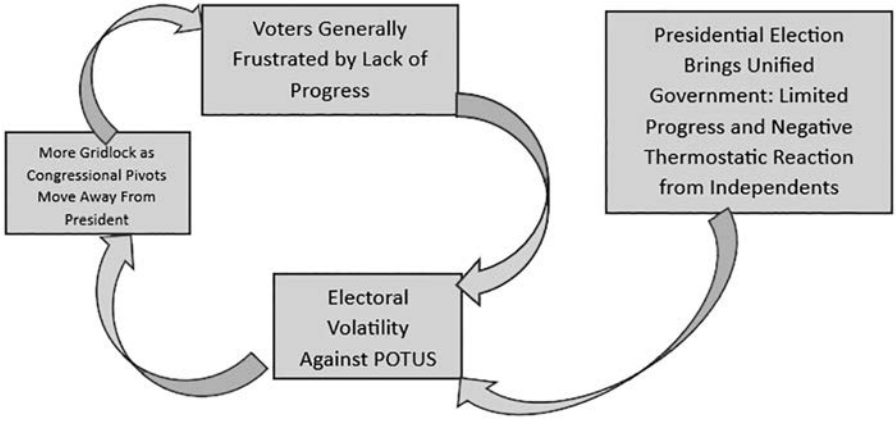

Fig. 5.1. The Policy Doom Loop

Testing the Policy Doom Loop Theory: Data and Methods

The General Case of Government Functionality

To examine the extent to which negative views about the functionality of government that are brought about by previous election results then feed into voting decisions in the subsequent election, I turn to a series of public opinion surveys conducted in 2010, 2014, and 2018.[18] I first examine how perceptions of the overall functionality of government affect midterm election dynamics, drawing on a sporadically-asked question where respondents are directed to rate their feelings about how the federal government is doing, with the options being "enthusiastic," "satisfied, but not enthusiastic," "dissatisfied, but not angry," and "angry." Here, I use data from the 2010 national exit poll, a national survey conducted by CBS in the lead-up to the 2014 midterm election, and the 2018 Voter Analysis Survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for the Associated Press and Fox News (National Election Pool 2010, CBS News 2014, Fox News/Associated Press (AP-Votecast). 2018). These surveys allow me to test my expectation that the more negatively the respondent rates the government's functionality, the more likely they are to engage in behavior that perpetuates the policy doom loop. For independents, I run three logistic regression models where the dependent variable measures whether the respondent prefers the out-party over the president's party in the election.[19] For partisans, I run two logistic regression models (2014, 2018) where the dependent variable measures whether the respondent states that they are certain to vote (or already voted). In these models, I interact party with the respondent's feelings about the government, with the expectation that respondents who are from the out-party and have more negative feelings about government will see a boost in turnout, while those from the president's party with negative feelings will see their turnout rates drop. I am unable to run a turnout model for 2010 because the exit poll only surveys those who actually voted, thus omitting non-voters, so my analysis of partisan turnout includes only 2014 and 2018.

I also include a series of control variables that are meant to parallel those variables used in my models in Chapter Two. In both sets of models, I control for presidential approval with the exception of the 2010 vote choice model. In the 2010 exit poll, the subset of voters who survey enumerators asked about feelings towards the government were not asked about whether they approved of President Obama. Instead, I substitute an ordinal trichotomous variable constructed from a question where voters were asked

whether their vote was to support or oppose President Obama, or whether their vote was meant to convey neither of these messages. The other four models below all control for presidential approval. When available (i.e., in 2014 and 2018), I also include a right direction/wrong track dummy variable in the vote choice models.[20]

Crucial to my argument here is that feelings about government functionality are at least in part distinct from presidential approval and the right direction/wrong track measure. Indeed, there is a relatively weak correlation between feelings about government (the focal independent variable) and each of presidential approval and the right direction/wrong track variables. For example, in the 2014 CBS poll, the correlation between government feelings and presidential approval is only 0.34, while the correlation between government feelings and right direction/wrong track is 0.37. In 2018, the correlations are a slightly higher 0.47 for government feelings and presidential approval and 0.49 for government feelings and right direction/wrong track. Still, these correlations are weak enough to suggest that while *some* of the same respondents who disapprove of the president or feel the country is off on the wrong track also have negative feelings about government functionality, there is still a relatively large subset of respondents for whom (often negative) views about government functionality represent an unaccompanied source of frustration at the state of affairs in the country. To more specifically illustrate just how many voters fit into each combination of question answers, I made a Venn Diagram to show the distribution of different combination of responses to the approval, wrong track, and government functionality questions in the 2014 CBS survey.[21] In Figure 5.2 below, the largest group of voters, a majority of 53.5 percent gave negative responses to each of the questions (disapproval, wrong track, government is dysfunctional). However, the *second* largest group of respondents, 15.4 percent, gave positive responses to the approval and right direction/wrong track questions (indicating that they approved of President Obama and believed the country was going in the right direction), but stated that they thought government was not functional.

Furthermore, setting aside approval (and the above Venn Diagram) and thus considering just the right direction/wrong track and government functionality questions, 16.2 percent of respondents indicated that thought the country was going in the right direction, but that government was not working well. Another 8.1 percent gave the opposite answers, responding that they believed the country was off on the wrong track, but that

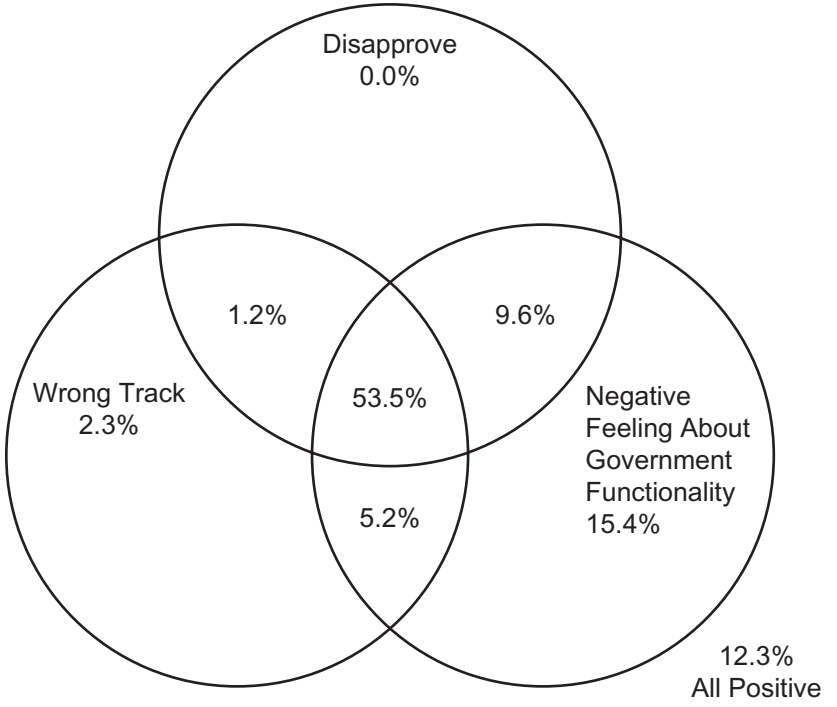

Fig. 5.2. Responses to Approval, Right Direction/Wrong Track, and Government Functionality Questions in 2014 CBS Poll

government was functioning in line with expectations.[22] Thus, the analysis in this chapter represents a distinct, but complementary analysis to that conducted in Chapter Two.

Finally, in addition to the approval and right direction/ wrong track variables, I also include other controls that mirror those in Chapter Two. Specifically, in both the vote choice and voter turnout models, I include a three-point ordinal measure of ideology and a series of demographic dummy variables for gender, race/ethnicity, college graduation status, and whether the respondent is a senior citizen.

The Case of the ACA

I also specifically examine the role of perceptions on the Affordable Care Act—the rare example of a recent major policy that did pass largely as the result of a wave election fueled by anger with the government—on the

results in the 2010, 2014, and 2018 midterm elections. The decision to pass the ACA in the face of negative public opinion came from the lessons learned from the 1993–94 effort to pass health care reform at the start of the Clinton administration. Thus, I briefly discuss this effort before returning to the ACA itself. In 1993, it appeared a policy window might be open to pass health reform with costs and the number of uninsured Americans rising (Skocpol 1997, 25). Additionally, appointed Senator Harris Wofford (D-PA) unexpectedly won a special election to retain his Senate seat in 1991 that emphasized health care, which Skocpol (1997, 26–30) argued served as a focusing event for health care. Bill Clinton also made health care a focus of his successful 1992 presidential campaign. After taking office, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton took the lead in the effort to pass health care reform. The Clinton administration had already run into challenges on a number of issues ranging from the budget to Cabinet appointments and the effort failed amidst opposition from Republicans (PBS Frontline n.d.). There were still a large number of moderate to conservative Democrats in Congress in 1993 and although Clinton's party enjoyed a relatively large House majority, they did not hold 60 Senate seats, so Republican votes would be necessary in the upper chamber to overcome the filibuster pivot.[23]

Clinton's approval dropped over the course of the first two years of his administration and Republicans won their first House majority in 40 years in the 1994 midterms. Notably, in ANES data from 1994, although Clinton had a 48.2 percent approval overall (with 46 percent disapproving), only 33.4 percent of respondents approved of his job on health care reform. Even among liberals, almost certainly frustrated about the effort's failure. approval stood at 48.1 percent approval (with 44.2 percent disapproval). The lesson Democrats took from 1994 was that while passing an unpopular bill might have electoral consequences, so too could doing nothing. Indeed, at a 2009 Senate Democratic Caucus meeting, former President Clinton told Democrats that "the worst thing we can do is nothing" (Rushing 2009).[24]

Like the Clinton administration effort, the ACA was met with an array of challenges ahead of its ultimate passage. Although President Obama came to office with high popularity, his approval rating began to diminish after the honeymoon period for his administration. Amidst a series of volatile town halls in the summer of 2009 as the Tea Party began to rise, it looked like health care reform might again fail (Pew Research Center 2009, Shanahan 2013). Yet, the Obama effort had several advantages compared to Clinton. First, the lesson from 1994 that there was a good chance

that Democrats might lose their majority anyway even if they abandoned reform efforts. Second, the median House member during the first two years of the Obama administration was slightly to the left of the median Senate member.[25] Additionally, after Sen. Arlen Specter (R and then D-PA) changed parties in May of 2009 and Al Franken (D-MN) was finally sworn into the Senate in July of 2009, Democrats held the filibuster pivot until Scott Brown (R-MA) won a special election in January to fill the remainder of the term of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA). Having passed a bill in December 2009, Speaker Pelosi decided to have the House pass the Senate bill and then the Senate and then the House passed a simple majority budget reconciliation bill to make changes that otherwise might have gone through the regular legislative process (see Sinclair 2017, 170–218 for a detailed discussion of the legislative process that went into passing the ACA). Thus, health care reform passed in 2010 and was a salient issue in the next several midterm elections.

