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Gene Healy: Three cheers for divided government

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This election day, the punditocracy is closely watching the off-year contests, thinking they predict how the president's party will do in next year's congressional midterms. If so, things don't look so hot for President Obama.

In New Jersey, Democratic governor Jon Corzine has done surprisingly well with his "make fun of the fat kid" reelection strategy, yet portly Republican Chris Christie retains a narrow advantage.

In Virginia, the GOP's Bob McDonnell is comfortably ahead in a state that Obama won by over 200,000 votes, and a Sunday poll had Conservative Party upstart Doug Hoffman 16 points ahead of his Democratic opponent in New York's 23rd congressional district.

If history is any guide, Democrats have reason to worry about 2010. In every midterm election but two since the end of WWII, the president's party has lost seats, and it's a fair bet that the Blue Team faces double-digit losses next year.

The "Hopefest 2009" aura surrounding Obama's inauguration reminds us that Americans are still suckers for the romance of Camelot. But though we periodically swoon for heroic presidents who pledge to heal the country and the world, when we sober up, we vote to check the hero's power.

In fact, in the past half century, voters have opted for divided government over 60 percent of the time. We Americans rest easier when the purse and sword are in different hands.

Why shouldn't we, given the horrors of one-party government? Whenever one faction controls both elected branches, checks and balances disappear.

My colleague Bill Niskanen, former chairman of President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisors, points out that since the start of the Cold War, we've had only a dozen years of real fiscal restraint: Six under Eisenhower and a Democratic Congress, and six under Clinton and a GOP majority.

Per Niskanen's calculations, since FDR, unified governments have spent roughly three times as fast as divided ones, and they've been much more likely to waste blood and treasure abroad.

The Framers tried to craft a constitution that gave politicians proper incentives to check each other. "Ambition [would] counteract ambition," as James Madison saw it, with congressmen keeping presidents honest and vice-versa.

Things haven't worked out as planned. Too often, party loyalty trumps constitutional fidelity, as evidenced by former House speaker Denny Hastert's self-image as a "lieutenant" of George Bush rather than a guardian of congressional prerogatives.

But when different parties hold the legislature and the executive, the Madisonian system works better. Divided government leads to many more congressional investigations into presidential misconduct, and, as two University of Chicago scholars demonstrated recently, "the White House's propensity to exercise military force steadily declines as members of the opposition party pick up seats in Congress."

When politicians wax sentimental about "the wisdom of the American people," it's usually a good idea to hold on to your wallet. If we're so smart, who's to blame for the clowns we elect?

But when it comes to separating the purse and the sword, we may be brighter than expected. A good chunk of us deliberately split our tickets. In 2004, two political scientists crunched the numbers, estimating that more than 20 percent of American voters were "cognitive Madisonians." In plain English, these voters consciously tried to "divide power and balance policy."

Even if the "cognitive Madisonians" are energized in 2010, it will be difficult for the GOP to seize the House. As analyst Charlie Cook notes, there are fewer open seats for the taking than there were during the Republican Revolution of '94.

Ironically enough, though, if things were easier for the Republicans, the embattled Obama might have a better shot at a successful presidency. Divided government tends to boost the president's approval rating.

It's no accident that the few modern presidents who left office with high popularity--Eisenhower, Reagan, and Clinton--had to battle a Congress controlled by the opposition. We tend to like the guy better when he doesn't have a free hand.

No doubt Obama's pulling for Corzine, Deeds, and Owens today, and for a Democratic majority in 2010. But if he knew what was good for him--and for the country--he'd silently root for divided government.

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