

Political wind blows fair for Republicans

What some are calling the Revolution of 1994 is the result of the convergence of several national political trends with effective Republican Party organization. Compared with historical trends, the Republicans did quite well in 1994. Since 1900, midterm election losses for the president's party has averaged 31 House seats and four Senate seats. The election of 1994 saw the Republican Party picking up 8 seats (9 after the cross-over of Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama) in the U.S. Senate, at least 52 seats (nine Democratic victories are expected to be recounted) in the House of Representatives and 10 state governorships. Not a single incumbent Republican senator, representative or governor lost in the '94 election.

While each Congressional campaign is, in part, its own election with its own individual candidates and dynamics, there are at least seven underlying conditions that shaped the dramatic 1994 campaign results.

1. Electoral fundamentals: The 1990 reapportionment away from Northeast (New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio lost a total of 7 seats) toward the Sunbelt (Texas and Florida gained a total of seven seats) and Republican success in gaining favorable redistricting laid the foundation for this result.

Additionally, the most significant new development in Congressional redistricting is the "majority-minority" district where racial minority districts are drawn. In North Carolina, two such districts resulted in the reselection of two Democratic African Americans with 60 percent and 66 percent of the vote. Two Democratic incumbents, however, lost in close races, and two other Democratic incumbents squeaked

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by and appear to be ripe for defeat in 1996.

2. Continuing trends toward Republican candidates: Especially in the South, where the party breakdown is now 73 Republican seats, 63 Democratic members, the 1994 results are a continuation of a trend going back to the 1980 Reagan Revolution. Few people recall that in 1992, Republicans picked up 10 House seats, lost no Senate seats and gained many state legislative seats while Bill Clinton won the presidency with 43 percent of the vote. The 1992 campaign of Ross Perot and the lackluster, "visionless" campaign of George Bush might just have postponed a Republican Congressional victory for two years.

3. Sustained decline in trust in government and in Congress: Public disapproval of Congress is at 79 percent, and with Democrats being in the majority, 58 percent of ABC exit poll respondents voted for Republican candidates. Only 25 percent of those respondents felt they could "trust government to do right" always or most of the time. While more than two-thirds of these voters supported Democrats, more than 60 percent of the remaining 74 percent of voters who felt they could only "trust government to do right" some or none of the time backed Republican candidates.

4. More effective Republican campaign organization: Republicans did not field a challenger in seven congressional districts, while Democrats did not have a candidate in 22 Congressional districts. Sen. Robert Dole, the former minority leader soon to become the Senate majority leader, stated that he made more than 500 appearances for Congressional candidates since the '92 election.

5. Dissatisfaction with President Clinton: Midterm elections generally are viewed as a referendum on the president's party, and Clinton's disapproval is strongly linked to voters' preference for Republican candidates. ABC exit polls found that of the 51 percent of voters who disapprove of his job performance, 83 percent of them voted for the Republican Congressional candidates. Similarly, 49 percent of ABC exit poll respondents feel that Clinton does not have the "honesty and integrity it takes to be president" and 83 percent of these voters preferred the Republican Congressional candidates.

6. Concern about the economy: In 1992 many voters felt the economy was in bad shape, and 62 percent of them voted for Democrats. This year ABC exit polls found that three-quarters of voters said their financial situation is no better and that 62 percent of them voted Republican.

7. The 1994 Republican Campaign: The Republicans ran a better campaign in 1994 than did the Democrats. Republicans were successful in "nationalizing" the campaign by focusing on its 10-item "Contract with America." In two high-visibility Senate races where the Republican candidates lost (North in Virginia and Huffington in California), the candidates became the campaign issue rather than public policy. In several races, Speaker Tom Foley in Washington and Dave McCurdy's Senate race in Oklahoma, for example, gun control and the crime bill worked against Democratic candidates.

It is not clear yet if the 1994 Congressional elections are an ideological-based party realignment or whether they are mainly a result of party organization effectiveness without a fundamental shifting of party identification among voters. Either way it appears that the foundation for continued Republican success is in place. Early indications predict a large field of Republican presidential candidates in 1996, thus continuing the elevated energy level of Congressional Republicans. Even if Clinton's approval rating improved, and as Republican Party in-fighting increases due to its majority status, the trends of fundamental distrust of government combined with redistricting patterns and apparent superior organizational effectiveness, suggest that the prospects for Republican successes over the next two or more Congressional elections appear bright.

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