In searching for surveys with relevant questions about health care for 2010, I was particularly interested in those that focus specifically on the policy itself and respondents' evaluations of how well it is working, especially when associated with the president. In 2010, a question from a CBS/*New York Times* poll near Election Day asked voters "How much progress has Barack Obama made in making health care affordable for all Americans?" (CBS News/*New York Times* 2010). This question fits particularly well here because it focuses specifically on the goal of the ACA and respondents' perspective on how successful President Obama was at achieving a goal, in this case making health care more affordable. From this question, I am able to create an ordinal variable with four options ("a lot," "some", "not much", "none") as my focal independent variable in the 2010 models. As with the models for the overall feelings about government, I interact this variable with party ID in the turnout models, while including it by itself in the models for independents.

For the 2014 and 2018 ACA models, I draw on surveys that ask about whether voters approve of the president on health care policy specifically. Notably, both President Obama in 2014 and President Trump in 2018 had lower health care approval ratings than their overall approval ratings, with a small but notable group of respondents who *approved* of the president overall expressing *disapproval* specifically on the issue of health care. By 2014, the debate on health care policy was particularly focused on implementation after the rocky rollout of the healthcare.gov website. To analyze

this midterm election, I used a *CNN* survey conducted in late September of 2014 to look at how approval of President Obama on health care relates to vote choice (Cable News Network 2014). Among independents in this survey, 38 percent approved of President Obama's handling of health care compared to an overall approval of 41 percent.[26] Unfortunately, this CNN poll did not ask how likely respondents were to vote, so to conduct the partisan turnout analysis for 2014, I needed to turn to another survey. Here, I used an early September Fox News survey conducted by Anderson Robbins Research and Shaw and Co. Research (Fox News 2014).[27] Using this survey, I interact approval of President Obama on health care with partisan ID. President Obama's approval on health care among Democrats was 79 percent, slightly (although not significantly) lower than his overall approval of 81 percent. Finally, as a robustness check I wanted to run an independents model for 2014 using the Fox News poll. However, an *extremely* small number of respondents in this survey were independents, so instead I carried out a model looking at voters who classify themselves as "moderates."[28] These two groups are not the same as one another, speaking to the importance of including the CNN model to parallel the other years.

For 2018, I used data from the Voter Analysis Survey on President Trump's approval on health care (Fox News/Associated Press [AP-Votecast] 2018). After Trump's surprise victory in 2016, Republicans began their effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act that culminated in the famous aforementioned defeat on the night of July 27, 2017 with the thumbs down from Senator John McCain (R-AZ). Republicans were able to zero out the penalty for not having health insurance as part of the individual mandate in their tax cut reconciliation bill at the end of 2017, but for the most part the Affordable Care Act remained intact. This failed repeal effort led to frustration among independents and partisans alike, albeit for different reasons. By the time Trump took office, the Affordable Care Act became somewhat more popular than unpopular, driven especially by increased support among independents (Belluz 2017). Ahead of Election Day, as with President Obama in 2014, President Trump had a lower approval on health care policy than his overall approval, likely because of the attempt to repeal the ACA. In the Voter Analysis Survey, Trump's approval on health care was 33 percent among independents compared to an overall approval of 38.5 percent among this same group of voters.[29] Republicans, no doubt frustrated by the failure of the repeal effort (and in a very small set of cases, perhaps worried about how a successful repeal might hurt them

if they personally benefitted from the ACA), also gave President Trump a weaker approval rating on health care policy (78 percent) as compared to overall approval (84 percent). As in 2014, I include a vote choice model in 2018 with presidential approval on health care and a likely/definite turnout model where I interact health approval with partisan identification. The controls in these models are the same as for previous years, with a right direction/wrong track variable in the vote choice model when available, an ordinal trichotomous control variable for ideology, and the same series of demographic dummy variables.

The General Case of Frustration with the Functioning of Government

In the first series of models in Table 5.1 below, I examine the effect of feelings about government on vote choice among independent voters. In all three election years, this variable has a positive relationship with supporting the presidential out-party congressional candidate (Republicans in 2010 and 2014, Democrats in 2018). In 2010 and 2018, the coefficient for this variable attains significance at the 95 percent confidence level, while it falls just short in 2014 ($p = 0.09$).[30] Among the control variables, ideology attains significance in all three models as does the variable related to President Obama (whether the vote was about him in 2010 and approval in 2014 and 2018). The right direction/wrong track variable reaches significance in 2018, but is not significant in the 2014 model.

Returning to the result for the focal independent variable, in Figure 5.3 below I display the predicted probabilities of voting for the presidential out-party in 2010 and 2018 (i.e., a Republican vote and Democratic vote, respectively) as feelings about how government is working become increasingly negative. In both instances, increasingly negative feelings relate to an increased probability of voting for the out-party, although there is a slightly steeper increase in the model using the 2010 exit poll than the one for the 2018 Voter Analysis Survey. In 2010, a voter who was "enthusiastic" about how the federal government was working had about a 33 percent chance of voting Republican, compared to 48 percent of those who were satisfied, 63 percent of those who were dissatisfied, and 77 percent of those who were angry. A slight majority of 51 percent of independent voters fell into the "dissatisfied" category, follow by 31 percent who were "angry." Only 17 percent

of voters felt "satisfied" with how the government was working and a paltry 1 percent of voters were "enthusiastic." A similar pattern was present in 2018; as a respondent went from "enthusiastic" to "angry," the predicted probability of voting Democratic increased from 49 percent to 68 percent and again, the slight majority of respondents (52 percent in this case) said they were "dissatisfied," with "angry" respondents being the second largest group. Overall, these results provide support for my expectation that the dissatisfaction that independents have with the government's ability to solve problems plays an important role in driving the policy doom loop. Of course, when the out-party makes substantial gains in Congress (either taking control as was the case in 2010 and 2018 or making an existing majority larger like in 2014), the result is gridlock, rather than major new bipartisan policies.

Table 5.1. View of Government Functionality and Vote Choice in Three Midterms

Variable	2010: GOP Vote (National Exit Poll)	2014: GOP Vote (CBS Poll)	2018: Dem Vote (Voter Analysis Survey)
Feelings about Government Functionality	0.63* (0.15)	0.53 (0.31)	0.27* (0.05)
Was Vote to Oppose Obama?	2.12* (0.19)	-	-
Disapprove of President	-	2.39* (0.57)	2.34* (0.07)
Wrong Track	-	0.15 (0.60)	1.13* (0.08)
Ideology	1.19* (0.16)	1.61* (0.36)	-1.26* (0.05)
Female Respondent	-0.19 (0.18)	-0.24 (0.41)	0.05 (0.06)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.18 (0.26)	-0.30 (0.63)	0.53* (0.08)
College Graduate	-0.13 (0.18)	-0.89* (0.42)	0.02 (0.06)
Senior Citizen	0.12 (0.27)	-0.33 (0.44)	0.06 (0.07)
Intercept	-8.61* (0.64)	-7.91 (1.35)	-0.09 (0.19)
N	996	230	9852
Log-Likelihood	-395.82	-83.13	-3,465.58

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures vote choice (a value of 1 indicates support for the out-party)

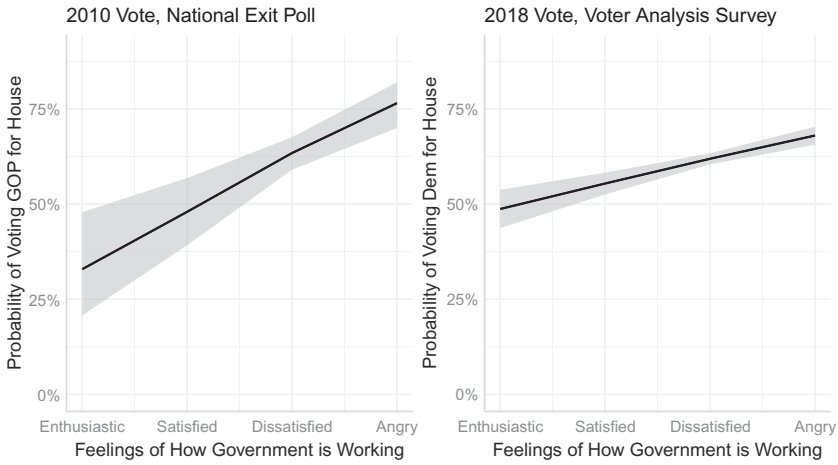

Fig. 5.3. Independents' View of Federal Government and Vote Choice

Independents are not the only ones driving the policy doom loop. A pattern of differential partisan turnout emerges when one interacts the focal independent variable with party ID. I was unable to conduct this analysis in 2010 because I used exit poll data of actual voters, but my models for 2014 and 2018 in Table 5.2 below both have results that are generally consistent with the idea of differential partisan turnout. In 2014, the coefficient for the interaction falls just short of significance at $p = 0.08$, while it reaches significance at the 95 percent confidence level in the 2018 model. Among the control variables, only the college graduate dummy variable attains statistical significance in 2014, while each of the controls except for presidential approval reaches significance in the 2018 likely turnout model.

In Table 5.3 below, I display the predicted probability of turnout among partisans. In 2014, Democrats (i.e., the party of President Obama) saw their predicted probability of saying they were certain to vote (or already had voted at the time of the survey) decrease as their feelings became more negative about the government.[31] In contrast, four years later when President Trump occupied the White House, Democrats were *more* likely to be certain voters as their feelings about the government became more negative. The opposite pattern was true among Republicans, for whom predicted likely turnout surged as negative feelings increased in 2014, but dipped slightly in 2018 as their feelings became more negative. Notably, a relatively large percentage of the president's partisans indicate negative feelings about how the federal government is working in these surveys. In 2014 (a year

Table 5.2. View of Functionality of Government and Partisan Turnout in 2014 and 2018

Variable	2014 (CBS Poll)	2018 (Voter Analysis Survey)
Feelings about Government Functionality	-1.57 (1.12)	0.05 (0.03)
Party	-0.18 (1.12)	-1.65* (0.13)
Feelings about Government Functionality * Party	0.61 (0.35)	0.71* (0.04)
Disapprove of President	-0.18 (0.34)	-0.08 (0.05)
Ideology	0.07 (0.19)	0.07* (0.03)
Female Respondent	0.38 (0.24)	-0.40* (0.04)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.39 (0.31)	-0.12* (0.04)
College Graduate	0.58* (0.23)	0.72* (0.04)
Senior Citizen	0.49 (0.26)	1.57* (0.06)
Intercept	1.44 (0.77)	1.09* (0.11)
N	567	26,983
Log-Likelihood	-243.60	-11,081.29

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures likely voter turnout

of notably low overall turnout, particularly among Democrats), 48 percent of Democrats said they were "dissatisfied" with how the government was working and 16 percent of Democrats said that they were "angry." In 2018, 41 percent of Republicans in 2018 expressed the "dissatisfied" view and 11 percent stated that they were "angry" about how the government was working. Notably, far more partisans express a negative view than they would on a typical presidential approval question. Since government satisfaction is not directly tied to a specific person or party but the more amorphous concept of "the government," the president's partisans may feel freer to express negative views. However, those negative views then return back to the president when it becomes time to decide whether to vote as potential voters look to someone to blame and disaffection manifests in higher turnout among the out-party and lower turnout among the president's partisans.

