"The Rebirth of Party: The 1994 Congressional Elections in Historical Perspective"

Richard M. Skinner, Rollins College
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Richard Skinner
Department of Government
University of Virginia
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Abstract

The Republican surge of 1994 poses serious problems for most theories of congressional elections, which either discount the likelihood of such a swing, or attribute one to a readily apparent short-term cause. This essay includes a district-level analysis that finds a strong link between the 1988-92 presidential vote and the 1994 House vote. A discussion of theories of realignment leads to a conclusion that while the U.S. political system is changing, a new Republican era may not yet be upon us.

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The balloting of November 8, 1994, revolutionized Congress. For the first time since 1946, the GOP won a majority of ballots cast in House elections nationwide. Democratic titans such as Speaker Thomas Foley (WA), Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski (IL), House Judiciary Chairman Jack Brooks (TX) and Senate Budget Chairman (and putative floor leader) Jim Sasser (TN) lost their bids for re-election. Democrats gained only four seats vacated by Republicans, but lost 21 of 31 seats vacated by their own members; no party, except for the Whigs during their disintegration in the 1850s, has ever lost such a large proportion of its open seats in American history.

Thirty-five Democratic representatives and two senators lost their bids for re-election; no Republican incumbents were defeated. In all, Republicans won 52 seats in the House, ending forty years of Democratic control; the eight seats Republicans gained in the Senate gave them a slim majority there as well.

Republican gains were especially striking when viewed from a regional perspective. For the first time in history, Republicans held a majority of House seats in the historically Democratic South. Indeed, the GOP held majorities of the House delegations from every region except the East; the margins were especially dramatic in the Midwest and West (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1995, p. 317-320).

Nor were Republican victories confined to Congress. Leading Democrats such as New York's Mario Cuomo and Texas's Ann
Richards were defeated in gubernatorial elections, while all incumbent Republican governors who sought re-election won it. In total, the GOP gained control of the governorships of eleven states. Republican governors won landslide re-election in Massachusetts, home of the Kennedys; in Michigan, birthplace of the United Auto Workers; and in Wisconsin, cradle of progressivism. Before the election, only 38.4 percent of Americans lived under Republican governors. By the beginning of 1995, 71.8 percent did, the largest such proportion for the GOP since the 1860s (Burnham 1995, p. 365-67). Republicans captured control of 15 state legislative chambers and tied in three others (Wilcox 1995, p. 1).

A partisan victory of such magnitude has naturally led some observers to hail the coming of a Republican majority. Walter Dean Burnham has suggested that the 1994 elections may have constituted a realignment of the party system. Many have questioned whether "realignment" is a useful concept in political science. Others see it as helpful in the understanding of historical phenomena, but irrelevant to the current age of party decline.

Even if realignment is a viable concept, it may not apply to the elections of 1994. Although Republicans have achieved dominance on the gubernatorial level, their margins in both houses of Congress are slim. The Democrats still hold the presidency, and as of the summer of 1996, appear likely to keep
it. Roughly equal numbers of voters identify with the two parties, while a significant share remain independent. By contrast, Democrats maintained the support of a majority (or close to it) of the electorate for a generation after the New Deal. It is quite plausible that 1994 marked only a shift in the existing party system towards closer competition, or signified a new era of instability, or even was a onetime occurrence with no lasting impact.

It appears that the 1994 elections were not an isolated phenomenon stemming from short-term factors. Previous partisan landslides during midterm elections occurred during times of economic trouble or extreme presidential unpopularity. When Republicans won control of Congress in 1946, widespread labor unrest and food shortages left Harry Truman with one of the lowest levels of voter support ever recorded. In 1966, Republicans scored major gains as urban riots and a prolonged war turned a landslide winner into a newly unpopular president. In 1958 and 1974, the nation was in the depths of recession; in the latter year, voters had witnessed the resignation of a president due to the Watergate scandal. But in 1994, Bill Clinton's popularity ratings were tepid, not terrible. And the economy, though not booming, was growing.

The 1994 election differs from previous landslides in another fashion. According to the theory of "surge and decline,"
first propounded by Angus Campbell (1960) and further developed by James Campbell (1993), a landslide victory in a presidential election is likely to be followed two years later by big losses for the president's party. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon won landslide victories in 1964 and 1972, respectively; in each case, the following midterm elections resulted in substantial losses for the President's party. For Johnson and Nixon the theory of "surge and decline" seemed to hold. But although Bill Clinton won only 53 percent of the two-party popular vote in 1992 -- hardly a landslide -- his party suffered worse losses than the Democrats endured in 1966 or the Republicans experienced in 1974.

Rather than a reflection of short-term discontent or a midterm decline after a presidential-year surge, the 1994 elections appear to be the culmination of a series of shifts in the American polity. In recent years, public opinion has been moving in the direction of the Republican party and conservatism. This change has not given the GOP a majority, but it has deprived the Democrats of one. During the 1980s and early 1990s, however, this shift was not reflected in most nonpresidential elections, especially those for the House. Divided government allowed Democrats to run independently of their national party; they could conduct campaigns focused on local issues and personal popularity. Since Democrats generally ran better, more experienced candidates than did Republicans, they were able to win the bulk of elections (Jacobson 1992; Ehrenhalt 1992).
Members' careful use of the perquisites of incumbency kept turnover in the House to a minimum.

Ferejohn and Fiorina (1985) provide a nice summary of the congressional elections of the 1980s:
No matter who runs for president, or what happens to the economy or the world order, the great majority of congressional incumbents will survive. To do so they deemphasize the platform of the party and their allegiance to the president and emphasize instead their personal relationship with their constituents. By developing a reputation with a minimal amount of partisan or ideological content, members of Congress induce constituents to evaluate them separately from the state of the nation and the performance of parties and administrations (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1985, p. 94-5).

But the 1992 election sounded the death knell for this political order. Massive turnover due to retirements and redistricting created more open seats in 1992 and 1994. A series of congressional scandals placed the institution in deeper disrepute than usual, and reduced the advantages of incumbency. But, above all, the election of a Democratic president ended divided government. Democrats could no longer present themselves as individual candidates separate from the workings of the administration; they could not use local issues to protect themselves from the vagaries and vicissitudes of national politics. With their protective shell demolished, they were exposed to partisan disapproval.

1994: What happened?
In the late 1980s, congressional Republicans could not be faulted for despairing. The GOP had not controlled the House since the first two years of the Eisenhower Administration. Landslide victories by Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan had failed to end congressional Republicans' sojourn in the wilderness. As George Bush soared to victory in 1988, his party lost five seats in the House. Congressional elections seemed to have achieved something akin to stasis: only nine seats switched party control. Six incumbents were defeated. Seventy-nine incumbents ran unopposed, the highest such number since the Eisenhower administration (Jacobson 1988, p. 187-190).

The 1990 elections offered little additional comfort to House Republicans. While the average margin of victory dipped for incumbents of both parties, Republicans suffered most. Only a lack of strong challengers kept GOP losses from exceeding the nine they endured (Jacobson 1992, p. 190-193).

Republicans fared slightly better in 1992. Despite losing the White House, the GOP gained ten seats in the House. But this was no great victory. Republicans had been hoping for a major breakthrough. A large number of retirements led to ninety-two open-seat contests, the most in six decades (Burnham 1995, p. 369). The House bank scandal tarnished the institution and many incumbents. Redistricting further raised Republican hopes of major gains. In August, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) announced that it was targeting 124 races
instead of the usual twenty. But Bush's weakness hurt Republican congressional candidates, many of whom were reluctant to invite him to visit their districts (Hershey 1993, p. 169-170). Democrats did see their share of the nationwide House vote fall from 53 percent in 1990 to 51 percent in 1992 (Cook 1995, p. 390). But they retained control of the House by a large margin. One observer commented on dashed GOP hopes:

It was a disappointment for the Republican party. Republicans had long explained their deficit in the House by citing the big reelection advantages held by House incumbents, most of whom are Democrats. If there were more open seats, or if the playing field could be leveled by campaign finance reforms, they argued, Republicans could do better. There were unprecedented numbers of open seats in 1992, at least in comparison with the last forty-five years. But perhaps in part because of President Bush's drop in the polls, Democrats won 63 percent of the seats where no incumbent was running, or where one incumbent, because of redistricting, was facing another incumbent (Hershey 1993, p. 173).

