Opinions

ELECTION FORECAST

Taking a hard look at the 2022 midterms

David S. Kerr

All the big political forecasting firms have statistical models that they use to predict the upcoming midterm elections and I thought I would try my hand at my own. Mind you, I am only focusing on the House of Representatives. My model is a mix of multiple regression (seeing which variables appear to correlate with certain outcomes), the impact of topical political trends, and some common sense. I have used this approach before and during the last midterms, in 2018, it was surprisingly accurate.

The multiple regression model I use is simple. I use it to look for factors that impact the outcome of House of Representatives races and use data going back as far as 1950 to try to find the factors that have the most correlation to the number of seats won or lost. Again, I only focus on "midterm elections." Usually, the question is how many seats the party that's in the White House loses?

But, back to my model. I took factors I thought would have the most impact on the outcome, and my model tested just what impact they had. I ended up using two variables. Well, three, but I combined the economic data into one, so in the end it was two factors. First, and this is always telling, there is the popularity of the president. A wildly popular president can have coattails. While an unpopular one can hurt his party's chances. The 2018 midterms showed this effect. Second, there is the "misery index." This is the inflation rate plus the unemployment rate. Combine presidential popularity with the inflation and unemployment rates and you have a basis for making some predictions.

In the election that will be held in a few weeks neither of these factors is that helpful for the Democrats. Unemployment is low, but combined with inflation, the economic misery index is at a 15 year high. As for President Joe Biden's popularity, almost every poll has him well below the 50%. My model suggests Democrats will lose 34 to 40 seats in the House.

However, other factors can come into play that impact the model's projection. There are some historical examples of this.

GETTY IMAGES

In 2002 the GOP did exceptionally well in what some referred to as the "national security" midterm election," and in 1998, in a backlash against the Clinton impeachment trial, the Democrats had a surprisingly good midterm election. So, conventional wisdom doesn't always apply.

Could something similar happen this year? This election has several issues that are not good for Republicans. The Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, making abortion illegal in much of the United States, is going to have an impact. A large majority of women voters, even conservative women voters, didn't like the decision and may hold their noses and vote for a Democrat in protest. There is also one other related factor. This decision has motivated Democratic voters, mostly women, to be more likely to vote. And to volunteer. Usually, the problem for the party in the White House is that the opposition party is more motivated to go to the polls. Thanks to overturning Roe v. Wade that may not be the case this year.

It's nearly impossible for the Democrats to hold onto the House. There are too many swing seats leaning towards the Republicans for that to happen. But, the Roe v. Wade decision, and the President's recent legislative accomplishments, the climate change bill for instance, might mitigate the normal trend against the party in the White House. And of course, always in the background, there is Donald Trump. He is a former president, but his lightning rod presence in the political scene still seems like a motivator for Democratic voters who might otherwise stay home.

Some have projected that these factors, plus a lot of money going to Democrats, might limit the party's losses in the midterms. However, make no mistake, the Democrats are sure to lose seats. For some, a 20-seat drop, far better than the larger scale losses models like mine predict — and I am kind of in the mainstream for this election — would be seen as a good result for the Democrats. Just like my Little League baseball team back in the 1970s, "We didn't lose as badly as everyone expected."

And in the world of politics that's a spin on the outcome that might leave the Democrats feeling good on election night.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'Different rules for different parties'

EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:

Why are Democrats wanting an investigation of the Poolhouse company, which was given the contract for the "The Governor's Welcome Project" videos for the Virginia Tourism Corporation? Three companies were asked to submit a bid. The Martin Agency, Henninger Media Services and Poolhouse. Martin Agency advised they could not do it for various reason and Henninger did not submit a bid. That left Poolhouse at $268,000.

Are we to be aghast that Poolhouse designed the logo for Youngkin's campaign and continues to use them for his campaign?

Roll back to May 2020. Mayor Levar Stoney paid a firm which was linked to one of his political donors $1.8 million to take down Richmond's Confederate statues. Per the Richmond Times Dispatch, "The city contracted with NAH LLC to remove Richmond's Confederate iconography during ongoing civil unrest. The entity, created 10 days before Stoney ordered the statues' removal, is a shell company linked to Team Henry Enterprises, a Newport News-based contracting firm owned by Devon Henry, a Stoney donor. Under an emergency order, Richmond officials, including its director of procurement, said Stoney executed the contract in compliance with state law, even without following procedures outlined under the city's emergency procurement rules."

Stoney did not want the deal to be known so it took FOIA to get the documents. The "emergency order" does not pass the sniff test. No Democrat or FBI investigated this shady deal.

So $268,000 versus $1.8 million. Stop playing politics. Different rules for different parties.

JS HODGSON.
MIDLOTHIAN.

'I can spot a conflict of interest when I see one'

EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:

I have followed the developing story regarding the decision taken by the president and CEO of the Virginia Tourism Corporation to engage a firm that had never performed work for the agency and had never created similar work for any client but that had a previous business relationship with the governor and his campaign. Having spent the better part of my career in procurement for large, publicly traded companies, I feel like I can spot a conflict of interest when I see one. In fact, it almost makes no difference whether there is an actual or perceived conflict of interest — the taint of an unethical decision remains.