Table 5.3. Predicted Probability of Turnout Among Partisans

Party and Feeling about Government Functionality	Likely/Definitely will Vote in 2014	Likely/Definitely will Vote in 2018
Democrats: Enthusiastic	86.6 percent	64.2 percent
Democrats: Satisfied	84.4 percent	77.7 percent
Democrats: Dissatisfied	81.9 percent	87.1 percent
Democrats: Angry	79.0 percent	92.9 percent
Republicans: Enthusiastic	71.2 percent	82.2 percent
Republicans: Satisfied	79.2 percent	81.5 percent
Republicans: Dissatisfied	85.5 percent	80.8 percent
Republicans: Angry	89.9 percent	80.1 percent

When Policymaking Efforts Succeed: The Case of the Affordable Care Act

Next, I examine the results from the ACA models presented in Table 5.4 below. I begin with looking at the effect of attitudes on the ACA on vote choice among independents. In 2010, independents who were frustrated with President Obama's progress on making health care more affordable were more likely to indicate that they planned to vote for a Republican congressional candidate instead of a Democrat in my analysis of a late October 2010 CBS/*New York Times* poll. In 2014, independents in a late September CNN poll and moderates in the early September Fox News poll were likelier to indicate that they planned to vote Republican in the upcoming congressional election if they disapproved of President Obama on health care policy. Similarly, independents in 2018 who disapproved of President Trump on health care policy were more likely to vote Democratic than those independents who approved of Trump on health care policy. Among control variables, presidential approval and ideology reached significance in the expected direction in all four years and the right direction/wrong track variable attained significance in 2018. The coefficient for BIPOC respondent variable was significant in 2014 and 2018 in the direction of supporting the Democratic candidate in both years and the senior citizen coefficient variable reached significance in 2018 in the direction of being more likely to support Democrats.

Returning to the effect of feelings about health care policy on vote choice, I display predicted probabilities from my 2010 and 2018 models in Figure 5.4 below. In 2010, an independent voter who felt that there had

Table 5.4. Views on the ACA and Independent Vote Choice in 2010, 2014, and 2018

Variable	2010: GOP Vote (CBS/NYT Poll)	2010: GOP Vote among Moderates (Fox Poll)	2014: GOP Vote (CNN Poll)	2018: Dem Vote (Voter Analysis Survey)
Obama Lack of Progress on Health Care Affordability	0.66* (0.24)	-	-	-
Disapprove of President on Health Care (Obama in 2014, Trump in 2018)	-	1.21* (0.36)	1.42* (0.48)	1.23* (0.08)
Disapprove of President	2.74* (0.62)	2.11* (0.37)	2.20* (0.47)	1.91* (0.08)
Wrong Track	-0.60 (0.67)	-	-	1.03* (0.08)
Ideology	0.93* (0.33)	1.10* (0.17)	-1.63* (0.32)	-1.26* (0.06)
Female Respondent	-0.01 (0.41)	-0.15 (0.29)	-0.10 (0.38)	0.04 (0.07)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.14 (0.52)	-1.19* (0.38)	-1.27* (0.49)	0.46* (0.08)
College Graduate	0.63 (0.43)	-0.11 (0.29)	0.23 (0.40)	0.01 (0.07)
Senior Citizen	0.45 (0.46)	-0.35 (0.37)	-0.09 (0.43)	0.16* (0.08)
Intercept	-5.36* (1.03)	-4.07 (0.48)	0.85 (0.78)	0.19* (0.15)
N	223	478	274	9562
Log-Likelihood	-85.95	-10.17	-95.66	-3,246.72

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures vote choice (a value of 1 indicates support for the out-party)

been "a lot" of progress on making health care more affordable had a 24 percent predicted probability of voting Republican, compared to a 38 percent of those who said there had been "some" progress, 54 percent for who said there had been "not much" progress," and 69 percent among those who said the amount of progress was "none." As with views on overall governmental functionality, public opinion about whether government was able to make progress on an important social problem was decidedly negative here—even after the largest expansion of the social safety net since the

Great Society. Among independents, 33 percent classified the amount of progress as "none," and 21 percent said "not much," together constituting a majority of independents.

A similarly negative effect on the president's party in midterm elections was present when looking at the role of presidential approval on health care policy in 2014 and 2018. In Figure 5.4 below, I also present results of how disapproval (or approval) of President Trump on health care policy, alongside overall approval or disapproval of Trump, affected the probability of voting Democratic in the 2018 midterm election. Among those independents who *disapproved* of Trump both overall and on the issue of health care, the predicted probability of voting Democratic for Congress was just more than 83 percent. Among those who *approved* both overall and on health care, the model predicts that slightly less than 18 percent planned to support Democrats. A particularly intriguing group are those who *approved* of Trump overall, but *disapproved* on health care policy. This group constitutes about 11 percent of respondents, almost twice the percentage who disapproved overall, but approved on health policy. Among these disapproved on health care/approved overall respondents, the predicted probability of voting Republican for Congress was 42.6 percent. President Trump's unpopular actions on health care policy took a small group of voters who were generally favorable to him—and thus, overall, fairly likely to vote Republican in the 2018 congressional elections and made them relatively more likely to support Democrats instead of Republicans in the 2018 midterms.

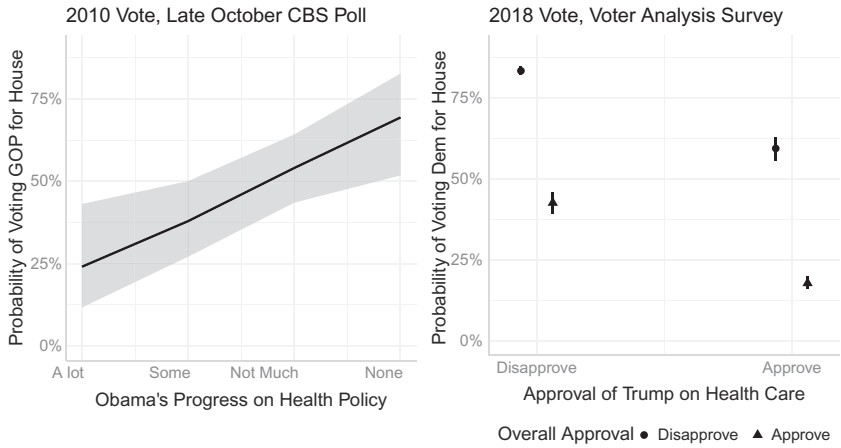

Fig. 5.4. Independents, Health Care, and the 2010 and 2018 Elections

Finally, I turn to an analysis of the effect of view on health care policy on differential partisan likely turnout. Here my focus is on the interaction between the health care variable and partisan identification, with the expectation that the frustration among the president's partisans will result in lower likely turnout, but that there will be *increased* likely turnout among those who are in the other party. In my below models, I find a significant interaction in 2010 and 2018. In 2014, the coefficient for the interaction term is in the expected direction, but does not reach significance. Among the control variables, presidential approval is positive and significant in 2010 and the female and BIPOC variables are negative and significant in 2018. Unsurprisingly and consistent with usual patterns, the college graduate and senior dummy variables are positive and significant in all three years, thus indicating a higher rate of definite turnout.

In Figure 5.5 below, I display the predicted probability of likely turnout (i.e., saying that one is certain to vote or already having voted) based upon the level of the health policy variable in 2010 and 2018. In 2010, among Republicans, the probability of a predicted likely or certain vote increased from 77.7 percent to 83.6 percent as the respondent went from stating that President Obama had made "a lot" of progress on making health care to one who said that the amount of progress was "none." The reverse pattern was true among Democrats, among whom the predicted probability of likely turnout fell from 89.2 percent to 71.7 percent as the rating on President Obama's progress on health policy went from "a lot" to "none." Notably, despite the passage of the Affordable Care Act, a small, but noticeable percentage of Democrats were skeptical about the amount of progress that had been made on health care affordability. A majority of Democrats, 51.3 percent, said that "some," but not "a lot" of progress had been made on health care affordability, with 17.3 percent saying either "not much" or none." During the debate surrounding the Affordable Care Act, there was skepticism among both the most progressive Democrats as well as the more conservative wing of the party. In this survey, however, among this most skeptical sixth of Democrats, just under 27.5 percent classified themselves as liberals, compared to 51.25 percent calling themselves moderates, and 18.75 percent designating themselves as a conservative Democrat. Overall, just under 41 percent of Democrats in this sample called themselves liberals, so here skepticism was somewhat more likely to come from the more moderate to conservative side of the party than from progressives.

Table 5.5. Views on the ACA and Likely Partisan Turnout in 2010, 2014, and 2018

Variable	2010: Turnout (CBS Poll)	2014: Turnout (Fox Poll)	2018: Turnout (Voter Analysis Survey)
Obama Progress on Health Care	-0.64* (0.19)	-	-
Party	-2.55* (0.85)	-0.07 (0.44)	0.70* (0.07)
Obama Progress * Party	1.07* (0.28)	-	-
Disapprove of President on Health Care	-	-0.17 (0.28)	1.18* (0.07)
Disapprove on Health Care * Party	-	0.78 (0.51)	-1.56* (0.09)
Disapprove of President	0.23* (0.38)	0.02 (0.33)	-0.07 (0.06)
Ideology	-0.17 (0.18)	0.07 (0.12)	0.01 (0.03)
Female Respondent	0.22 (0.25)	0.28 (0.19)	-0.43* (0.04)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.32 (0.27)	0.13 (0.24)	-0.19* (0.04)
College Graduate	0.95* (0.27)	0.54* (0.19)	0.75* (0.04)
Senior Citizen	0.53* (0.28)	1.05* (0.26)	1.59* (0.06)
Intercept	2.83* (0.57)	0.17 (0.28)	0.58* (0.09)
N	628	678	26,770
Log-Likelihood	-232.42	-348.25	-11,069.74

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures likely voter turnout

A similar pattern is present when examining predicted probabilities from the other models presented in Table 5.5 above. As discussed previously, the interaction does not attain significance in my analysis of the 2014 Fox News poll, but the predicted probabilities are consistent with the pattern from the other years. Among Democrats in 2014, going from approving to disapproving of President Obama on health care

translated to a decrease in the predicted probability of a likely vote from 74 percent to 71 percent, while Republicans saw an increase in predicted likely turnout from 73 percent to 83 percent when comparing Obama health care approvers to Obama health care disapprovers. I display my results from the analysis of the 2018 Voter Analysis Survey in Figure 5.5 below, alongside results from 2010. Here, there is a similar pattern, albeit reversed by party, as the party of the president shifted between these two midterm elections. Among Democrats, there was an increase in predicted turnout from 71.7 percent to 89.2 percent when comparing those who approved of President Trump on health care (a very small group) to those who disapproved. At the same time, there was a decrease in predicted likely Republican turnout from 83.6 percent to 77.7 percent when contrasting those who approved of President Trump on health care policy to those who disapproved. This small drop in likely turnout, alongside the increase in turnout among Democrats who disapproved, created turnout dynamics that favored Democrats in 2018. Combined with the pattern of a majority of independents who disapproved of President Trump on health care supporting Democratic candidates, this policy issue played an important role in powering Democrats' historic House gains in 2018.