One bright spot for Republicans was the South, where for the first time ever, the GOP ran better in House elections than it did nationally (Burnham 1995, p. 364). And, paradoxically, the defeat of George Bush opened the door to Republican gains. Gary Jacobson comments:

The Republican most responsible for Newt Gingrich's ascension to Speaker of the House in 1995 is, ironically, George Bush. The termination of divided government in 1992 was an essential to its reinstitution, in transposed form, in 1994. Bush's failure to win reelection put the full force of public anger and frustration with gridlock, policy failure, and the president behind Republican candidates. The Democrat most responsible is, of course, Bill Clinton. Republicans have always done best in House elections when an unpopular Democrat sits in the White House (Jacobson 1994, p. 22).
Clinton came into office having received the votes of only 43 percent of voters -- the smallest such proportion since Woodrow Wilson in 1912. The 20 million voters who had voted for Ross Perot -- most of whom had supported George Bush in 1988 -- provided a large constituency in support of fiscal responsibility and political reform and in opposition to the status quo.

So in 1993, even as Clinton struggled through his first year, and as Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison won a landslide victory in a special Senate election in Texas, the Democrats had little reason to suspect that their decades-long dominion over the House would soon end. Victories that fall in gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia and in mayoral contests in the Democratic bastions of New York and Los Angeles gave the GOP some hope of making significant gains in 1994. But Republicans remained cautious. Pollster Fred Steeper commented that "broad partisan interpretations of the 1993 election results are 'exaggerated' and the victories are 'not necessarily a harbinger for the (Republican) party'" (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1995, p. 322). In January 1994, Haley Barbour, chairman of the Republican National Committee, said that he did not expect his party to win control of the Senate, let alone the House (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1995, p. 322).

As 1994 progressed, however, GOP prospects brightened considerably. Large numbers of Democrats announced their
retirements. Republicans won special elections for House seats in Kentucky and Oklahoma. President Clinton's approval ratings fell into the forties. Health care reform, the centerpiece of his legislative program, lost public support and failed to advance in Congress. By the fall, it had become clear that the GOP was headed for a major victory (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1995, p. 322). Polls began to show Republicans leading or tied with Democrats in party identification and in the "generic vote" for the House (Barnes 1994, p. 16). In September, House Republicans announced the "Contract With America," a list of legislation they pledged to bring to a vote if they won control.

By the eve of the election, the sense that an "electoral earthquake" was possible was strong enough for Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report to devote a major article to the subject of realignment (Gettinger 1994). But still, most observers did not expect a Republican victory in the House. Abramowitz notes that no forecasting model came close to predicting such a result (Abramowitz 1996, p. 873-74).

Republicans built their House majority primarily by winning in districts carried by their presidential nominees in recent years. Jacobson (1995) notes that, as a consequence of the GOP's nationalization of the elections: party representation in the House is now aligned with the district vote more closely than it has been in four decades.... For example, 31 open seats formerly held by Democrats were at stake, Republicans won all 16 open seats ... in districts where George Bush's share of the two-party vote, averaged together for 1988 and 1992, exceeded 50%; they won only 6 of the 15 where
Bush's average vote fell below 50% (p. 16).

Balz and Brownstein (1996) find that:
In some respects, the most dramatic aspect of the GOP success in 1994 was that it required no dramatic shifts in voter loyalties. One way of looking at the 1994 result was that the GOP did nothing more than finally re-create at the congressional level the voter coalition that drove the party's five presidential victories from 1968 to 1988. In fact, the GOP captured Congress with an electoral performance that matched only a lower peak on that twenty-year range of presidential successes. Without approaching the heights Nixon or Reagan reached in their landslide re-elections, the 1994 Republican congressional vote closely followed the contours of George Bush's solid 1988 victory over Michael Dukakis. ... Whether measured by race, gender, income, ideology, or education, exit polls show that the overall Republican share of the congressional vote in 1994 usually fell within a few percentage points of Bush's showing (Balz and Brownstein 1996, p. 347).

Republicans captured 27 districts that had voted for Bush in 1988 and 1992, 21 that had favored Bush in 1988 but which switched to Clinton in 1992 and only eight that had voted Democratic in both elections (Cook 1994b, p. 3354). This phenomenon leads William Schneider to comment that 1994 "was not a typical landslide":
Republicans didn't pick up seats that were marginal for the GOP. They picked up seats that were marginal for Democrats. Democrats survived as long as they could not be exposed as liberals. That became very difficult once they came under pressure to support Clinton (Schneider 1995, p. 334).

Burnham (1995) accurately describes the 1994 Republican coalition as being based in the "Great Protestant White Middle."

Compared to its performance in congressional elections between
1984 and 1992, the GOP scored huge gains among white born-again Christians, whites aged 30-44 and men aged 30-44. Regionally, Republicans made particular progress among whites in the South and Midwest. Groups that already leaned Democratic, such as Jews and unmarried women, became somewhat more so. Burnham also correctly labels 1994 as a "polarizing election" during which social groups diverged sharply in their voting behavior (p. 377-379).

Party differences were sharpened during the 1994 elections. House Republicans especially sought to focus public attention on national issues rather than on local concerns or candidates' personalities, most notably through the Contract with America. Not surprisingly, this partisan polarization was reflected in the electorate. Only seven percent of Republicans voted for a Democratic candidate for the House, down from 15 percent in 1992 and 23 percent in 1990. Almost nine-tenths of those who voted Republican for president in 1992 supported a GOP House candidate in 1994; this proportion had hovered around the two-thirds mark during the three previous midterm elections (Jacobson 1994, p. 16-17).

Self-identified conservatives and members of the Religious Right also swung towards the GOP (Schneider 1994, p. 2630). Only one-tenth of Democrats supported a Republican House candidate in 1994, almost the same proportion as in 1992, but down substantially from 1990 (Jacobson 1994, p. 16-17). Perot
supporters, who had split their House votes evenly between the parties in 1992, voted roughly 2-to-1 for GOP candidates in 1994 (Jacobson 1994, p. 13). Independents also shifted towards the GOP (Schneider 1994, p. 2630). The Republican coalition in 1994 was not some cobbled-together collection of those dissatisfied with the incumbent administration; it was composed of those who had long favored Republican presidential candidates.
Interpretations of 1994

Few observers of the 1994 election completely dismiss its importance. But while Burnham and others argue that it may mark the dawn of a new Republican era, some are not so sure. Herbert Weisberg is not the only commentator to note the narrowness of Republican margins in Congress, while John B. Judis has declared a "new era of instability," (Judis 1994; Weisberg 1995). The causes of the Republican victory are also under dispute. Burnham sees it as the result of stagnant living standards and cultural decline (Burnham 1995, p. 380). Alan Abramowitz dismisses short-term economic and political explanations, and instead points to broader shifts in partisanship and ideology (Abramowitz 1996). Everett Carll Ladd similarly takes a longer view, seeing 1994 as part of a wider "postindustrial realignment" that is gradually superseding the New Deal order (Ladd 1995). Gary Jacobson focuses more on proximate political causes, such as the GOP's nationalization of the elections and the end of the Democrats' longstanding edge in candidate quality (Jacobson 1995). Although Jacobson is correct to note many of the short-term factors that affected the outcome in 1994, long-term partisan shifts were just as important.

Burnham sees 1994 as a vindication for his much-maligned theory of critical realignment. Since the publication in 1970 of his work Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics, Burnham's detractors have argued that declining
partisanship and divided government have made realignment an obsolete concept, if it ever was a useful idea at all\(^1\). Almost gleefully, Burnham hails the election as a exoneration of realignment. He pronounces 1994 as a "very big event indeed, both for what it was and for what it has made possible since: The closer I look at it and its unfolding ramifications, the bigger it looms. Conventional political science wisdom will in many respects have to be discarded and textbooks will have to be rewritten. The resumption of divided government in 1995-97 rests on electoral foundations that, in some respects, are the polar opposites of those dominating the classic 1969-93 version. Unlike that version, it may prove of very short duration. Those who have stressed partisan dealignment will now have to consider how this abrupt emergence of something remarkably like an old-fashioned partisan election fits their models. And those who have placed their bets on the argument that critical-realignment analysis is irrelevant to this modern candidate-driven electoral universe will have to reconsider their position (Burnham 1995, p. 370).

One can imagine Burnham, on election night 1994, raising his hands in triumph (despite his evident opposition to Republican ideology), confident that, at long last, his theory had been proven correct. One wonders how Burnham has reacted to the developments of 1995 and 1996. Have the Republicans spoiled their chances for a realignment? Or are their current problems merely a bump on the road to majority status?

Burnham makes a solid case for the historical importance of the 1994 elections. Although the president's party usually

\(^{1}\) For a defense of realignment theory when its reputation had reached its nadir, see Burnham 1991.
suffers losses during the midterm elections, devastating defeats such as 1994 usually occur during the sixth year rather than the second year of a presidential administration. The last two "six-year-itch" disasters for a president's party were in 1966, when Republicans recovered from the Goldwater debacle during a year marked by the Vietnam war and urban riots, and in 1974, when Watergate and economic crisis helped give the Democrats a landslide victory. The elections of 1994 had a different context. Not only was 1994 only the second year of Democratic rule in the White House, but there was no obvious stressor like a scandal, a recession or an unpopular war (Burnham 1995, p. 367). As Burnham puts it, "there was no dog barking in the night" (Burnham 1995, p. 369).