Generally, good procurement practice would include identifying business needs, drafting an appropriate scope of work and proposal that is written in a way that doesn't favor any specific potential supplier, identifying suppliers that have the requisite experience and then soliciting proposals that allow the suppliers appropriate time to submit a quality response. I was immediately suspicious when I read that the selected supplier was able to respond in one day. Through solid reporting by Patrick Wilson we now know they had advanced knowledge of the request for proposal and no experience similar to what was being requested — two suspicious facts.

An independent investigation is warranted and I look forward to further reporting on this very interesting story. It feel like the surface has only been scratched.

CHARLES FLOCCO.
RICHMOND.

An idea for improving education

EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:

Adults talk and nothing gets done. I have an idea for improving education — not just test scores — for Richmond students. First, have year-round school with flex vacation and holidays. Second, block subject time to concentrate on a subject and find each student's best learning style. Third, create study hall time to allow children to get the extra help they need in an environment that promotes learning. And have subject expert teachers instead of the barely trained union educators that can't get out of first gear. Our young people need a solid foundation in math, science, business, English and reading if we are going to help them compete in the global community.

MIA HORVAT.
RICHMOND.

A monument to VCU

EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:

On the Lee Monument's future, the best monument idea for the Lee site is build a tribute to VCU for all it has done to make the region and the city successful and survive. Put Rodney the Ram on the top and busts to all the VCU presidents that have made it happen — plus leave room for the future ones.

JOHN JAY SCHWARTZ.
HENRICO.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Does everyone deserve a place to call home?

Jovan Burton

Kelly King Horne

Imagine a Richmond region where quality housing is attainable for everyone. Additional stable housing means that more children will excel in school, more economic development and jobs will come to the region, fewer emergency room visits, improved health outcomes, seniors who are able to buy food and pay rent, and a more equitable community.

This vision doesn't have to be a lofty dream, but it won't be a reality unless our region recognizes the housing crisis on our doorstep and acts now.

Many central Virginians think that the Richmond region is a relatively affordable place to live, especially when compared to Northern Virginia and Washington. That assumption is no longer true. Our region has become increasingly unaffordable and our housing challenges more closely reflect what our neighbors experience further north on Interstate 95.

New data from the Partnership for Housing Affordability found that the Richmond region is not more affordable than other parts of the state. In fact, rental rates have risen higher and faster in Richmond since 2017 than in any other part of the commonwealth, including the Washington metro area. Furthermore, data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the rental market vacancy rate in RVA was only 1.9% in the second quarter of 2022 compared to 8.2% in Virginia Beach and 5.2% in metro Washington.

It's more difficult to find an apartment in our region than in any other part of the commonwealth. A recent slowdown in the for-sale home market hasn't changed this dynamic.

Data from our region's Homeless Connection Line and Housing Resource Line — two primary resources for our neighbors who face housing instability — provide further evidence of a housing crisis. Since May of this year calls to both the HCL and HRL have increased dramatically, indicating heightened need. Furthermore, between April 1, 2021 — March 31, 2022, over 2,000 people in our region were staying in a place not meant for habitation (essentially living outdoors or in cars).

The rise in housing instability in our community has a real economic and personal impact. A report released in July 2021 by the RVA Eviction Lab analyzed data around housing instability and evictions in our region. The Eviction Lab calculated that housing instability cost at minimum $49 million in the City of Richmond, $35 million in Henrico County, and $20 million in Chesterfield County for just one year. Those costs are associated with public services — that we fund as taxpayers — needed to address housing crises, including hospital care, emergency shelter, first responder activity, and more. Notably, these costs are 49% higher than the total 2021 investment in Virginia's Housing Trust Fund. Of course, these figures don't include the personal, economic, and psychological costs of not having a safe place to call home.

The price of inaction, not addressing the massive need for more housing, is too expensive. Investing in housing upfront is more cost-effective than not doing so.

Imagine a path where we prioritize affordable homes. What if Richmond, Henrico, and Chesterfield invested $100 million to support the construction of new homes for teachers, nurses, local government employees, food service workers, seniors, and others? We could leverage these funds to build well over 2,000 housing units at a faster rate than the market could provide. Even if our region invested $50 million — half the cost we're paying each year due to housing instability — we could build more than 1,000 new homes to support our region's workforce and seniors.

Once completed, these new homes would immediately present a return on investment by shifting from unintentionally high use of public services to more strategic and impactful uses.

What can you do?

First, budget season is almost here for our local governments. Contact your City Council representative or county supervisor and say you want them to prioritize housing. The pandemic showed that additional resources for homelessness services and housing help more people.

Second, advocate for policy changes that allow more homes to be built. Restrictive zoning makes it much harder to create the housing we need.

Third, request that future local bond referendums include funding for housing. Our region has seen great success from bonds and now is the time to use this tool to support the creation of more homes.

Why does housing matter? It's more than the inherent dignity that we all deserve a place to call home. Research demonstrates that having a safe and stable home means that people are healthier, kids perform better in school, and it's easier to attract new jobs and grow existing employers.

Let's come together and make home a priority for everyone.

Jovan Burton is the executive director of the Partnership for Housing Affordability. Contact him at jburton@pharva.com.

Kelly King Horne is the executive director of Homeward, the planning agency that supports the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care, a network of homeless service providers. Contact her at kkhorne@homewardva.org.