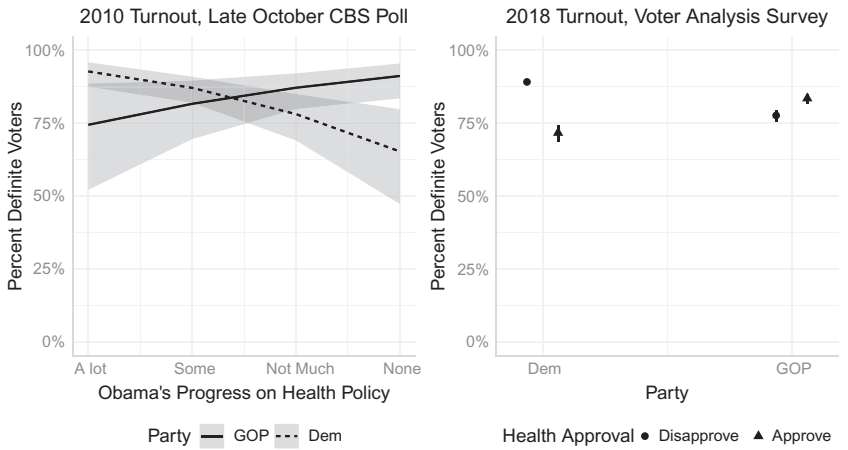

Fig. 5.5. Partisans, Health Care, and the 2010 and 2018 Elections

Discussion and Conclusion: An Endless Doom Loop?

In total, the results presented in this chapter paint a dismal picture for the ability of American government to solve critical policy problems. Apart from the start of presidencies, there is typically divided government in the United States, which unlike when Mayhew (2004) wrote *Divided We Govern*, does not present favorable circumstances for policymaking due to increased polarization that make it difficult to overcome gridlock. Even when there is unified government, presidents are only able to get a small portion of their program through Congress. Due to the filibuster, the simple-majority budget reconciliation process is the place where parties seek to pass major polices (e.g., the Bush and Trump tax cut bills, the Inflation Reduction Act). Even in the brief period when Democrats held 60 Senate seats from mid-2009 to early 2010, significant compromises needed to be made in order to get every Senate Democrat (from Nebraska's Ben Nelson to Vermont's Bernie Sanders) to vote "yes" on the Affordable Care Act as no Republicans supported final passage and policies addressing other policy challenges such as immigration and climate change were not even brought up for Senate votes and were certainly a cause of frustration among progressive who saw opportunity to take action on an array of issues at the start of the Obama presidency. The policy action that did occur during the Obama administration was a direct result of the large Democratic wins that occurred in 2006 and 2008 and thus are a direct, macro-level consequence of waves. At the same time, the actions taken during this period also contributed to the subsequent result in 2010. Put simply, the consequences of one election in this period become the causes of the next.

Despite this dismal picture in terms of achieving progress on an array of issues, in the concluding chapter of *Waves of Discontent*, I consider potential ways to get the United States away from the policy doom loop and to make government more able to address critical challenges. Ironically, the result in 2022, where Democrats avoided the huge losses that were the hallmark of recent midterms in outcome is somewhat similar to what these reforms might achieve. However, the reasons for the 2022 outcome, as I discuss next are far from the sort of favorable response to policymaking success that—were the country ever able to get to such a place—might be able to positively reinforce itself as corrections are made to policy in a manner more similar to Kingdon's (2003) expectations.[32]

CHAPTER 6

Ending the Policy Doom Loop

Beginning with the 2006 midterm elections, the United States experienced a series of highly volatile midterm elections that upended the political landscape in Washington, D.C. Furthermore, even though they did not change party control, the congressional elections occurring presidential election years in this period also saw larger vote and seat swings than had occurred in the immediately previous period. With polarization on the rise, the divided government that arose from these elections generally ground policymaking to a halt. And, when a series of elections (e.g., 2006 and 2008) produced conditions that were conducive to Democratic policy goals, the passage of the Affordable Care Act itself had an effect on voters for elections to come. With this backdrop of the previous decade-and-a-half, combined with Joe Biden's poor approval rating, it seemed almost certain that the 2022 election would be yet another election in this series— a midterm election with a huge seat swing away from the president's party that ground policymaking to a halt. Yet, that is not what happened, with Democrats only losing nine seats in the House of Representatives and gaining a seat in the Senate.

In this concluding chapter, I begin by examining the potential causes of decreased electoral volatility in 2022. Drawing on data from an ANES pilot study and the 2022 Voter Analysis Survey, I also argue that this decrease in electoral volatility was a result of voters being upset with the decisions of other political actors rather than being newly satisfied with government. Indeed, rather than suggest an increasingly functional or healthy system, the 2022 result merely demonstrates the spread of feelings of frustration to additional institutions. Finally, I conclude by considering what the "right" amount of electoral volatility is for a healthy democratic system and consider both institutional and electoral changes that might reduce electoral volatility to these levels.

What Happened in 2022?

Based upon the pattern in the previous four midterm elections, the 2022 midterm election seemed ripe for a huge seat swing against Democrats. With President Biden's approval mired in the low 40s in most public opinion surveys and inflation at its highest level since level in 40 years, Democrats appeared to be doomed to lose a large number of seats (and majority control) in both the House and Senate. Under a quarter of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the direction of the country throughout 2022, with the number dropping below 15 percent during the summer (Gallup Poll n.d.). Yet despite these indicators suggesting that Democrats were likely to lose a large number of seats, President Biden's party only lost 9 seats in the House and actually *gained* a seat in the Senate. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that John Fetterman's victory in the Pennsylvania Senate election was the first time since Minnesota in 2002 that the president's party won a Senate seat in a midterm in a state where the president had done less well than their national performance in the previous presidential election.[1] Many high-quality traditional pollsters such as Marist College, CNN/SSRS, Fox (conducted by a bipartisan team of pollsters), and Siena College (including their polls for the *New York Times*) had suggested that Democrats were likely to avoid large losses. Special election results from the late summer also saw Democratic overperformances.[2] However, the result was still surprising given the overall mood of the country and economic indicators.

Observers have speculated of potential causes of this midterm result. Chief among these is the public's response to the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* and voters' reaction to former President Trump's continued involvement in politics, particularly in the wake of the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Polling before and on Election Day suggested that these issues would play an important role in the outcome of the election. Throughout its series of fall polls, NBC consistently found that "threats to democracy" was the number one issue for voters (Murray 2022). On election night, the exit poll conducted by Edison Research for all of the major networks except for Fox found that abortion was the issue that was the second most likely to be cited by voters as being most important to their vote at 27 percent, just behind inflation at 31 percent.[3] Given these poll results, my examination of the outcome of the 2022 election will focus on the *Dobbs* decision and the voters' worries about threats to democracy, particularly related to then-President Trump's actions on January 6, 2021.

Results from the ANES Pilot Survey

As with previous years, my examination of the 2022 election begins with an analysis of vote choice among independent voters. For this analysis, presented in Table 6.1 below, I first use data from a pilot study that was run by the American National Election Studies as a way to test questions for the 2024 ANES. The ANES did not ask a specific right direction/wrong track question, but they did ask how people felt about how things were going in the country, first supplying a potential emotion (e.g., hope, anger) and then asking how strongly (if at all) a respondent felt that emotion. Here, I use anger as a proxy for respondents' feelings about the direction of the country. Based on my results for previous elections, one would expect that the angrier a respondent, the more likely they would be to vote for the out-party (Republicans) in 2022, which is the dependent variable in this model. The other variables are similar to those in models for previous years with a few small modifications. The presidential approval variable is on a five-point scale in this ANES survey and I cannot reliably recode it as a dummy variable because the middle option indicates that a respondent neither approved nor disapproved of Joe Biden's job performance. In this survey, ideology is coded on a five-point scale instead of three. Other variables are coded in the same manner as previous analyses in this chapter. After an initial analysis that approximates the models for 2006–2018, I include an additional model with two new variables in order to determine the effect of *Dobbs* and concern about threats to democracy posed by former President Trump. To examine the role of the *Dobbs* decision in the 2022 midterms, I add a variable that measures how angry respondents were about the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. I also include a variable measuring how responsible respondents thought former President Trump is for the January 6th insurrection. Both of these variables are on five-point scales; a higher value on the *Dobbs* variable indicates that the respondent is angrier about the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, while a higher value on the January 6th variable indicates that the respondent thinks former President Trump is less responsible for the events of that day.

The results of these models demonstrate the unique dynamics at play in 2022. In the initial model without the *Dobbs* and January 6 variables, presidential approval is statistically significant in the expected direction, but the anger variable does not achieve significance (and actually has a *positive* sign). In the second model, the January 6th responsibility variable attains significance. The *Dobbs* variable, while having the expected direction, falls

Table 6.1. Vote Choice Among Independents in the 2022 Midterms, ANES Pilot Data

Variable	Initial Model	Full Model
Angry about Way Things are Going in U.S.	0.32 (0.22)	0.23 (0.28)
Anger about *Dobbs* Decision	-	0.36 (0.27)
How Responsible is Trump for Jan. 6?	-	-0.67* (0.23)
Disapprove of President	-1.82* (0.29)	-1.23* (0.33)
Ideology	-1.27* (0.27)	-1.00* (0.41)
BIPOC Respondent	0.43 (0.68)	0.75 (0.75)
Female Respondent	1.20* (0.58)	1.28* (0.62)
College Graduate	0.37 (0.55)	0.25 (0.60)
Senior Citizen	0.73 (0.68)	1.00 (0.80)
Intercept	8.82* (1.60)	6.94* (2.17)
N	204	204
Log-likelihood	-48.53	-41.02

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures whether the respondent decided to vote for the Democratic candidate

short of significance. However, the small sample size for this model may be a factor in the lack of significance here.[4]

A non-major party voter who was angry about the *Dobbs* decision and felt former President Trump had a large amount of responsibility for the January 6th insurrection was much more likely to vote Democratic in 2022 than one who was not angry about *Dobbs* and did not feel as though President Trump was responsible for the events of January 6th. I display the predicted probability of an independent voter preferring the Democratic candidate for Congress based upon the levels of these two other variables in Figure 6.1 below. A voter who felt that Trump had some responsibility for January 6th (the median response) saw their probability of voting Democratic increase from 34 percent for a respondent who was not at

all angry about the *Dobbs* decision to almost 69 percent for one who was extremely angry about the decision. Similarly, for a respondent that was a little angry about *Dobbs* (the median response), the probability of voting for a Democrat for Congress increased from just over 16 percent for a respondent who felt that former President Trump had no responsibility for January 6th to just under 74 percent for a respondent who felt that he had a great deal of responsibility. Overall, these results demonstrate that factors unique to the 2022 election—the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection—played an important role in determining the results. While data from Gallup (see Figure 2.1 earlier in this text) shows many Americans remain dissatisfied with the direction of the country, these two events that were specific to 2022 meant that independents did not just direct their anger towards President Biden's party.