Burnham sees 1994 as marking the end of the "interregnum state" that lasted for about a quarter century. This era was marked by divided government, weak partisanship, candidate-centered politics and pro-incumbent voting. Burnham argues that a "genuine critical realignment (if not a conventionally partisan one) swept through the country between 1966 and 1972," although this seems to stretch realignment theory to the breaking point (Burnham 1995, p. 367).

The "interregnum state" reached its peak in the late 1980s (only seven House incumbents lost in 1986 while six fell in 1988), but fell into crisis in 1990 when incumbents of both parties saw their share of the vote decline. In 1992, a huge number of
retirements created additional turmoil. The Republican landslide of 1994 finally ended the "interregnum state" and opened the door to partisan realignment (Burnham 1995, p. 369).

Burnham correctly states that 1994 marked a break with an electoral order that had prevailed over the past generation. Party mattered in 1994, more so than it had in many years.

Burnham surveys electoral history by examining both House and state legislative elections and then measuring the deviation of any given election from the mean of the five previous contests.

He looks at both House and state legislative elections. Burnham finds 1994 to have been comparable to such contests as 1800, 1860, 1894 and 1932 -- all of them generally considered to have been part of realignments. He comments that:

An analyst totally insensitive to other symptoms of the critical-realignment syndrome certainly would have to regard 1994 on this showing as a strong candidate for inclusion in the mega-event category (p. 376).

Although Burnham makes a convincing case for the significance of the Republican victory, he is less persuasive in explaining its cause. He cobbles together an interpretation: The whole post-1990 cycle, 1994 included, appears to be a case in which gradual but very persistent, unilinear deterioration in the conditions of life for the Great White Middle simply crossed a pain threshold less than five years ago, and doing so propelled the political system into a new upheaval phase. The pain is centrally and obviously related to the politics of decline, the flattening or declining of economic horizons for the future of self and family, and of increasing fear of violence at home -- on the streets and in the schools one's children attend -- as the social order appears to rot away (p. 380).
But Burnham does not offer any convincing evidence that these problems became especially severe in the 1990s, or that they would necessarily induce voters to back Republican candidates. It also offers little explanation as to why voting in 1994 so closely followed ideological and partisan lines that were largely set years before. All in all, Burnham's explanation appears jury-rigged. Burnham is on surer ground when asserts that Republicans "brilliantly" exploited "mass discontent with government" (Burnham 1995, p. 370).

Burnham notes that Republicans are likely to develop a formidable advantage in campaign finance (which they have) and to become dominant in the South. He draws two conclusions from these observations:

First, in the future partisan control of the House is likely to change hands far more frequently than all but the very oldest of us can remember. Second, when Democrats win control of the House at all, their majorities are likely to be far smaller than they were across the forty-year period of ascendency, terminated in 1994. And, given the true policy balance among voting Democratic representatives, the prospects for extended conservative -- if not necessarily always formally Republican -- control of the House of Representatives in the years ahead seem very bright.

One further reasonable interpolation can be made from the scene immediately before us. Extreme ideological polarization will be the order of the day in Washington, including, increasingly, the Senate (Burnham 1995, p. 385-386).

Burnham's predictions have had a mixed record for the 104th Congress. While voting in Congress has become more polarized, Democrats (particularly Clinton) have attempted to move to the
center on such issues as taxes, crime and welfare reform. Meanwhile, they have branded Republicans as "extremists" for their stances on Medicare and the environment. During the current presidential campaign, both major-party candidates seem to positioning themselves in the center-right.

Burnham is probably correct that partisan control of Congress is likely to change more frequently in the near future than it has over the past few decades. A Democratic resurgence in November 1996 is a real possibility. But any Democratic majorities are likely to be slender; assuming that Clinton is re-elected, they could easily be erased in 1998. (See Fiorina 1995 for a discussion of the likelihood of partisan turnover).

Burnham notes that Republicans have overridden two major norms of American politics. The first is American voters' disdain for ideological rigidity. The second is the American electorate's tendency to be "ideologically conservative" but "operationally liberal," opposing big government in the abstract but supporting concrete programs. Burnham questions how long Republicans can continue to violate these norms without offending the electorate or disrupting social harmony (Burnham 1995, p. 387). Indeed, the Republicans' difficulties during the 104th Congress seem to stem, in part, from their violating these norms.

Alan Abramowitz examines the 1994 elections and their implications for congressional election research. He admits
that "nothing in the extensive literature that has developed since 1978 quite prepared us for the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 874). Research has tended to focus on such factors as "partisanship, incumbency, campaign spending, candidate familiarity, and candidate evaluation" but "very little research has examined the effects of campaign issues and ideology" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 874).

Abramowitz uses data from the 1994 and earlier National Election Studies both to seek explanations for and the implications of the Republican victory. Correctly, Abramowitz mostly dismisses short-term explanations for the 1994 earthquake. According to the 1994 NES, "public assessments of both personal finances and economic conditions were generally positive" -- more positive, in fact, than in the three previous midterm elections. Respondents who expected their personal finances to improve in the next year were four times as numerous as those who thought the opposite -- which casts doubt upon Burnham's emphasis on the "politics of decline" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 875-76).

The 1994 NES found an almost even balance between respondents who approved of President Clinton and those who disapproved of him (48 percent to 46 percent). Those who strongly disapproved of Clinton outnumbered those who strongly approved by 29 percent to 18 percent. Abramowitz calls these "mediocre but not extraordinarily poor marks." He describes
opinions of Congress as being "overwhelmingly negative, but not much lower than in other recent midterm election years." Thirty percent of respondents approved of the job that Congress was doing while 62 percent disapproved, including 38 percent who strongly disapproved (Abramowitz 1996, p. 876).

Abramowitz tests the influence of several variables on voting decisions: party identification, ideological identification, incumbency status, rating of President Clinton's job performance, rating of Congress's job performance, current personal finances, personal financial outlook, rating of economic conditions. The only short-term issue that had a significant influence on voting was evaluations of President Clinton's performance. Abramowitz finds the three variables with the strongest influence to be incumbency status, party identification and, "surprisingly," ideological identification (Abramowitz 1996, p. 877).

According to Abramowitz, incumbency status remained important in 1994, but was less significant than in 1986 or 1990. Evaluations of both the Congress and the President were no more important than in previous years (Abramowitz 1996, p. 877-78).

Abramowitz finds that partisanship and ideology influenced voting more in 1994 than in the three previous midterm elections (Abramowitz 1995, p. 878). This is consistent with the poll findings discussed earlier in this essay. He notes that the Democrats have almost entirely lost the edge in party
identification that they have enjoyed since the New Deal. This edge helped them maintain control of Congress even while often losing the presidency. Abramowitz discusses the collapse of this lead:

Although the Democratic advantage in party identification slipped somewhat during the 1980s, as recently as 1990 the Democrats enjoyed a 15 percentage point lead over the Republicans. Between 1990 and 1994, however, that lead shriveled to only three percentage points in the entire electorate and only one percentage point among actual voters. The percentage of Democratic identifiers in 1994 was the smallest in the history of the National Election Studies while the percentage of Republican identifiers was the largest in the history of the NES (Abramowitz 1995, p. 7).

Abramowitz also notes an ideological shift in the electorate. While conservatives have outnumbered liberals ever since the NES began using a seven-point ideological scale in 1968, the proportion of conservatives rose significantly from 1990 to 1994. The percentage of self-identified conservatives in 1994 was the highest ever. At the same time, the electorate increasingly viewed the Democratic party as left of center and placed themselves closer to the Republicans on the ideological scale. And as Abramowitz puts it, "not only did the electorate become more Republican and more conservative between 1990 and 1994, but both of these groups were much more likely to cast their votes for Republican candidates in 1994" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 879-881).

Drawing upon research by Gary Jacobson that found challengers tend to emphasize issues and ideology more than
incumbents, Abramowitz tests this proposition for the 1994 elections. He compares races that involved Republican incumbents, Democratic incumbents with well-funded Republican challengers (who would have been best able to communicate their message) and Democratic incumbents with poorly funded Republican challengers. He finds that ideology mattered little in races involving Republican incumbents, but had a "substantial impact" on those featuring Democratic incumbents and well-funded Republican challengers (Abramowitz 1996, p. 882-84).

Abramowitz finds a strong link between campaign spending by GOP challengers and voters' decisions; he also notes that Republican campaign funds were well-targeted, with most of the high spenders running in districts where the GOP was competitive.

