All politics is local," famously intoned legendary US House speaker Tip O’Neil--to whose wisdom must be appended, "except when it isn’t all local." And it isn’t all local right now. And therein hangs a tale--a tale of two elections, two different political parties, two different presidents, but one common fate.

The tale begins in 1994, the last time the mid-term elections were largely nationalized in American politics; we can say the 1994 elections were nationalized because voters were primarily motivated by their judgments about federal issues and national politics.

The "nationalization" of congressional elections is infrequent in mid-term elections. In the more typical or "normal" mid-term, voters cast their ballots on the basis of how well their own local member of Congress is performing or on the basis of some state issue--rather than on the basis of some overriding national or international issue. This is what Tip O’Neil’s maxim really means; most of the time, voters tend to vote nationally but think locally.

But when an election becomes nationalized, it has profound significance for both national and state politics. The old rules and trite formulations no longer apply in trying to understand or analyze the election.

As historians are well aware, parallels with the past are never perfect, but sometimes they provide important clues to future events. And nowhere is this truer than with the current parallels being drawn between the 1994 midterm elections and the one currently underway. In both situations, presidents had low approval ratings, scandals were attached to the congressional majority, and nagging national issues made the voters ripe for change.

In 1994, the Republicans played successfully on two themes. The first was an attack on President Clinton and the Democratic Congress for ethical shortcomings, attacks that were made credible by Clinton’s low approval rating and instances of Democrat duplicity with the post office and bank scandals. The second was the Contract with America, a specific set of reform proposals signed onto by 370 Republican candidates for Congress.

It was brilliant strategy but Republicans couldn’t have made it work without some help from Democrats. Indeed, it was serious Democratic mistakes that paved the way for the Republican victory, including Hillary Clinton’s disastrous healthcare plan, the distracting debate over gays in the military and persistent allegations of ethical problems in the administration and Congress. Republicans captured both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years.

The Democrat carnage was not limited to Congress. The nationalization of the mid-term races also helped make it possible for the Republicans to make a clean sweep in Pennsylvania state government, thus setting the stage for a decade of political domination. In Pennsylvania, Republicans won the US Senate election and the
governorship, while increasing their edge in the state senate and gaining control of the state house by a single vote.

But now exactly 12 years later, the gains made possible by the conservative 1994 revolution are in jeopardy in another mid-term election. Nationally, Republicans in 2006 are in the throes of an electoral meltdown just as Democrats were in 1994.

As in 1994, the US House and possibly the Senate seem increasingly likely to switch parties. As in 1994, an unpopular president and his unpopular policies are feeding the fire engulfing his party. And as in 1994, it is desertion of the ruling coalition by moderate and independent voters that provides the crucial catalyst that may sweep the ruling party from power.

Most striking in the parallels between 1994 and 2006 is this defection of core centrist voters. In 1994, the GOP coup de grace was delivered when conservatives turned out in record numbers while the turnout of dispirited Democrats sagged. In 2006, what presages a Democratic victory is the lassitude of Republican core voters who seem ready in some numbers to sit this election out.

Pennsylvania illustrates the national trends. To win elections in Pennsylvania, Republicans have always required the votes of more moderate suburban Republicans. But recently, these moderate voters threaten to desert the GOP in several important suburban congressional elections. In Pennsylvania, as nationally, it’s the unpopularity of the war in Iraq and the president’s low approval ratings that are the short term problem. But longer term, it is the reaction of the suburban Republican voters to the activism of the social conservatives in their party that is at the root of Republican problems.

Nationally, Republicans are struggling in both congressional and statewide races. Also in Pennsylvania, similar trends are apparent. Both the Republican US Senate and gubernatorial candidates are running behind their Democrat opponents. More shockingly, as many as four GOP US House seats seem vulnerable and as many as 15 GOP state House seats may be in play.

Pennsylvania’s US Senate race between incumbent Rick Santorum and challenger Bob Casey has become a metaphor for the national election. In 1994, Santorum was the up-start, anti-establishment Republican who railed against the Democratic establishment, against big government programs, and against excessive spending.

But now in 2006, the ex-firebrand no longer challenges the prevailing Washington orthodoxy, and is comfortable in the very political culture he once battled to win both his seats in the House and in the Senate.

Santorum--who lives in an upscale Washington suburb, defends an embattled president, and holds a high leadership position in the Senate Republican Conference--has become the very embodiment of that once reviled establishment. The former revolutionary has become defender of the status quo.

In 2006, it is instead his challenger Bob Casey who plays Santorum’s 1994 role and borrows from the Santorum 1994 version playbook, arguing for a new Washington direction, and running against the congressional establishment, against big spending, against deficits, and against the sleaze culture that seems to dominate so much of Washington.
As goes the Santorum-Casey match, so goes many of the competitive national races. Almost everywhere, incumbent Republicans are on the defensive. Buoyant Democrats are on the attack. The flamethrowers of 1994 have become the fire department of 2006--furiously trying to keep together a wobbly coalition that may have seen its last hurrah.

As we enter the final days of the campaign, more and more, the 2006 election looks like the mirror image of 1994; the 1994 Republican hunters have become the 2006 hunted and resurgent Democrats are increasingly confident they will bag many of them.

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