Next, I examine the decision to vote among partisans in 2022. In previous elections, frustration with the direction of the country supercharged turnout for the out-party, while disaffected partisans of the president's party were less likely to turn out. To examine whether this pattern held in 2022, I began with a model that interacted the variable measuring whether voters were angry with the way things were going in the U.S. with the respondent's party. The dependent variable here measures whether the respondent said they definitely or probably voted. Control variables remain the same

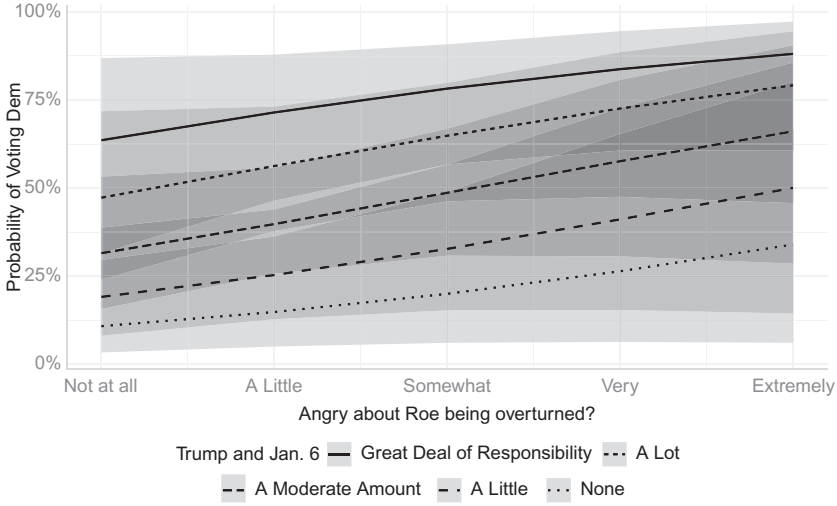

Fig. 6.1. Independent Vote Choice in 2022

as the model for those not in a major party and are consistent with models for previous years. Unlike in the equivalent model for previous years, the interaction term here does not attain significance. As in previous years, out-party Republicans who were angry about the direction of the country saw a notable increase in turnout, resulting in *somewhat* of a partisan gap in turnout. However, unlike previous elections, voters of the president's party who were angry about the direction of the country were not less likely to turn out. In fact, as shown in Figure 6.2 below, Democrats who were angrier about the direction were actually modestly *more* likely to reported having voted than those who were not angry.[5]

Next, in Table 6.2 below I examine why anger appears to have had the opposite effect on turnout among Democrats in 2022 than it had on the president's party in previous election cycles. Here, I consider which factors predict when Democrats express feelings of anger about the direction of the country in

Table 6.2. Anger and Turnout Among Partisans in 2022

Variable	Model
Angry about Way Things are Going in U.S.	0.15 (0.14)
Party	-0.94 (0.58)
Angry * Party	0.27 (0.18)
Disapprove of President	-0.26* (0.11)
Ideology	-0.15 (0.13)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.02 (0.30)
Female Respondent	-0.53* (0.24)
College Graduate	0.81* (0.27)
Senior Citizen	0.79* (0.30)
Intercept	1.62* (0.55)
N	642
Log-likelihood	-252.69

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures whether the respondent reported they had voted in the election

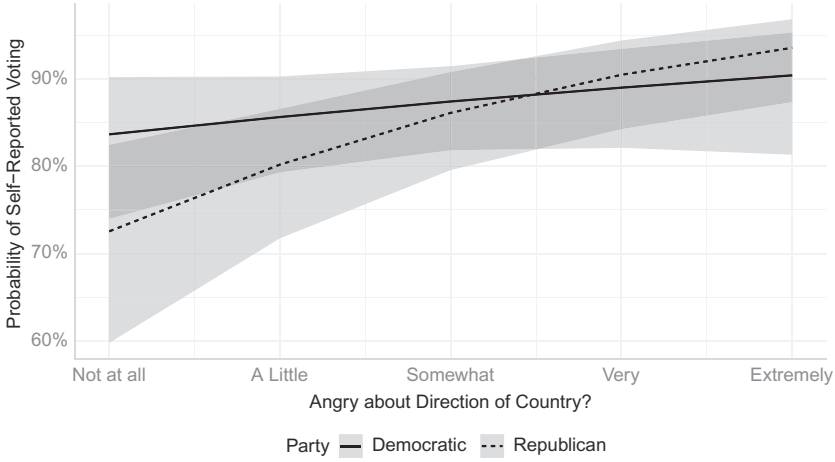

Fig. 6.2. Partisan Turnout in 2022

2022. I ran an ordered logistic regression among self-identified Democrats where the dependent variable measures the level of anger among the voter. I turn to the same variables related to the *Dobbs* decision and January 6th insurrection as in the model for non-major party respondents, specifically how angry the Democratic respondent is about the *Dobbs* decision and the extent to which they believe former President Trump was responsible for the events of January 6th. In this model, presented in Table 6.3 below the *Dobbs* variable attains significance, while the January 6th variable does not attain significance.[6]

Figure 6.3 shows how a Democratic respondent's anger about the *Dobbs* decision relates their overall anger about the direction of the country. The probability of a Democratic voter indicating that they were not at all angry about the direction of the country decreased substantially as feelings of anger about the *Dobbs* decision increased. There was also a modest decline in the probability that a Democratic respondent was only a little angry about the direction of the country as their anger about the *Dobbs* decision increased. As anger about the *Dobbs* decision increased, there was a small increase in the percentage of those who were somewhat angry about the overall direction of the country and a more notable increase in those who were very or extremely angry about the direction of the country. Overall, this model demonstrates that feelings of anger about the *Dobbs* decision drove overall feelings of anger among Democrats.

Table 6.3. Determinants of Anger Among Democrats in 2022

Variable	Model
Angry about *Dobbs* Decision	0.45* (0.08)
How Responsible is Trump for January 6th?	0.01 (0.12)
Disapprove of President	0.40* (0.11)
Ideology	-0.12 (0.11)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.48* (0.23)
Female Respondent	-0.06 (0.20)
College Graduate	0.10 (0.21)
Senior Citizen	-0.10 (0.24)
Intercept: Not at all | Little	0.74 (0.55)
Intercept: A Little | Somewhat	2.00* (0.56)
Intercept: Somewhat | Very	3.23* (0.58)
Intercept: Very | Extremely	4.67* (0.60)
N	352
Log-likelihood	-514.84

*p < 0.05, dependent variable measures how angry Democratic respondents said they were

Voter Analysis Survey Data and the Policy Doom Loop

Drawing on data from the Voter Analysis Survey, I am also able to connect feelings about *Dobbs* in 2022 to the dynamics that drove the policy doom loop in previous election cycles. In Chapter Five, I focused especially on the survey question that asked respondents how they felt about how the government, in general, was doing. This question did not appear in the ANES pilot survey thus requiring this additional set of analyses, but it did appear on the 2022 Voter Analysis Survey conducted by NORC for the Associated Press and Fox News (Associated Press (AP-Votecast/Fox News

Fig. 6.3. *Dobbs* and Anger Among Democrats in 2022

2022). Unfortunately, this study did not ask directly about the January 6th insurrection, but it has a number of questions about the *Dobbs* decision, which is the focus of my analysis here.[7]

Consistent with my expectation when analyzing ANES data, I expect that the conditions unique to 2022 (e.g., the *Dobbs* decision) resulted in some voters who felt government was not effectively solving problems still voting for in-party Democratic candidates. These voters would usually have expressed their frustration by voting Republican, but these specific conditions affected their voting calculus and, ironically caused the policy doom loop to be interrupted to some extent. To examine the role of the *Dobbs* decision in 2022 relative to the dynamics surrounding the policy doom loop, I run several series of models, first considering vote choice among independents and second looking at differential partisan turnout.

Independents and Government Satisfaction

My initial model examines vote choice among independents in 2022, incorporating the same variables as in Chapter Five. I include all of the variables related to political discontent—approval, the right direction/wrong track indicator, and satisfaction with the direction of government—as well as

controls for whether the respondent is BIPOC, their ideology, if they are female, whether they are a college graduate, and their senior citizen status. New to this model is a four-point ordinal variable that measures the extent to which these independent voters were upset about the *Dobbs* decision. Consistent with expectations and with results from previous elections cycles, the variable measure feelings about the federal government attains statistical significance in the expected direction (i.e., the more frustrated a voter, the more likely they are to vote for the out-party). Other factors are also significant, including feelings about *Dobbs*.

To more directly examine my expectation that the reaction to the *Dobbs* decision actually *interrupted* the policy doom loop, I then run a model that interacts the variable measuring satisfaction with the federal government and the variable indicating an independent voter's reaction to the *Dobbs* decision. To support my expectation, I would need to find evidence that independents who think that the federal government is not working well—but also are upset about the *Dobbs* decision—are more likely to vote Democratic than independents who think the federal government is not working well, but are less upset about the *Dobbs* decision. Indeed, the coefficient for the interaction between these variables attains significance and the predicted probability plot in Figure 6.4 below demonstrates that the angrier a voter is about the *Dobbs* decision, the less of an effect also being upset about the effectiveness of the federal government has on their vote choice for Congress. For a voter who is happy about the *Dobbs* decision, the probability of voting Republican increases from 46 percent if they are enthusiastic about the effectiveness of the federal government to 90.6 percent if they are angry about the federal government. The magnitude of this increase drops as one examines voters who are increasingly upset about the *Dobbs* decision; for an independent who is angry about the *Dobbs* decision, there is a much smaller increase from 17.1 percent to 24.9 percent when comparing an independent who is enthusiastic about the federal government's effectiveness to one who is angry about how the federal government is doing. Among independents who were angry about the *Dobbs* decision, this ruling dampened the usual effect of frustration with the competence of the federal government. To be sure, frustration with the federal government still helped Republicans gain votes (and ultimately, seats) in the House, but the effect was substantially smaller than usual.

Differential partisan turnout also drives the outcome of midterm elections. As a baseline, I include a parallel model to those from Chapter Five

Table 6.4. Independents, *Dobbs*, and the Policy Doom Loop

Variable	Original Model	Interactive Model
Feelings About Government Functionality	0.38*	1.03*
	(0.06)	(0.18)
Feelings about *Dobbs*	-0.94*	-0.26
	(0.04)	(0.18)
Feelings About Government Functionality * Feelings About *Dobbs*	-	-0.22*
		(0.06)
Wrong Track	0.15	0.12
	(0.12)	(0.12)
Ideology	1.00	0.99
	(0.06)	(0.07)
Female Respondent	-0.01	0.00
	(0.07)	(0.07)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.39*	-0.38*
	(0.08)	(0.08)
College Graduate	-0.17	-0.18
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Senior Citizen	-0.12	-0.14
	(0.09)	(0.09)
Intercept	-2.09	-4.04
	(0.27)	(0.59)
N	6,665	6,665
Log-Likelihood	-2492.94	-2485.59

*$p < 0.05$, dependent variable measures vote choice

in Table 6.4, where I interact party and the variable measuring how respondents feel the federal government is doing. I again include presidential approval and the same set of demographic variables as controls. As with previous analyses, there is a significant interaction between the variable measuring feelings about how the federal government is doing and party identification. As Democrats become angrier about how the federal government is doing, they are less likely to be likely/certain voters, while Republicans become *more* likely to turn out as their frustration about the federal government increases.