In races with "very well funded" GOP challengers, almost three-fifths of voters supported the Republican. Abramowitz notes that:

As in previous years, almost all of the incumbents who lost their seats in 1994 represented marginal districts and faced well financed challengers. What was different in 1994 from other recent midterm elections is that many more incumbents found themselves in marginal districts with well financed challengers (Abramowitz 1996, p. 884).

This may give comfort to Republicans who are enjoying a newly acquired advantage in campaign funds.

Looking ahead to 1996, Abramowitz asserts (questionably) that "the Republicans' chances of maintaining control of the House of Representatives ... obviously will depend on the outcome
of the presidential election." But he goes on to proclaim the end of "the era of Democratic domination of House elections is probably over":

The most important underpinning of that domination was the Democrats' advantage over the GOP in party identification. That advantage has almost completely disappeared. A second long-term factor, the balance of ideological identification, now favors the GOP more strongly than in the past. And of course the Democrats have lost the advantage of having more incumbents than the Republicanism (Abramowitz, p. 884-885).

Abramowitz finds that Democrats will "find it extremely difficult to win back most of the House seats that they lost in the 1994 midterm elections ... In districts that were captured by Republicans, Republican identifiers outnumbered Democrats by a wide margin." But Abramowitz also notes that "there may not be a lot of additional districts that lean toward the GOP among the House districts that remain in Democratic hands. Therefore, Republicans may find it difficult to add to their current fairly narrow majority in the House" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 885).

Abramowitz asserts that "the Republican victory reflected a long-term realignment of party strength in the U.S. and not just short-term issues that favored the GOP" (Abramowitz 1996, p. 887). He predicts that the most likely scenario for the next few elections is an ongoing battle for control of the House with neither party able to establish clear dominance and shifts in party control quite possible. The era of Democratic domination appears to be giving way to a new era of intense competition for control of the House of Representatives (Abramowitz 1996, p. 887).

Everett Carll Ladd sees the 1994 elections as having been
part of an ongoing realignment. He rejects the conventional notion that a realignment must lead to a new majority party. Ladd says that this concept blocks attention to other transformations of the party system that may be of comparable sweep and consequence, which together produce a new party system distinctly different form its predecessors, even though no new majority party has appeared on the scene. This distinction is of more than minor relevance, because just such a redevelopment has occurred over the past twenty-five years (Ladd 1995, p. 3).

Ladd correctly notes that the Republicans have not attained majority status, although they have achieved parity with the Democrats. He also points out that the decline of partisanship and the rise of independent voting may mean that the United States will never again "have a majority party in the complete sense that the Republicans were a majority from the 1890s through the 1930s and the Democrats were from the 1930s through the early 1960s" (Ladd 1995, p. 3).

Ladd sees the New Deal alignment as a creature of the industrial era, when voters saw expanded government as an appropriate response to the problems of their day. "Vast concentrations of power and activity" in the private sector demanded a similar approach in the polity. "Centralization and concentration" was the hallmark of the industrial era (Ladd 1995, p. 4-6).

Ladd claims that the "postindustrial America of 1994 is as decisively different in social structural regards from industrial America of 1937, as the latter was from the
predominately agricultural America of 1867" (Ladd 1995, p. 6-7).

"Decentralization and dispersion" marks the postindustrial era, a time when small enterprises increasingly lead economic growth (Ladd 1995, p. 7-8).

This change has led Americans to become more skeptical of government action -- a phenomenon that dates back to the tax revolts of the late 1970s and, arguably, even earlier. Ladd proclaims:

The magnitude of this change is at once exaggerated and trivialized by calling present thinking antigovernment. Americans evidently do not want to dismantle the modern state. It's nonsensical to claim that we are against government. It's equally silly, though, to say that our thinking about government has not changed substantially over the last twenty years. Americans continue to want a lot out of government. They will continue to want a lot. But they have shifted their views (Ladd 1995, p. 9).

Ladd argues that the debate over health care reform showed that "more government is a vastly harder sell now than it was from the Depression through the Great Society." Public opinion, favorable to the Clinton plan in January, had turned sharply against it by summer (Ladd 1995, p. 10). A poll taken in October 1994 found that 71 percent of respondents saw government as "the problem, not the solution to our problems." In 1958, 73 percent of respondents said that they trusted the federal government to "do what is right" always or most of the time. By 1994, that number had fallen to 22 percent. Ladd argues that these findings and others show a broad shift in public attitudes toward government (Ladd 1995, p. 13). He also points to poll findings
that show increasing support for conservatism and decreasing backing for federal spending in a variety of areas (Ladd 1995, p. 14-15). While he notes President Clinton's mediocre job ratings, he adds that "short-term factors always shape elections. This doesn't stop us from seeing larger elements at play" (Ladd 1995, p. 16-17).

Ladd notes that "Americans have not resolved their ambivalence about the modern state": Data suggest that skepticism about governmental answers is greater now than at any point since the New Deal. This hardly means, however, that the tensions in sentiment about the state have been removed. Doubts on government's role and record coexist with high public expectations that large national problems be vigorously addressed. ... The public will continue to be cross-pulled, even while the underlying balance of sentiment has shifted in the post-industrial era (Ladd 1995, p. 18-19).

Ladd makes a strong case for his view that the 1994 election reflected a long-term shift in the American electorate. President Clinton himself has acknowledged this change, proclaiming that "the era of big government is over." Ladd's position that the two parties have achieved parity, with neither one claiming a majority of voters, squares with the political facts of the 1990s.

Gary Jacobson, arguably the foremost scholar of congressional elections, examines the 1994 elections with an eye to the "legacy of divided government." He argues that the Republicans won the House
by fielding superior candidates who were on the right side of the issues that were important to voters in House elections and because voters blamed a unified Democratic government for government's failures. Their key success was in nationalizing the congressional races, effectively exploiting, for the first time, the same themes and issues that served them so well in presidential campaigns from 1968 onward (Jacobson 1995, p. 2).

This marked a complete reversal from the situation of the 1970s and 1980s, when strong Democratic candidates exploited divided government, ran on issues that favored their party and kept the focus of campaigns on local concerns. With its greater faith in government, the Democratic party tended to generate more ambitious and skilled candidates than the GOP (See Ehrenhalt 1992 for an exploration of this view). Democratic congressmen associated themselves with their party's more popular stands and distanced themselves from those positions less admired back home. They often avoided national issues, instead spotlighting their personal strengths or their work on local concerns. But 1994 was different:

All politics was not local in 1994. Republicans succeeded in framing the choice in national terms, making taxes, crime (the domestic equivalent of a strong national defense), big government, and the Clinton presidency the issues. They did so by exploiting three interrelated waves of public sentiment that crested simultaneously in 1994. The first was public disgust with politics, politicians, and government as exemplified by Congress. The second was the widespread feeling that American economic and social life was out of control and heading in the wrong direction. The third was the visceral rejection of Bill Clinton by a crucial set of swing voters, the "Reagan Democrats" and supporters of Ross Perot (Jacobson 1995, p. 3-4).
Jacobson examines the by-now-familiar theme of voter anger. He sees the budget deficit as being one of the leading causes of this discontent; divided government, in turn, was a major factor in the growth of the deficit in the 1980s:

The Reagan administration's early experiments with supply side economics taught Republicans that opposition to taxes was popular but attacking middle-class entitlements and other popular programs was not. Democrats learned that most large domestic programs were indeed popular but people did not like to pay for them. Subsequent election campaigns, built on these insights, gave voters the opportunity to declare themselves for both low taxes and generous domestic spending, electing Republican presidents on a promise of 'no new taxes' and Democratic majorities in Congress committed to maintaining or enlarging middle-class entitlements (Jacobson 1995, p. 5).

Both the deficit itself and efforts to eliminate it by Presidents Bush and Clinton have alienated voters. Jacobson also sees stagnant incomes, declining public services and increasing cultural disorder as major causes of popular discontent.

Jacobson finds a strong relationship between presidential approval and voting for the House. About 86 percent of House votes were "consistent with presidential ratings (that is, for the Democrat if the respondent approved of Clinton's performance, for the Republican if the respondent disapproved)." The figure for 1990 was 68 percent and in 1986, it was 72 percent. This particularly hurt Democrats among southern whites, whose support for Democratic House candidates dropped from 47 percent in 1992 to only 35 percent in 1994; 44 percent of southern white males said their vote was a protest against Clinton (Jacobson 1995,
Jacobson notes that a longstanding Democratic edge in candidate quality dissipated in 1994. On average over the previous 24 postwar congressional elections, 26 percent of Republican incumbents, but only 16 percent of Democratic incumbents, faced challengers who had previously won elective public office. In 1994, for only the third time during this period, the Democrats lost this advantage. Only 14 percent of Democratic challengers had elective experience, while 15 percent of Republican challengers did (Jacobson 1995, p. 15). Given the GOP's sweeping gains in state legislatures, this edge may persist into 1996 and beyond. Despite the GOP's anti-government rhetoric, their experienced challengers ran better than others: 47 percent of Republican challengers with elective experience won, while only 11 percent of the rest did (Jacobson 1995, p. 15).

