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Midterm elections in the US have brought forth almost as many words from commentators, pundits, academics and analysts as politicians themselves. **Adam Christie** considered a few.

Spouting off

JUST as politicians in the US have been exercising themselves in the final days of the campaign for mid-term elections, so too have academics and pundits, commentators and analysts.

According to Dallas-based attorney and analyst Jonathan Smaby, the prize from this year's election is nothing less than control of Congress and, by implication, whether the Bush administration will meet with success or failure with its domestic and foreign policy initiatives, whether its nominees to fill potential US Supreme Court vacancies will be confirmed.

Smaby said the race in President Bush's home state of Texas to fill the seat left vacant by departing GOP Senator Phil Gramm, between Democrat Ron Kirk and Republican John Cornyn, for whom the President had appeared several times, exemplified how importantly both parties were campaigning.

But, national political election expert Alan Abramowitz, Alben W Barkley professor of political science at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, has predicted that the Democrats have a strong chance of regaining control of the House of Representatives.

"The gain is a small shift, but a significant one, with many implications for domestic policy," said Abramowitz, who developed a statistical forecasting model that shows the party winning 14 more seats.

"Although President Bush is campaigning extensively for his party's candidates, a Republican Congress would not necessarily be the best outcome for Bush, since there's no escaping responsibility for what happens, especially if the economy doesn't pull out of its slump, which could cause harm to the party in 2004," said Abramowitz.

Others, even Abramowitz's colleagues at Emory, disagree. The university's political scientist and congressional expert Randall Strahan said that the Republican and Democratic parties are essentially tied with voters across the nation.

"Both parties are competing for the voters in the middle, working a

balancing act between what their core voters want and the undecided voters who aren't taken to strong positions," Strahan said.

"Such an evenly divided Congress won't result in total gridlock, but each party will have difficulty in passing any major legislation, regardless of the outcome of the election," said Strahan.

Home or away?

Debate has also been raging about the factors most likely to influence voters. Some have argued that foreign policy questions have had a direct impact, while others have claimed that the effects have been less immediate and only felt economically.

For Tari Renner, professor and chair of the political science department at Illinois Wesleyan University, the terror attacks of 2001 altered the domestic political landscape.

"September 11 sucked the political oxygen out of the air," Renner said. "Had the events of Sept 11 not occurred, we would be looking at a very different political landscape heading into November, and it would be entirely likely that the President's party would take a beating just as it has done on all but two occasions in the last 100 years.

Renner said foreign policy issues were overshadowing the domestic agenda, so that Bush and the Republicans may not be as susceptible to the typical midterm losses despite problems in the economy.

"You have a lag factor between two key issues - presidential popularity and the economy. Were it not for Bush's high approval ratings based largely on his handling of September 11, you could expect that the performance of the economy could be a major issue," said Renner.

John A Challenger, chief executive officer of the international outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc, the economic immediacy of employment has been a stronger factor.

"For most American workers, the war against terrorism or Iraq seems distant and has no direct effect on their day-to-day lives. The economy and the lack of job security, on the other hand, hits close to home," he said.

"In one newspaper survey, 21 percent of workers said it is likely that they or someone in their household will lose their job in the next 12 months. That represents some 30m voters who will probably cast their vote for whomever they feel will keep that from happening."

But another Emory University academic, environmental economist Ujjayant Chakravorty, said that while Americans were paying premiums at gas pumps because of uncertainty over a possible war with Iraq, he doubted that the high prices would directly influence the elections.

"After all, supporters of war can argue that success in ousting Saddam Hussein could result in Iraq's eventually pumping more oil in the world market and lower oil prices down the road," Chakravorty said.

Emory colleague, economics professor Paul Rubin, said he feared that congressional Democrats may have hurt themselves at the polls this fall by spending so much time on the joint resolution on Iraq rather than the nation's sagging economy.

"They're doing what they can to make up for lost time, but probably weren't helped by emphasizing an issue the Bush administration considers its strong suit," said Rubin, author of *Darwinian Politics*.

Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department, LLC, Farmington, Connecticut, suggested that the race would be difficult to call.