While there was still a partisan turnout gap driven by frustration with the government in 2022, additional frustration over the *Dobbs* decision reduced the magnitude of this gap (see Table 6.5 below). I find evidence of this decline in magnitude by running an additional model looking at

turnout just among Democrats where I interact feelings about the federal government and feelings about the *Dobbs* decision.[8] Here, I find that while voters in all categories in terms of feelings about the *Dobbs* decision were less likely to turn out as they became more upset with the federal government, those who were most upset about *Dobbs* saw the smallest decline in turnout. In other words, *Dobbs* served to dampen the usual effect in turnout decline that occurred among the most president's partisans as they became more frustrated with the federal government's ability to solve problems.

Table 6.5. Partisan Turnout and *Dobbs*

Variable	All Partisans	Just Democrats
Feelings about Government Functionality	-0.07* (0.02)	-0.40 (0.10)
Party	-1.80* (0.07)	-
Feelings about Government Functionality * Party	0.63* (0.02)	-
Feelings about *Dobbs* Decision	-	0.09 (0.08)
Feelings about Government Functionality * Feelings about *Dobbs* Decision	-	0.07* (0.03)
Presidential Approval	-0.62 (0.02)	-0.67* (0.06)
Wrong Track	-	-0.18* (0.06)
Ideology	0.09* (0.02)	-0.26* (0.04)
Female Respondent	-0.33* (0.02)	-0.30* (0.05)
BIPOC Respondent	-0.28* (0.02)	-0.22* (0.05)
College Graduate	0.91* (0.02)	0.86* (0.06)
Senior Citizen	1.46* (0.03)	1.34* (0.09)
Intercept	1.28* (0.05)	1.95* (0.27)
N	78,906	11,548
Log-Likelihood	-37,348.77	-5,060.40

*$p < 0.05$; dependent variable measures likely/certain turnout

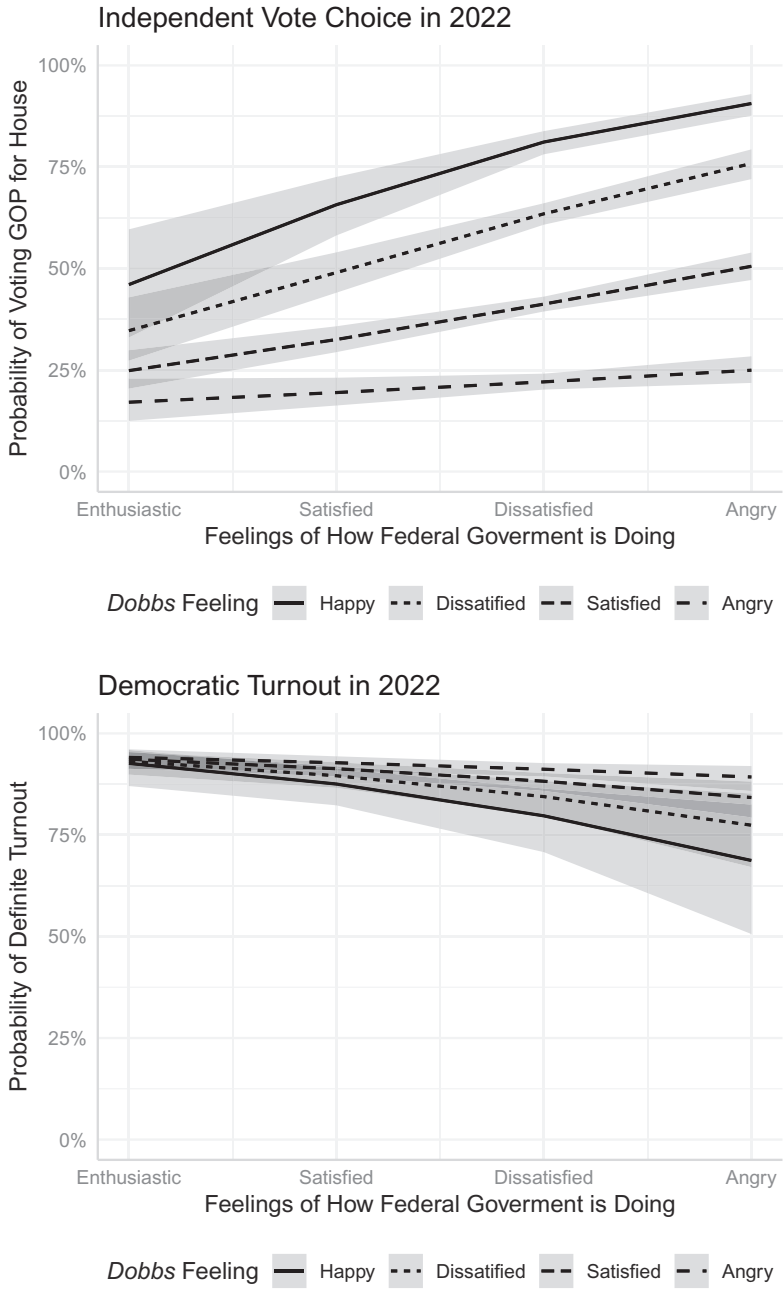

Fig. 6.4. The Effect of *Dobbs* in 2022

Finally, it is worth noting that although Democrats overperformed expectations in 2022, they still did lose seats (and party control) of the House of Representatives. Notably, turnout data from the U.S. Elections Project shows that there was a particular turnout drop among Black voters (U.S. Elections Project n.d.). Unfortunately, the Voter Analysis Survey did not have a question specifically about the fact that the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act did not pass, but there is the possibility that the failure to make progress on police reform or other issues of racial justice were the cause of this turnout drop. Such a result, would be consistent with my overall theory of the policy doom loop, albeit at a smaller scale.

Overall Conclusions from 2022

A different pattern emerged in 2022. After four consecutive volatile midterm elections with double digit seat swings away from the president's party, Democrats performed better than expected in the 2022 midterms, losing nine House seats and gaining a Senate seat. As the analysis in this chapter shows, the *Dobbs* decision and reaction to the January 6th insurrection both played an important role in this outcome. A negative reaction to either of these translated to a higher percentage of voting Democratic among voters who were not affiliated with either party, with a particularly noteworthy result for the January 6th variable. Both Republican *and* Democratic respondents who were angry with the direction of the country were more likely to say they voted than those who were not angry. The pattern among Republicans here is consistent with that from recent midterm elections, but the result for Democrats stands in contrast with previous elections where typically disaffected partisans from the president's party stay home. Closer investigation showed that feelings of anger about the direction of the country as a whole among Democrats correlated closely with feelings about the *Dobbs* decision. Unlike other recent midterm elections, many Democrats who had negative feelings about the direction of the country did not have these due to dissatisfaction with the president or Congress, but rather the Supreme Court's decision. This departure from typical circumstances is a likely explanation for why angry Democrats took out their frustrations by voting rather than staying home on Election Day.

Another important feature of 2022 that goes beyond these models is the fact that while Democrats minimize their seat losses, Republicans did win the House popular vote by almost three percentage points, compared with

a two-point Democratic win in 2020 (Wasserman 2022). Further, the swing away from Democrats was often smaller in swing seats, if there was a swing against the party at all. Nonetheless, this swing was still smaller than in other recent midterms, a result the analysis in this chapter suggests is due to reactions to January 6th and the *Dobbs* decision. As these two events were unique to 2022, it seems more likely than not that 2026 will return to the usual pattern of large losses for the president's party if dissatisfaction with the direction of the country remains high.[9]

Ultimately, in terms of the policy consequences, Republicans did still gain control of the House of Representatives. However, their majority was so narrow that unlike in 1994 and 2010, they struggled to pass legislation out of the chamber that could be used as an attempt to jam the Senate and White House.[10] Thus, the partial interruption of the doom loop in the electorate also hampered Republicans efforts to push back against President Biden. The fact that there was still a smaller iteration of the doom loop, however, did mean that Republicans—two years after the January 6th insurrection—were back in power, an outcome with potentially serious consequences for American democracy.

Electoral Volatility, Democratic Health, and Reforms for the 21st Century

The impact of electoral volatility goes beyond the policy doom loop, to the health of American democracy itself. Indeed, one of Alexander Hamilton's greatest concerns at the Founding was that the government under the Articles of Confederation was unable to solve any of the myriad of problems facing the loose association of states. "Government implies the power of making laws," Hamilton (1787) succinctly argued and indeed, the Articles government was unable to pass legislation, and in particular pass laws with the teeth to enforce them. Once again, the United States finds itself in a place where it is unable to pass laws— not quite yet at "the last stage of national humiliation" (as Hamilton 1787 put it)— but also not in a place where the country can respond to critical challenges facing the country. Indeed, in both 2022 and 2023, Freedom House subtracted a point from its sub-rating for the United States for "functioning of government" due to the inability of the government to even pass basic funding bills or confirm nominations. Electoral volatility itself is not an inherent evil in democracy— as V.O. Key

(1964) famously noted, the electorate could at least in theory serve as a "rational god of vengeance and reward," removing from office a government performing poorly (and rewarding one doing well). Indeed, as Busch (1999, 1–2) notes, midterm elections serve as a "nearly unique" tool among advanced democracies that allows American voters to express their frustration with a president's agenda part way through their term. In theory, these elections could even lead to new policy supported by a wide group of voters. For example, the message sent by these elections could cause a president to course correct and pursue bipartisan solutions to win back the support of the voters ahead of their reelection campaign. Instead, however, as I find in the earlier chapters of this book, the problem now is the frequency of electoral volatility and the fact that this volatility generally does not lead to policy solutions, but rather even more dysfunction in government.

A number of potential institutional and electoral reforms exist that might blunt the policy doom loop caused by electoral volatility. On the institutional side, most simply, policymakers might focus on making it easier to enact change. For example, Congress might consider adopting a form of the Colorado legislature's Give a Vote to Every Legislator (GAVEL) reform that requires bills to receive a vote in committee and then—if successful there—to be considered on the floor (Clark 2015, 7–8). If adopted, this reform would allow legislation that is broadly popular in Congress, but that is not supported by the majority of the majority party, to come to a vote. Majority parties seek to avoid these circumstances, termed a "majority party roll" by Cox and McCubbins (2005, also known colloquially as the "Hastert Rule"), so this reform would prevent the majority party from using its agenda control to block broadly popular legislation. A similar reform could be to allow legislation with at least a set number of cosponsors from each party to see a floor vote within a specified timeframe, which could get around unfavorable committee membership that could doom a policy under the GAVEL reform procedure.

Electorally, reforms could focus on giving discontented voters an option to express their frustration other than voting out the party in power. One way in which voters could be allowed to demonstrate their displeasure at the ballot box would be to adopt Nevada's option of allowing voters to cast a "none of the above" vote rather than voting for a candidate (Yang 2016). In Nevada, this vote is merely symbolic, the equivalent of casting a blank vote, although it allows politicians to see just how many people are entirely frustrated with the candidates who ran. One possibility would be to modify this reform so that if a set percentage of voters, say 10 percent of those who cast

a ballot, vote "none of the above," then a new election, perhaps with entirely new candidates, would have to be held. Such a reform would force candidates to specifically consider the nature and extent of discontent in the electorate.