Jacobson speculates about the future of the House Republican majority:
The election altered the fundamental distribution of partisan strength in the House, leaving Republicans in a stronger position than they have enjoyed since the New Deal realignment. Democrats have little prospect of taking back many of the seats lost to the Republicans in 1994, particularly in the South. Why elect conservative Democrats rather than Republicans
to protect local (southern) interests if the Democrats are no longer the majority party? The same will be true in districts outside the South where Democrats have held on through their ability to deliver the goods despite being out of ideological or partisan sync with their constituents. Moreover, the Democrats will no longer have their majority status and committee clout to attract PAC contributions from the business interests, so they may face problems in financing campaigns. Still, nothing in the election polls or results implies that the Republicans' new majority status in the House (or Senate, for that matter) is particularly secure; the more likely prospect is for a period of intense, volatile competition for control of both Houses of Congress (Jacobson 1995, p. 23).

Some observers are intensely skeptical of GOP claims to majority status. Herbert Weisberg reminds us that Republican majorities in both houses of Congress are narrow and that the GOP has, at best, achieved parity with the Democrats in party identification (Weisberg 1995). John B. Judis admits the possibility of a new Republican era, but sees the 1994 elections as more plausibly heralding an era of greater political turbulence characterized by empty sloganeering, mean-spirited campaigning and the growth of local and national third parties -- an era in which neither Democrats nor Republicans can count on stable majorities (Judis 1994).
Judis argues that while 1994 marked "the last fevered gasp of the Democratic majority that has prevailed since 1932," the Republicans "remain divided among themselves" and offer a "conservative populism that is thematic rather than substantial" (Judis 1994). We may be entering a new political era, but it is not necessarily a Republican one.

**Theories of Congressional Elections**

While political scientists have tended to focus on presidential elections rather than the congressional variety, enough attention has been devoted to the latter to make for some lively controversies. The most prominent division among theories of congressional elections is between those that emphasize national factors and those that stress local considerations. During the 1960s, when *The American Voter* set the tone for election research, political scientists claimed that voters knew little about House candidates and campaigns. The results of congressional elections therefore were mostly dependent on national considerations such as party identification or presidential evaluations. In the 1970s, however, many political scientists became interested in the strength of congressional incumbents; this led them to assert the importance of individual and local factors, especially voters' evaluations of candidates. The increasing amount of data collected on House elections also supported the notion that
citizens knew more about these contests than the authors of *The American Voter* had claimed.

**National Factors**

Angus Campbell, one of the authors of *The American Voter*, produced one of the first major theories of congressional elections when he developed the concept of "surge and decline." This sought to explain a curious phenomenon of American politics: the President's party (nearly) always loses House seats during a midterm election. During the twentieth century, the only exception to this rule has been 1934, when the Democrats picked up a handful of seats in the midst of the New Deal realignment. Using data from the elections of the 1940s and 1950s, Campbell asserted that midterm losses stem from a change in the electorate. Presidential elections are "high-stimulus" contests that bring "peripheral" voters, especially independents, to the polls to support the winning candidate. By contrast, midterm elections are "low-stimulus" contests; "peripheral" voters stay home. After experiencing a "surge" during the year of the presidential election, the president's party suffers a "decline" at the midterm. It also no longer benefits from the short-term forces that encouraged defections from the opposing party during the presidential election (Campbell 1960).
Campbell explained his theory:
The fact that the off-year elections typically reduce the congressional strength of the party which has won the Presidency two years earlier is readily understandable within the terms of our description of surge and decline. As long as there is no significant shift in the distribution of standing party attachments within the electorate, the decline in turnout in an off-year election will almost certainly be associated with a decline in the proportion of the vote won by the presidential party. If the partisan pressures of the presidential election have induced any movement toward the winning candidate among the Independents and members of the opposing party, this movement will recede in the following congressional election, partly through the dropout of voters who have supported the ticket of the winning presidential candidate and partly through the return to their usual voting positions of those Independents and opposing partisans who had been moved during the presidential year (Campbell 1960, p. 417).

Surge and decline became the dominant theory of congressional elections during the 1960s. (See Hinckley 1967 for an expansion upon Campbell's work). Political scientists often dismissed midterm contests as "non-elections" without any content of their own. But surge and decline came under increasing criticism during the following decades. For one thing, surge and decline did not accurately describe the composition of the presidential and midterm electorates. Campbell claimed that independents were a larger fraction of voters during presidential years than they were at the midterm. This turned out not to be the case. Campbell made similar assertions about less educated and younger voters that also did not hold true (Campbell 1993).
A more serious problem with the theory of surge and decline was that it did not account for the considerable variations between midterm elections, except to tie them to the presidential contests that had occurred two years before.

Edward Tufte (1975, 1978) challenged surge and decline by positing that midterm elections are referenda on incumbent presidents. Tufte proclaimed that the prevailing view of midterm outcomes as an adjustment restoring the normal partisan equilibrium unrelated to objective events in the two years prior to the midterm is incomplete, for while it explains why the President's party should almost always be operating in the loss column, it does not account for the number (emphasis in the original) of votes and seats lost by the President's party. ... In this study, we seek to explain the magnitude of the national midterm loss by the President's party; why do some presidents lose fewer congressional seats at midterm than other presidents? Do the outcomes of congressional elections represent the electorate's evaluation of the President's performance? ... Or, on the other hand, is the midterm "referendum" only "derivative" and the outcomes lacking in rational explanation? Since those citizens showing up at the polls at the midterm are probably somewhat more politically sophisticated and interested than those voting in on-year elections, the assertion that midterm outcomes are "irrational" provides a substantial challenge to the view that the electorate behaves in rational ways, or at least in ways somewhat responsive to the political environment (Tufte 1975, p. 813).

Tufte seeks to show the influence that short-term factors exert on midterm congressional voting. His variables are public approval of the President (measured by the Gallup poll) and economic performance (measured by yearly change in real disposable income). (For an earlier look at the effects of short-term factors, see Kramer 1971). Using these variables,
Tufte predicts the results of congressional elections with a high degree of accuracy. When an incumbent administration is unpopular or the economy is doing poorly, the president's party is likely to lose a large number of seats at the midterm. When a president is popular or the economy is growing rapidly, such losses will probably be minimal. He also notes that the "swing ratio," the proportion of House seats that would turn over due to a given change in the overall congressional vote, declined during the 1960s and 1970s, making big fluctuations in the House less likely. Because of this change, "the political meaning of the midterm itself has shifted" (Tufte 1975, p. 822). Tufte claims that this shift has obscured the essential rationality of midterm voting.

Tufte proclaims that his fundamental finding is that the vote cast in midterm congressional elections is a referendum. ... From a statistical point of view, the model constitutes a virtually complete explanation of the aggregate vote in midterm elections: the model explains 91 per cent of the variation in the partisan division of the vote in midterms from 1938 to 1970 (Tufte 1975, p. 824-25).

Tufte disavows the standard view ... that the midterm outcome derives from the prior on-year election, mostly a residual product of an electorate from which the short-term forces prevailing in the prior on-year have been subtracted (Tufte 1975, p. 826).

Tufte's findings revolutionized the study of congressional elections. No longer could political scientists dismiss the notion that midterm voters were passing judgment on an incumbent
administration. Even scholars sympathetic to surge and decline were forced to admit that the referendum theory had at least some validity.

Samuel Kernell (1977) produced a similar critique of surge and decline. He noted this theory's failure to correctly describe the composition of the on-year and midterm electorates. Kernell observed that political writers and activists have long acted as if presidential evaluations have a powerful effect on congressional voting. Examining variations in both presidential popularity and congressional voting, he found that they "covary in a predictable manner, but do so within the confines of a general continuity of the vote." He also noted that "both parties fare worse in midterm congressional elections when an incumbent from their party occupies the White House than when they represent the opposition" (Kernell 1977, p. 50).

