

Congressional Elections

The Case of the Vanishing Marginals

Of the electoral instruments voters have used to influence American national government few have been more important than the biennial “net partisan swing” in United States House membership. Since Jacksonian times ups and downs in party seat holdings in the House have supplied an important form of party linkage.

The seat swing is, in practice, a two-step phenomenon. For a party to register a net gain in House seats there must occur (*a*) a gain (over the last election) in the national proportion of popular votes cast for House candidates of the party in question. That is, the party must be the beneficiary of a national trend in popular voting for the House.¹ But there must also occur (*b*) a translation of popular vote gains into seat gains.² Having the former without the latter might be interesting but it would not be very important.

The causes of popular vote swings have only recently been traced with any precision. There is voter behavior that produces the familiar mid-term sag for parties in control of the presidency.³ There is the long-run close relation between changes in economic indices and changes in the House popular vote.⁴ There are doubtless other matters that can give a national cast to House voting, including wars.⁵

The consequences of partisan seat swings (built on popular vote swings) have been more elusive but no less arresting. As in the case of the Great Society