Another possible reform would be to adopt Alaska's top-four ranked-choice voting system where the top four candidates in votes received make the general election and then voters rank these four choices. Several other states have adopted the top two primary (also sometimes called the "jungle primary"), but the benefit of a top four primary is that a consensus-focused candidate may make it to the general election. This candidate may end up then winning by being a broadly acceptable, if not universally adored option. Alaska first used this system in a 2022 special election following the death of Representative Don Young (R-AK). The four candidates to make the general election included two Republicans, former Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK) and businessman Nick Begich. Al Gross, an independent who previously had run with Democratic support for the Senate in 2020 also advanced as did former state Representative Mary Peltola (D-AK). Gross ultimately dropped out, and Nick Begich finished third in the rank choice vote. Mary Peltola—who had just barely made the runoff after finishing fourth in the first round—defeated Palin in the final round of the runoff after some Begich voters who were turned off by Palin's extremism cast a second vote for Peltola (Blanco and Uhrmacher 2022). Peltola won reelection by an even larger margin in November of 2022 and has been at the center of bipartisan efforts in Congress (Clint and Ruskin 2022, Ruskin 2023). Ultimately, however, any of these solutions are unlikely to be adopted in today's partisan political climate on a widespread national basis.

Going forward, it is highly likely that high levels of electoral volatility will persist in midterm elections barring unforeseen circumstances like the *Dobbs* decision and reaction to January 6th in 2022. Should Kamala Harris win a second consecutive term for Democrats in 2024, it is quite possible that the 2026 midterm election will be a poor showing for the party, although this may again depend on Donald Trump's reaction to losing again in 2024. Should Trump win in 2024, Democrats will likely mobilize in 2026 as they did in 2018 when they last flipped control of the House of Representatives. If either party has unified control of government in 2025, they should wisely use their power, knowing that whatever they do pass is likely to create a backlash from the other party. Ultimately, the cycle of electoral volatility in American politics is likely to continue to churn for the foreseeable future.

APPENDIX A

Methods for Coding *New York Times* Articles

I relied on Barrett et al. (2020) in creating my search string for the *New York Times* measure. These authors use the search string to include articles with *Country name AND ("protest*" OR "riot*" OR "revolution" OR (("civil" or "domestic") within 10 words of "unrest")* and then exclude *"vote of protest" OR "protest vote" OR "protestant*" OR "anniversary" OR "war" OR "memorial" OR "movie,"* as well as country-specific terms. I use a slightly modified version of this search string on ProQuest's database of historical news articles. Specifically, I did not use a country name because many articles about the United States include only a cite or country name for the location and not a country name. I also removed the term revolution because any usage of this term in the US is almost certain to either be a historical reference to the American Revolution or a mention of a peaceful political movement (e.g., Bernie Sanders's "Political Revolution.") I also did not exclude any country specific terms, preferring to exclude articles through hand-coding.

After modifying this search string, I searched for *New York Times* front page articles in the two months before the general election in each election year (e.g., if Election Day was November 3, I would include all articles from September 3 to November 3). In the earlier years of my analysis, there was not a nationally fixed Election Day for House elections; however, the majority of these elections still took place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, so I still used this as the date of the election to count back from. After generating a list of articles, I hand-coded each of these articles to produce of a count of the number of articles that actually mentioned political unrest occurring in the United States. I sought to include only articles that relayed some sort of tension; this could include physical violence, but also jeering, booing, or the expectation of escalation of the unrest. I did not include articles that mentioned that peace had begun to prevail. Such articles were most common at the end of labor disputes. Using an article identifier, I recorded which articles I coded as discussing political unrest for the purposes of future replication. Finally, I calculated the percentage of all front-page articles that I had coded as mentioning unrest.

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. One Minnesota elector cast a vote for "John Ewards."
2. See https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/.
3. If one counts Representative Bernie Sanders' (I-VT) House seat as a non-Democratic seat as some accounts do, then the seat gain was 31.
4. Official House election results available at https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/; seat divisions from official results at this link used throughout the book.
5. For example, Bendavid (2007) notes that the election analyst Charlie Cook wrote that "he doubted fifteen Republican seats even existed that could plausibly flip to Democrats."
6. North Carolina's 9th District was vacant at the start of the 116th Congress due to absentee ballot fraud; it was later won by Republican Dan Bishop in a September 2019 special election (Fausset and Martin 2019). I count it as a Republican seat for the purposes of this analysis.
7. Rothenberg did not state an exact number for "minimal losses."
8. Here, I use official party divisions made available on the House website at https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/.
9. For example, if one seat in the current House with 435 seats was held by an independent who caucused with neither party, I would divide each party's seat share by 434 instead of 435.
10. The number of seats held was obtained from official data from the House of Representatives available here: https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/.
11. The measure including just Congress here shows the House and Senate flipped 80 percent of the time in these elections.
12. See Goldfarb (2006) for a good journalistic and academic discussion of what constitutes a wave.
13. Some overlap exists between wave and mandate elections, but mandates are rarer; all elections classified by the authors as mandates are waves, but not all waves are mandates under Grossback, Stimson, and Peterson's definition.

14. Data in Figure 1.1. before 1946 was generously provided by Jason Roberts (see Carson and Roberts 2013); data from 1942–2020 was generously provided by Gary Jacobson and Jamie Carson.

15. To provide an extreme example here, Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX) went from being unopposed in 2016, to losing to Democrat Collin Allred in 2018 (Livingston 2020). Jacobson (1987) examines how seats can go from a candidate or incumbent winning a landslide victory to losing in a landslide in his reconsideration of marginality.

16. Calculated by author using Jacobson-Carson dataset.

17. The two-party vote share removes third party votes and considers just Democratic and Republican votes (e.g., the Democratic two-party vote share would be calculated by taking Democratic votes divided by Democratic and Republican votes).

18. This counts Independents Bernie Sanders and Angus King as Democrats. Two of the seats up, held by appointed senators Tina Smith (D-MN) and Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS) were special elections to finish unexpired terms due to the resignations of Senators Al Franken (D-MN) and Thad Cochran (R-MS).

19. Democrat Doug Jones won the December 2017 special election to fill Senator Jeff Sessions' (R-AL) US Senate seat, increasing Democrats' seat share from 48 to 49 U.S Senate seats.

20. Data from CQ Voting and Elections Collection.

21. This number fell to five senators after the 2022 election of Senator John Fetterman (D-PA, see DeSilver 2022).

22. An exception here is the presidential year congressional wave in 2008.

Chapter 2

1. See Carter 1979. Notably, Carter never actually used the word "malaise" in this speech.

2. See the Gallup Presidential Job Approval Center at https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/presidential-job-approval-center.aspx.

3. Since the end of World War II through 2022, the average seat swing in midterms has been 27.1 seats and the average swing in presidential years has been 15.26 seats.

4. An R^2 value of 1 could actually cause issues for out-of-sample prediction as the model could be overfit to the data in the model.

5. Stimson suggests that the equilibrium approval for presidents in the modern era may be closer to 48 or 49 percent.

6. Ad is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE1plRU-3Ic.

7. A closer examination of why this gap between trust and discontent developed in this period would be a fascinating subject for future research but is beyond the scope of this book's focus on electoral volatility.

8. This Gallup survey did not provide toplines for independents, but since a higher number of both Democrats and Republicans were able to provide correct political knowledge than the overall population, this implies that independents

were able to answer these questions correctly at a lower rate than the population as a whole.

9. The correlation is a slightly higher 0.685 in the 2006 CCES model and 0.747 on the Voter Analysis Survey model. Indeed, I a perfect correlation existed between these measures, the resulting multicollinearity in the model(s) would result in large standard errors and insignificant coefficients.

10. Notably, an examination of variance inflation factors in all three models does not provide any evidence of substantial multicollinearity. (All VIFs are well below 10.)

11. Voters are notoriously poor at remembering and correctly reporting which candidate they supported (or may not want to admit they supported a now-unpopular president), so some skepticism is warranted here.

12. Social desirability bias, as well as selection bias in terms of who participates in surveys, will inflate the percentage who say they are certain to vote compared with validated vote. This measure still indicates general interest in voting.

13. One difference with the midterms model is that ideology here is measured on a seven-point scale instead of a three-point scale. For the independents model, I use respondents who score between a 3 and a 5 on the party scale (Democratic-leaning independents, pure independents, Republican-leaning independents). I also include year fixed effects. I also include a model in the online appendix for just 2008, 2012, and 2016 and find similar results.

14. Admittedly, however, many voters are not sophisticated enough to work through that logic.

Chapter 3

1. There is no evidence that Melania Trump said anything similar to Frances Folsom Cleveland upon leaving the White House.

2. In the late 1800s, Black voters were heavily Republican until Southern Democrats disenfranchised them starting in the Jim Crow Era (Valelly 2004).

3. Wisconsin had last voted Republican in a presidential election in 1984, while Pennsylvania and Michigan had last voted Republican for president in 1988. Georgia had last voted Democratic for president in 1992, while Arizona had last voted Republican for president in 1996.

4. The partisan voting index averages the result in the previous two presidential elections in that district and compares that average to the presidential result nationally in those two elections.

5. Calculation by author using data from Daily Kos Elections (n.d.).

6. The recent period has also seen particularly high alignment between Senate and presidential results (e.g., see DeSilver 2021b) with the number of senators representing states that went for the other party in the most recent presidential election dropping to five senators in 2023. However, one cannot make a direct comparison to the late 1800s because this period was before the 17th Amendment provided for the universal direct election of senators starting

in 1914. Hopkins (2018) documents how the nationalization of elections has affected even local elections in the present era.

7. Burnham (1965, 15) is well aware of the challenges of estimating turnout in this period given the disenfranchisement of Black voters and enfranchisement of female voters.

8. Burnham's (1965, 28) warning that "the half of the American electorate which is now more or less entirely outside the universe of active politics may someday be mobilized… by totalitarian or semi-totalitarian appeals" seems especially prescient today.

9. This is not to say that pre-existing biases will not affect swing voters, but rather that they will not engage in the same level of motivated reasoning as a partisan voter.

10. Lindert and Williamson (2016, 173) note that the increase in incomes among the top 10 percent (from 39.3 to 40.6 percent of income) was more modest than when looking at the increase in the top 1 percent. The reason there are estimates available in 1870, but then not again until the 1910s is because there was a Census of Wealth in 1870 (with all the potential sources of inaccuracy that come with a census); income inequality estimates can be calculated starting in the 1910s with the creation of the national income tax.

11. See https://unionelections.org/data/starbucks/ for a map of Starbucks union elections and the results of the elections.

12. The late 1800s Democratic Party also sought to limit the rights that Black people of all genders had beyond politics in American society.

13. See https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/47-1/h83.

14. At the same time, sometimes a party (e.g., Democrats in the late 1800s) will seek to suppress the votes of the other party through changes to electoral institutions pertaining to the vote and the qualifications for voting/registering to vote.

15. In the context of the civil rights movement, Wasow (2020) found that areas with non-violent protests saw Democratic presidential candidates do better, while areas with more violent protests saw Republican Richard Nixon do better in 1968.

16. Within Ocean County, Achen and Bartels (2016, 127) also found a large decline for Wilson in townships on the beach than those near, but not on the beach. See Fowler and Hall (2018) for a critique of Achen and Bartels.