Kernell noted that public reactions to presidential performance are asymmetric; unpopular presidents see their party hurt badly at the midterm, while the parties of popular presidents do not experience a corresponding boost. To explain this phenomenon, Kernell drew upon psychological research to construct what he called the "negative voting model": "[C]itizens displeased with a President's performance are more likely to vote against his party's congressional candidates than are satisfied voters likely to vote for them" (Kernell 1977, p. 52). After testing his hypothesis at the individual level, Kernell found
that voters who disapprove of the President's performance are more likely to turn out than those who approve; the one possible exception is members of the President's party. He also found that presidential popularity correlates with congressional voting, once partisanship is controlled. Disapproval of the President is more likely than approval to encourage partisan defections and to influence independents' vote decisions. These constitute powerful evidence to confirm his hypothesis (Kernell 1977). Albert Cover expanded upon Kernell's work. He noted that voters' evaluations of the in-party's competence tend to fall during a President's term. He argued that these evaluations determine the congressional vote, mediating the effects of presidential popularity and economic performance. The decline in these evaluations causes the President's party to lose seats at the midterm (Cover 1986).

The referendum model supported by Tufte and Kernell's studies has become the leading paradigm in congressional election research. But some problems have emerged. One of the most serious is the disparity between aggregate and individual-level data. The former has tended to confirm the referendum hypothesis, while the latter often has not. The discrepancy has been especially notable for economic indicators, but has also occurred with presidential popularity. There have been a variety of responses to this problem. One has been the "strategic politicians" theory, propounded by Gary Jacobson and
Samuel Kernell. According to this concept, potential candidates make their decisions about whether to run based on the economic conditions and level of presidential popularity some months in advance of the election. If the President is unpopular and the economy is faring poorly, the most attractive candidates in his party will forego races for the House. The President's party will therefore fare poorly in November (Jacobson and Kernell 1981). Other political scientists have argued that voters base their voting decisions on "sociotropic" economic factors, those affecting society as a whole, rather than on their own well-being.

Not all scholars of congressional elections are primarily interested in the referendum model. Bruce Oppenheimer, James Stimson, and Richard Waterman have devised what they call the "exposure thesis," that, all things being equal, a party tends to lose seats when its representation in the House exceeds its historical average:

Why does exposure matter? First, just as there are elections in which short-term forces produce deviations from the normal vote in any alignment period, so such elections may produce deviations in the number of House seats a party wins. But, barring a realignment, we expect a rebound from whatever short-term forces caused the deviation, and this movement toward the normal seat in the House. This in a sense is the well-known phenomenon of regression to the mean. But having put a name to it does not explain it; regression to the mean occurs for some reason. ... Many dynamic systems tend to return to an equilibrium when disturbed, but to know that they do so does not satisfy our need to know why (Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman 1986, p. 229).
Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman argued that when a party wins more than its normal number of seats, it carries some districts that normally belong to the other party. In such a victory, some of the party's weaker candidates will win despite their personal flaws. The opposition party, meanwhile, has been reduced to holding its safest seats and electing its strongest candidates. Once the short-term forces that produced the victory pass from the scene, the overexposed party is likely to lose many of its marginal districts and see some of its weakest officeholders lose re-election. The party balance in Congress returns to equilibrium. "The system itself is self-correcting" (Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman 1986, p. 229).

Using the theory of exposure, Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman were able to explain about half of the variance between congressional elections. By adding the referendum-type variables of economic performance and presidential popularity, they are able to increase their model's predictive ability to about two-thirds (for one formula) and over three-quarters (for another). Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman were also able to show that there is no "surge and decline" independent of the effect of exposure (Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman 1986).

James Campbell attempted to update the theory of surge and decline. He noted that many of its propositions, particularly those regarding turnout, have been discredited. He also noted that referendum theories have some validity. But Campbell
argued that there is a process of surge and decline, although it occurs in a different manner than Angus Campbell had claimed: "Short-term forces manifest themselves in the vote choices of independents and in the turnout of partisans" (Campbell 1993, p. 100). During on-year elections, short-term forces generally favor the party that wins the presidency. Those voters who identify with that party turn out at higher levels, while those who support the opposite party are less likely to go to the polls. Independents, who lack the guidance of party identification, are swayed by short-term forces to vote disproportionately for the winning party. These factors produce a surge for the President's party during the on-year. At the midterm, Independents are more affected by local factors. Favorable short-term factors do not push members of the President's party to the polls as they did during the on-year election, and unfavorable ones may discourage them from voting. The opposite is true for members of the party out of power (Campbell 1993).

Campbell found that the in-party tends to suffer losses at the midterm in proportion to its presidential vote two years before, e.g. the Republican sweep in 1966 that followed Lyndon Johnson's landslide re-election in 1964. This is consistent with surge and decline. Campbell found that the surge is significant even when presidential popularity and economic performance are taken into account. He did note, however, that surge and decline has become less important in recent years as
party ties have weakened and the advantages of incumbency have increased (Campbell 1993).

While most recent studies of national factors in congressional elections have focused on short-term variables, some work has been done on long-term influences. These have generally found that while party identification has become less important over the past three decades, it remains a powerful determinant of voting.

Local Factors

After the publication of The American Voter, political scientists mostly dismissed the role that local factors played in congressional elections. Since voters knew little about individual candidates, they could not pass judgment on them. While an extraordinarily popular individual might occasionally swing some votes in his favor, most elections were determined by national factors, whether long-term ones such as party identification, or short-term ones such as surge and decline. The classic statement of this position is Stokes and Miller (1962).

In the 1970s, scholars began to criticize this viewpoint. The proximate cause for this dispute was the increasing value of incumbency. As David Mayhew noted in "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," an increasing number of congressmen were winning re-election by margins
exceeding 60 or even 70 percent. While Richard Nixon won a second term in 1972 with 60 percent of the vote, his party gained only twelve seats in the House. Only six Democratic incumbents lost to Republican challengers; more than three-quarters of incumbents won at least 60 percent of the major-party vote (Mayhew 1974b). While 1972 was an exceptional case, rates of re-election for incumbents rose significantly from the 1960s through the 1980s (Ornstein, Mann and Malbin 1994, p. 58).

The findings about incumbency posed serious problems for theories of congressional elections. If members of Congress were less vulnerable to defeat, big swings due to either surge and decline or discontent with a sitting administration were less likely. Since the rise in incumbents' strength occurred during the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s, it could not be ascribed to some general vote of confidence in the system. It did occur, however, during a time when party identification, one of the cornerstones of The American Voter, was becoming less important. The increasing number of Independents particularly benefitted incumbents; who were also the beneficiaries of the rising frequency of partisan defections (Cover 1977; Cover and Mayhew 1977).

The assumption that voters knew little about congressional campaigns was also coming under attack. Congressional scholars noted the effort that incumbents exerted toward their re-election (Mayhew 1974a; Fiorina 1977; Fenno 1978). One common theme that
emerged was the ability of incumbents to use the perquisites of office to improve their chances of re-election. Through casework (assisted by the growth in congressional staff) and the use of the frank, representatives were able to build a personal following transcending partisanship.

Thomas Mann, in his work *Unsafe at Any Margin*, presented the most comprehensive attack on the traditional view of congressional elections. He declared that congressional elections are local, not national, events; in deciding how to cast their ballots, voters are primarily influenced not by the President, the national parties, or the state of the economy, but by the local candidates (Mann 1978, p. 1)

Using data collected in district-level surveys done for the Democratic Study Group, Mann showed that most voters know more than Stokes and Miller had claimed. They are able to recognize candidates by name and can often give their opinion of them. Not only do voters have preferences between candidates, but those inclinations are better predictors of the vote than incumbency or party identification:

Individual voting in congressional elections is clearly responsive to perceptions of the candidates. ... Incumbents have a clear advantage over challengers in visibility and reputation, but to be known is not necessarily to be liked. There is sufficient variation in candidate reputations independent of party loyalty to suggest that candidates have much to do with their own electoral fates (Mann 1978, p. 81).

Mann noted that a national value for partisan swing can hide considerable diversity among districts. He also found that
the congressional vote can vary significantly from the district's partisan makeup. These findings confirm that candidate evaluations matter. Congressional elections are real events, not just on the national level, but locally as well (Mann 1978).

Also in 1978, for the first time, the National Election Study collected data on particular House races. This information tended to confirm Mann's view that candidate evaluations determine the vote to a significant degree (Hinckley 1980). The availability of NES data has allowed scholars to study congressional elections in much greater detail than was previously possible.

Gary Jacobson has emerged as one of the leading figures in the study of congressional elections. He has been particularly active in the areas of challenger quality and campaign finance. Jacobson has found that challengers with prior experience in elective office do better than those without such a background. This has benefitted the Democrats, who tend to run more experienced candidates. Jacobson has also found that while challengers run better when they spend more money, the reverse is true for incumbents, who spend more when facing a serious opponent (Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1992).

Some Observations

Most theories of congressional elections fail to the explain
the Republican victory in 1994. Surge and decline fares particularly poorly. According to James Campbell, large losses for the President's party usually follow landslide victories.

But Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992 with only 53 percent of the two-party vote, and his party actually lost seats in the House. In fairness to Campbell, he notes that a large vote for a third-party candidate can disrupt his process, and indeed he excludes years with a large third-party vote from his analysis.

Perhaps the 1992-94 cycle should be considered anomalous because of Ross Perot's 19 percent of the presidential vote. Given that current polls show Perot winning about 13 percent of the vote, the 1996-98 cycle may end up being an odd duck itself.

The referendum theory does not fare much better. As Abramowitz (1996) notes, neither presidential popularity nor economic performance was poor enough to account for the Democrats' poor showing. Nor does exposure explain the phenomenon of 1994: the House held 256 Democrats on the eve of the election, almost exactly the party's long-term equilibrium. (Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman 1986; Waterman, Oppenheimer and Stimson 1991). One could argue, however, that the Republican trend of the 1980s and 1990s lowered the Democrats' true equilibrium, but that this was not reflected in congressional elections because of divided government. Indeed, that is a central theme of this essay.

The localist theories, while helpful in explaining
individual contests, cannot explain the Republican sweep. Scholars devised most of these theories to explain why broad partisan victories were no longer common. They are of little value in explaining them when they occur. Indeed, Cover and Mayhew (1977) noted that "in a highly volatile electoral system a minority party can hope to come to power once in a while, in a more stable system victory may be forever denied" (p. 69). Cover and Mayhew make this statement in an article explaining how stable the political system had become by the mid-1970s, with individual incumbents increasingly immune from national forces.

But the electoral system in the 1990s has become "highly volatile," with national forces playing a more important role. Jacobson's work on campaign finance and challenger quality, however, may be more relevant to the 1994 election.

A District-Level Analysis of the 1994 House Elections

While Abramowitz (1996) has conducted an aggregate study of the 1994 House elections based on the NES, and Jacobson (1995) has done a descriptive district-level analysis, no one has yet done a district-level regression analysis of these contests. Ferejohn and Fiorina (1985) conducted such a study of the 1980 and 1984 elections, and it proved to be of theoretical interest. Such a regression may be useful in understanding the role of national and local factors, of incumbency and party, and of challenger quality and campaign finance.
A data set of 370 districts was created, encompassing every district in which there was major-party competition in both 1992 and 1994. Several variables were included for each district.

The Republican percentage of the 1992 two-party congressional vote was used as a measure of incumbents' personal and local appeal. Based upon Philip Converse's concept of the "normal vote," an average of the 1988 and 1992 Republican presidential vote was used as an index of district partisanship. Because we are seeking to measure what might be termed the "normal national vote," results of congressional contests were excluded (Converse 1964). Both of these variables should have a positive effect on the dependent variable, the Republican percentage of the 1994 two-party congressional vote. But if 1994 was strictly a local affair, the 1992 congressional vote should have a much stronger impact.

2Bernard Sanders of Vermont, an Independent and self-described socialist, was treated as a Democrat in this analysis. Sanders caucuses with the Democrats, has faced little Democratic opposition back home, and even receives aid from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

3Most of the information used in creating this data set was obtained from Barone and Ujifusa 1995. The data on per capita income change was provided by the Bureau of Economic Analysis's Regional Economic Information System. Information on candidate quality came from Barone and Ujifusa 1995 and from Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports, (October 22, 1994), 3062-76. Americans for Democratic Action and the American Conservative Union provided their ratings of congressional incumbents. Presidential support scores were obtained from Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports (December 31, 1994), p. 3636-37.

4Because of extensive redistricting after the 1990 census, it was not possible to include data from earlier elections.
There was much speculation after the 1994 election about the influence that Perot voters had on the outcome. The district vote for Perot, therefore, became another term in the regression. A positive correlation with the Republican congressional vote is expected, since post-election polls showed that about two-thirds of Perot voters supported GOP House candidates in 1994.

Since all observers agree that, all things being equal, incumbents have a distinct advantage in congressional elections, two dummy variables were created to measure incumbency. One indicates the presence of a Republican incumbent seeking re-election, the other shows that a Democrat is running for another term. The first should increase the Republican vote, the second should decrease it.

Gary Jacobson has repeatedly shown that House candidates with more political experience run better than those with less. He defines such experience as having served in elective office. We created two dummy variables to measure this factor: one for Republicans and one for Democrats. Naturally, the first term is expected to increase the Republican vote, the second should lower it. These variables are only used for contestants in open-seat races and for challengers to incumbents.

Most scholars of congressional elections agree that campaign spending affects voting in at least some situations. We therefore included spending by both Republican and Democratic
candidates in our analysis, with the expectation that the former should raise the GOP vote and the latter should depress it. Research on campaign finance also leads us to the expectation that spending should help challengers more than incumbents. At some level of spending -- perhaps a half million dollars -- candidates will reach a point of diminishing returns and additional expenditures will have little effect on the vote.

One of the ongoing phenomena of American politics since the 1950s has been the increase in Republican strength in the South. That rise was especially notable in the 1994 election. A dummy variable represents whether a district is located in the South. We used Congressional Quarterly's definition of the South as consisting of the eleven states of the Confederacy, as well as Kentucky and Oklahoma. A positive value of the regression coefficient was expected.

Since Alan Abramowitz and others have speculated that 1994 was a highly ideological election, it seemed appropriate to include some indicator of relative liberalism or conservatism. Originally three measures were used: the ratings provided by Americans for Democratic Action and the American Conservative Union, and Congressional Quarterly's index of presidential support. But using all of these indicators created the possibility of multicollinearity (they were strongly correlated with each other). The three indices also lacked separate theoretical value. They were instead combined into a scale
measuring the liberalism of an incumbent's record with zero being the most conservative rating and 100 the most liberal.\footnote{Since the American Conservative Union takes the opposite approach (with low scores indicating a liberal record and high scores revealing conservatism), its ratings were subtracted from 100. The remainder was averaged with the ADA and Clinton support score to create the liberalism scale, which runs from zero (most conservative) to 100 (most liberal).}

We faced a serious problem in trying to measure the effect that the economy had upon voting in 1994. If the referendum model holds true at the district level, one would expect to see Republican candidates run better in districts that have fared poorly during the Clinton years. Unfortunately, no economic data is available by congressional district for 1992-94. We were forced to use statewide data on change in per capita income. This poses a problem. Large states such as California and Texas contain districts with widely disparate economic bases. There is no easy solution to this problem. The only alternative was not to use any economic data at all, which would leave this analysis without variables supporting the referendum model. That would be intolerable. So while this economic data is not perfect, it is the best that we can do. We should expect that districts with lower rates of increase in per capita income should have higher votes for Republican congressional candidates.

We considered adding other terms to the analysis. Since Albert Cover and David Mayhew (1977) and others have noted the presence of a "sophomore surge" when representatives seek
re-election for the first time, we created dummy variables to indicate the presence of such a situation. These variables never had a significant effect in any regression and had only limited theoretical value. We therefore dropped them.

First-order correlations were run between the 1988-92 presidential vote and the 1992 and 1994 two-party Republican House vote. The 1994 House vote correlates better with the presidential vote than the 1992 House vote does: .75 versus .66. This supports the argument that the 1994 congressional elections were more nationalized than the 1992 contests. This finding contradicts the longstanding belief that congressional elections in midterm years are more oriented toward local issues than those held in on-years. Similar correlations were run between the 1992 and 1994 House votes and the Perot vote; there was virtually no difference between the years.

A series of ordinary least squares regressions was performed, with the 1994 two-party House Republican vote (measured by percentage) serving as the dependent vote. The first regression was performed on all 370 cases. (See Table 1) This model does a remarkable job of explaining variance, with an adjusted R square of .84. With a coefficient of .95, the presidential vote predicted the House vote very well; for every one percent difference in the presidential vote by district, there was (on average) a .95 percent change in the House vote. The 1992 House vote was not a statistically significant
predictor of the 1994 result. These findings support the notion that national factors played a powerful role in determining the results of the 1994 House elections.

Incumbency was also important in the 1994 election. The presence of a Democratic incumbent sharply depressed the Republican vote. Republican campaign spending had a strong positive correlation with the performance of Republican candidates. Since campaign spending tends to help challengers more than incumbents, the lack of statistical significance for Democratic campaign spending may simply reflect the greater number of Democratic congressmen seeking re-election. The negative coefficient for the South shows that Democratic congressional candidates still tend to outrun their national standard-bearers.

It is just as interesting to note which variables had no statistically significant link to the House vote. In this regression, change in per capita income did not affect the percentage won by Republican candidates. In fact, this term was not statistically significant in any regression. While one can partially discount this finding by noting the inappropriateness of using state-level data in a district-level analysis, one would presume that if the Republican sweep was based on short-term economic dissatisfaction, this variable would have been significant in some analysis.