"We're in a very unusual year that finds the popularity numbers for President Bush still strong because of the national security issues, the national parties spending what they can because of the soft money ban going into effect right after election day, and every state feeling the change from re-districting.

"One of the big questions is whether the Democrats can make the economy and these tough business times the predominant factor in the election," Dresner said.

"If they succeed in bringing the issues of healthcare, education and the economy to the concern of every American, then history will continue to show how midterm elections can hurt the party of the sitting President."

Making State-ments

While most commentators appear to have focused on national and international issues, more local factors came to the fore in many states.

"Colorado, similar to many other states with a US Senate race, is feeling the effects of the two major parties being so closely balanced in the Senate," said Robert Loevy, political science professor at Colorado College and author of the 1996 book *The Manipulated Path to the White House*.

"The Allard-Strickland race is being pursued with an intensity and at a scale that is unusual for a mid-sized western state.

"To the average voter, there is no question that more money is being spent, more outside interest groups are trying to influence the state's electorate, and more negative advertising is being used than in any Senate race in the state's previous history.

"Not since the 'silver standard' elections of the 1890s has a Colorado Senate race been so important," Loevy said .

In Vermont, the emergence of third-party candidates has had an impact.

According to Dr. Dr. Bill Grover, chair of political science at Saint Michael's College, both gubernatorial races there have been affected.

"Both races may be thrown to the legislature to decide, which will not be good for the democratic process," he said.

"There is more at stake nationwide than is publicly acknowledged since we can't seem to get our minds on the election," he added.

"Budget crises loom in state governments across the country - for good or ill, this election is very important, and voter turnout will be the critical factor."

Race has been key in the south, especially Georgia.

"Georgia voters have the strong potential to send five African-American candidates to Congress for the first time in history for any state," said another Emory academic, political scientist Robert Brown.

"Georgia's congressional races represent a shift in white voters, who historically have shown a reluctance to vote for black candidates," said Brown, an expert in the area of African-American and racial public opinion.

Away from geography, women, minorities and widespread apathy for environmental concerns have also prompted comment.

"2002 promises to be the closest midterm election in anyone's memory, but it won't be close when it comes to changing the face of executive leadership in the states," said Robin M. Gerber, a senior scholar at the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, University of Maryland.

"The number of women governors could double, which puts women one giant step closer to the White House. Beyond the governorships, many of the most important races in the country will hinge on women's votes," said Gerber.

His Maryland colleague Ronald Walters, director of the university's African American Leadership Institute, said: "I am concerned about low voter turnout caused by the war, the economy, lingering fears about the sniper attacks and how low voter turnout in the minority community will affect local and national races.

"I'm paying particular attention to the races where African-American candidates are running for governor, Lt. governor, US Senate and US House.

"Some of the key things to watch will be how the African-American/Hispanic coalition pays off in Texas, will President Bush have coattails, and how will election reform efforts affect this election and

preparations for 2004," said Walters.

Dallas attorney Jonathan Smaby agreed. If Ron Kirk wins, he could become an overnight star on the Democratic party's national stage, he said. "As a moderate black Democrat from Texas, he'd really attract an awful lot of attention."

In most states, the only environmental issue getting any attention has been increasing the funding for national parks.

Jennifer Coken, director of the Americans for National Parks Campaign, said: "This domestic issue cannot be ignored."

"No one can afford to overlook the role that our national parks play in preserving our history, protecting the natural environment, and enhancing the economy."

The final price

While registered voters across the US still have to decide about both going to the polls and choosing their preferred candidates, the aftermath cannot be ignored.

Robert Butterworth PhD, a Los Angeles-based psychologist for International Trauma Associates, has pointed out that there are personal costs.

In politics, he said, the "F" word is failure, winning is everything, and after the end of a grueling political contest, it is normal for the public to dismiss and even denigrate the loser.

Few losers suffer more acutely than defeated political candidates, Dr Butterworth explained.

"When politicians are defeated, they suffer an emotional letdown similar to the grief and depression that follows the loss of a close friend," he said, adding that psychological reactions associated with losing include sadness, depression, angry, euphoria and denial.

"Winning is not everything and the real measure of someone who's a winner is not how they handle themselves in victory but how they recover and move forward after defeat," Butterworth concluded.