17. Difference is based on point estimates in figures provided by Abramowitz and Saunders, information is not given on whether this difference is statistically significant.

18. One can use https://books.google.com/ngrams/ to see the frequency of word usage in books over time. While there is some variation to these terms, it is not substantial and some have gone up, while others have gone down, cancelling out much of any trend.

19. 1872 is when Jamie Carson and Jason Roberts's dataset with candidate quality information begins, allowing me to add an additional year to my analysis before the start of Fiorina's "Decision of No Decision" started in 1874.

20. I collected this data from Wikipedia in late April of 2023.

21. Brown (2011) found that Wikipedia was generally accurate when describing political events. The errors that were present were generally more likely to be "errors of omission" rather than factually inaccuracies (Brown 2011, 339). Thus, it is certainly possible that events of social unrest were omitted here, but those that were omitted are probably likely to be events of unrest that were less prominent or were not as major of events as the ones listed.

22. The political eras I used here are the (slightly expanded) "Era of No Decision" (1872–1894), the very Republican era from 1896–1930, the era of (almost) permanent Democratic majorities from 1932–1994, and the highly competitive era since 1994. Positive values of this variable mean that the president's party is above their usual seats (and thus, the expectation is that they will lose seats), while negative values mean that they are below their usual seats in this period.

23. Before 1946, this data comes from Jamie Carson and Jason Roberts dataset for their 2013 book, from 1946–2018, this comes from Gary Jacobson's dataset now with Jamie Carson on post-World War II congressional elections.

24. One option to add this observation back in would be to impute its value for 1978. Given the strong correlation between the *New York Times* and Wikipedia measures, I ran a bivariate OLS regression from 1872–1976 with the *New York Times* measure as the dependent variable and the Wikipedia measure as the independent variable and then estimated the value of *New York Times* measure in 1978 based off that model, which has an adjusted R^2 of 0.57 and in which the Wikipedia measure is significant at 0.05 level. Including the estimated value for 1978 in the regression with the *New York Times* measure as an independent variable does not notably change my results, with the interaction between the *New York Times* measure and polarization remaining significant.

25. As of the time of writing this book chapter, 2020 and 2022 were not yet available in the *ProQuest* database of articles. I also am unable to extend the Wikipedia model as the *Maddison Project* economic variable is not available after 2018.

Chapter 4

1. See https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/sonny_bono_349015.

2. These specific biographical details are available on pages 119, 356, 623, 666, 891, 1596, and 1599.

3. Wave baby is a colloquial term often used for those who win in waves, particularly those who flip seats under unusual circumstances. I use this term broadly to refer to all who flip seats, unless stated otherwise.

4. Or, as the website Politics1.com calls those who lose three elections in a row, "frequent candidates" (see https://politics1.com/faq.htm). Rohde examines the decision of House members to run for the Senate or a governorship.

5. Summary Statistics for the variables in this table are available in Online Appendix Table A.10.

6. The relatively smaller drop in the percentage of quality candidates flipping all seats compared to defeating incumbents may be a result of quality candidates being more willing to take the risk of running in an open seat held by the other party compared to running against an incumbent, even when national conditions look good for their party.

7. The "ideological purity test" quote comes from then-Representative Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), who was describing Emanuel's approach.

8. Notably, Republicans who won in GOP waves also held districts where the GOP presidential candidate had done significantly less well than those who flipped seats in normal years but the substantive difference was smaller than for Democrats (49.9 percent Republican in wave years compared to 52.5 percent in normal years). Both of these analyses exclude seats that flip for the party in the opposite direction as the wave (e.g., a GOP gain in 2008).

9. See https://thelawmakers.org/methodology for their methodology. See also Goodman (2015) for an explanation of the measure.

10. Other important causes of shortened congressional tenure include incapacitating illness, death, or being convicted in legal proceedings.

11. Thus, those members with positive scores would be more effective than the benchmark and those members with a negative score would be less effective than the benchmark.

Chapter 5

1. After coming up with this title, I noticed the existence of a book by Lee Drutman entitled *Breaking the Two Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America.* This "doom loop" is distinct from the one Drutman discusses.

2. Indeed, Democrats Senate majority briefly became filibuster-proof after the party switch of Arlen Specter (D, formerly R-PA) and the seating of Al Franken (D-MN) until the victory of Scott Brown (R-MA) in January of 2010.

3. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) also joined all 48 Democrats in voting no.

4. One example here would be collective bargaining in Ohio after voters repealed the law passed early in the Kasich administration, as discussed in Chapter Two.

5. The Inflation Reduction Act, passed, in 2022, does provide a good start in addressing this crisis.

6. The end of the discussion of Kingdon above touches on this cyclical pattern.

7. Stefanik and Suozzi are the 218th most conservative and liberal members listed on Voteview in terms of DW-Nominate scores and are listed merely as an illustration (see https://voteview.com/data); however due to vacancies and special elections, the actual pivotal vote varies throughout the Congress. Also crucial to understanding the impact of waves is agenda control, as discussed by Cox and McCubbins (2005), here shifting the speakership from Paul Ryan (R-WI) to Nancy Pelosi (D-CA).

8. Specific figures come from data generously shared with author by Sarah Binder.

9. We lack quality scientific polling data before the mid-1900s, but it is likely that (for example) Grover Cleveland was unpopular in 1894 as his party experienced huge House losses.

10. The averages here, calculated by me, are meant to span the decade with (generally) the same congressional district lines. When Pew conducted this analysis, the last Congress with the 2010 lines (2019–2021) had not yet happened in full. The pattern here is robust to other groupings of years, showing a decline over time in legislative productivity.

11. Updates for later years (and original data) available from Mayhew at https://campuspress.yale.edu/davidmayhew/datasets-divided-we-govern/.

12. This subsection title is indeed a reference to the start of Taylor Swift's "My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys."

13. I quantitatively establish the fact that these measures are somewhat distinct later in this chapter.

14. Frustration with the government's ability to solve problems undoubtedly plays a role in presidential elections as well, but falls outside the scope of this study.

15. Technically speaking, Democrats officially took control of the Senate later in the afternoon of January 20, 2021 when Vice President Harris swore in Senators Ossoff and Warnock (D-GA).

16. In the case of Clinton, that midterm was the 1954 midterm for the House and the 1986 midterm for the Senate. For George W. Bush, Democrats briefly retook the Senate for 17 days at the start of 2001 when George W. Bush was still vice-president. Democrats won the Senate in 2020–21 in the 2021 GA Senate runoffs.

17. Democrats lost control of both chambers in 1994; Republicans lost both chambers in 2006.

18. In the conclusion, I will discuss the extent to which the patterns examined here were present in 2022.

19. I exclude respondents who choose a third party or who say they are undecided.

20. As a final note on these variables, I do not include the right/direction wrong track control in the likely turnout models because (as demonstrated in chapter two), there is an interaction between this variable and partisan ID; including this interaction would add multicollinearity to these models as there is already an interaction term in these models that includes partisan ID as one of the variables (i.e., feelings about government * partisan ID).

21. The CBS survey has four options for functionality, which I collapse here into two groups here by combining the two positive and two negative responses with each other. I used https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/printouts/Venn3Circles.pdf as a template for the Venn diagram I made in Figure 5.2.

22. Each of these numbers include some voters who approve and some who disapprove of the president.

23. See https://voteview.com/data.

24. Notably, although health care was an important issue in 1994, it somewhat receded as an issue for the next several election cycles before returning as an issue in the mid-2000s. The reasons health care was somewhat less of an issue in this interregnum period are manifold but include the fact that the economy was strong late in the Clinton administration and that other issues such as the reaction to Bill Clinton's impeachment (1998) and terrorism (2002 and 2004) were high on the political agenda (see Roper Center n.d. for exit poll data on most important issues by election). Additionally, after rising steeply in the early 1990s, health care costs rose more modestly in the late 1990s, before increasing again in the early 2000s (McGough et al. 2023). Finally, there was some bipartisan effort to address some incremental health issues such as with the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and the Medicare prescription drug effort discussed at the start of this chapter (Pear 1997).

25. Calculated by author using data on Voteview.com.

26. Approval here among those who indicated either approval or disapproval, those who did not answer or said "not sure" have been omitted here.

27. While Fox News as a whole has a notable conservative lean (e.g., see Bump 2022), their polls are consistently unbiased and rated highly by organizations such as FiveThirtyEight. As of 2023, Fox News has an "A" grade from FiveThirtyEight, with a mean-reverted bias of *Democratic* + 1.4 (FiveThirtyEight 2023) Between 2014 and 2023, Beacon Research replaced Anderson Robbins as the Democratic half of the Fox poll team.

28. This survey asked respondents if they considered themselves to be Democrats or Republicans. Respondents could be classified as an independent if they volunteered that response, but it was not given as an option by the survey enumerator.

29. Here, I look at overall approval among those who answered the health approval question (a subset of respondents); the number I provide here does not vary substantially from approval among all independents in the survey. Approval ratings for subgroups calculated by me.

30. The 2014 model has the fewest survey respondents, so standard errors are larger than in the other two models.

31. Here, I collapse the options into definite/already voted and those who expressed some unsureness about voting.

32. Periodic volatility to hold presidents and parties accountable should still be part of such a system, but the constant doom loop of electoral volatility and minimal policy change would be left in the past. I discuss the normative implications of volatility and non-volatility in Chapter Six.

Chapter 6

1. The only Senate seats gained by the president's party in the 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018 midterms were GA, MO, and MN in 2002 and ND, FL, MO, and IN in 2018. Presidents Bush and Trump lost the popular vote nationally in 2000 and 2016, but Bush had won GA and MO and Trump had won all four of the states in which his party gained Senate seats in 2018. (See https://uselectionatlas.org/ for recent election results.)

2. See https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/ for a list of polls conducted in 2022.

3. See https://www.cnn.com/election/2022/exit-polls/national-results/house. "Threats to democracy" was not included as an issue in this exit poll. The other options were gun policy, immigration, and crime.

4. When I ran a model without the January 6th variable, the *Dobbs* variable attained significance.

5. I obtained similar results when I used hopefulness instead of anger here. Republicans who were not hopeful about the direction of the country were much more likely to say they voted, but Democrats who were not hopeful were still modestly more likely to say they had voted.

6. This non-significant result may be driven by the fact that almost all Democratic respondents felt that Trump was responsible for January 6th, causing a lack of variation in this variable; however, when I ran this model with another January 6th variable asking if the legal punishments for participants was too mild, about right, or too strict I obtained similar results. The legal punishments variable had much more variation, suggesting *Dobbs* may have been the overriding factor driving anger among Democrats.

7. The 2022 Voter Analysis Survey did have some questions that indirectly looked at the outcome of the 2020 election such as by asking if Joe Biden was the legitimate winner of the election, but not specific questions about January 6th.

8. Running a model that also includes Republicans here would involve a complicated multi-way interaction term that would result in a complicated interpretation.

9. Other unpopular Supreme Court decisions or continued fall-out from *Dobbs* could result in another unusual midterm in 2026 should Joe Biden win reelection in 2024.

10. Republicans controlled the Senate in 1995, while Democrats controlled the Senate in 2011.

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