The district's vote for Perot in 1992 was not
statistically significant in this regression and most of the others. It appears that the Republican victory of 1994 was not so much based on increasing the GOP vote in districts that gave Perot a high level of support, but instead on doing well in those that have voted Republican in recent presidential elections. Indeed, most Perot voters supported George Bush in 1988.

Candidate quality was not significant in this regression. It did have an impact in some other instances but, generally, campaign spending seems to have been more important than political experience in 1994.

**Democratic Incumbents**

Since incumbency was such a powerful factor in our first regression, it made sense to control for it in later analyses. Such a course was desirable for another reason. Republicans won most open-seat races; many Democratic incumbents saw their percentages drop, and 35 lost, but most were re-elected. Meanwhile, every Republican incumbent was re-elected, including such worthies as Ken Calvert (CA), who was picked up with a prostitute a year before the election. Abramowitz (1996) found that open-seat contests and races between Democratic incumbents and well-funded Republican challengers were highly nationalized, but elections involving Republican incumbents were not. There are good reasons to examine separately the three different kinds of contests.

Table 2 shows the results of a regression performed on the
198 Democratic incumbents who sought re-election and who had Republican opposition in both 1992 and 1994. While our model has less success with this subgroup than with the whole set, it does produce a respectable adjusted R square of .74. With incumbency controlled, the 1992 House vote is a significant predictor of the 1994 vote, but the presidential vote is almost as strong. Among the 80 Republican challengers who spent more than $250,000, both the presidential and the 1992 House vote remain strong predictors of the 1994 vote but, for that set, the former is more important than the latter. Perhaps Republican challengers who spent enough money to be competitive were also able to make national, rather than local, issues paramount in their contests; this is consistent with Abramowitz (1996). (See Appendix).

In accordance with Gary Jacobson's work on campaign finance, spending by Republican candidates (all of whom are challengers in this set) has a strong positive correlation with the vote they received. But among the 80 districts in which a Republican challenger spent at least $250,000, campaign finance no longer had a significant effect. Apparently, $250,000 is the point beyond which further spending produces little additional benefit (See Appendix).

For the 198 Democratic incumbents included in this set, their campaign spending had a positive effect on the Republican vote (indicating that troubled incumbents spent more), but it
is weak and of questionable statistical significance. The same is true for Republican candidate quality. It was more important for Republican challengers to be well-funded than to have experience in elective office. This regression also indicates an ideological effect: all other things being equal, more liberal Democrats ran worse than more conservative ones. The district's support for Perot and its location in the South had no statistically significant effects; per capita income growth was also irrelevant.

### Republican Incumbents

Table 3 presents the results of a regression performed on 121 districts with Republican incumbents who faced Democratic opposition in 1992 and 1994. Our model has less predictive ability for this group than it does for the set of all cases or for Democratic incumbents: the adjusted R square is .66. The presidential and 1992 House votes are both highly significant; they, however, have a weaker effect in this regression than they did in the one involving Democratic incumbents. This confirms Abramowitz (1996)'s findings that races involving GOP incumbents were less affected by ideology than those featuring a Democratic%

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Among Democrats, liberalism was negatively correlated with their districts' Republican presidential vote (−.59), support for Perot (−.21), location in the South (−.44) and 1992 Republican House vote (−.17). More conservative Democrats, therefore, tended to represent Republican-leaning districts, especially in the South, and had had close races in 1992. Similar correlations among Republicans were insignificant.
incumbent or in which no incumbent was running.

The strongest predictor is Democratic campaign finance. This is consistent with the large body of work that argues that spending helps challengers more than incumbents. For every hundred thousand dollars spent by a Democratic challenger, a Republican incumbent saw his or her vote drop by 1.7 percent.

There also appears to be a small negative effect for Republican campaign expenditures, confirming that endangered incumbents tend to spend more; this, however, is of questionable statistical significance.

The coefficient for the South is positive; with all other variables controlled, Republican incumbents in Dixie ran 2.83 percentage points better than their Yankee counterparts. This may reflect the South's longstanding proclivity to re-elect incumbents; it may also indicate that, in a region where Bill Clinton was unpopular during 1994, Democratic challengers may have run half-hearted efforts in ways not measurable by campaign finance statistics. The Perot vote, incumbent ideology, economic performance and challenger quality were all statistically insignificant.

There were few well-funded Democratic challengers in 1994. In our data set, only 29 spent at least $250,000 (See Appendix).  

7 Only nine Democratic challengers spent more than $500,000 (compared to 38 Republicans). These Democrats included two who fit the textbook definition of high-quality challengers: state senators Jay Bradford and James Maloney, who opposed vulnerable Republican incumbents Jay Dickey (AR) and Gary Franks (CT). Under somewhat better national conditions, Bradford and Maloney probably would have won.
This research confirms Gary Jacobson's (1995) point that the Democrats were badly hurt by a lack of high-quality, well-funded challengers.

**Open Seats**

Table 6 shows the results of a regression performed on a set of 50 contests in which no incumbent ran in the general election. The adjusted R square for this regression is very high: .85. These races, with no incumbent to muddy the waters, were almost completely nationalized. The presidential vote has a coefficient of .96, and is by far the best predictor of all the variable included in the analysis, with a standardized coefficient of .85. Republican, but not Democratic, campaign spending is statistically significant; it has a positive effect on GOP support. This is an interesting finding, but its theoretical meaning is unclear. Were Democrats in such bad shape in 1994 that any money they spent was wasted? Perhaps Democrats fared better in low-expenditure races. In the South, Democratic congressional candidates still do better than their party's presidential nominees, but the gap is much smaller than it was in the 1960s or 1970s.

With the presidential vote and Republican campaign spending...
carrying so much weight in this regression, almost everything else fades into the shadows. The 1992 House vote is completely irrelevant. Although this finding is not surprising given the absence of incumbents in these races, it does indicate that the presidential and congressional votes are not easily separable.

Candidate quality is also irrelevant. The Perot vote has little impact. (See Appendix for additional regressions).

Conclusions

We can draw one main conclusion from this analysis: that the presidential vote has a powerful impact on the congressional vote, even when the results of previous House elections are controlled. This is particularly interesting since 1994 was a midterm year without a presidential contest. As was stated above, we used the average presidential vote from the 1988 and 1992 elections as a "normal national vote." This "normal national vote" had a strong relationship with the 1994 congressional vote; this supports the widespread observation that these elections were decidedly nationalized.

This nationalization was strongest in open-seat races, where the presidential vote was almost the only important factor in predicting the outcome. It was also especially powerful in races that pitted a Democratic incumbent against a well-funded Republican challenger. But this nationalization was present in almost all cases, although it was weakest in races involving
Republican incumbents. This is consistent with Abramowitz (1996) and Jacobson (1995).

We may draw another important conclusion from this analysis. Campaign spending plays an important role in congressional elections, but this role varies according to the situation. Challengers derive a great deal of benefit from campaign spending, but its value peters out around $250,000 or a half million dollars, depending upon the circumstances. Incumbents spend the most money when they are endangered; their spending is actually inversely correlated (weakly) with the percentage of the vote that they receive.

Candidate quality was generally not significant in this analysis. This may reflect the anti-politician mood of 1994; experience in public office may not have been an unalloyed blessing for candidates. Additionally, the large effect of campaign finance may have overwhelmed a smaller impact for candidate quality. We may also need new ways of measuring this variable.
Theories of Realignment

V. O. Key Jr. originated the concept of realignment in his 1955 article "A Theory of Critical Elections." Key initially dealt with critical elections: events which dramatically reshuffle existing party allegiances. Key later conceived the notion of secular realignment in which change occurs gradually over several elections. Burnham developed realignment theory further in his 1970 work *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* and James Sundquist elaborated upon it in his 1973 book *Dynamics of the Party System*. Sundquist sees a realignment occurring when a new issue cuts across existing party lines. According to Sundquist, one characteristic of a realignment is durability. A realignment changes voters' allegiances permanently. Sundquist explains that it is when the political norm itself changes that realignment occurs. The concept applies, then, not to voting behavior as such, but to what underlies voting behavior -- to the basic party attachments of the voting citizens (Sundquist 1983, p. 5).

The new issue that leads to realignment must be "one powerful enough to dominate political debate and polarize the community" (Sundquist 1983, p. 300). It must also be "one on which major political groups take distinct and opposing policy positions that are easily dramatized and understood" (Sundquist 1983, p. 301).

Issues such as slavery in the 1850s and free silver in the 1890s fit these requirements. A realignment occurs when polarizing
forces take over one of the parties or form a new one. It is clear that our own time is one of increasing polarization. It is not as clear whether there is a particular issue that splits the parties. Certainly, Bob Dole and Bill Clinton have both avoided staking out polar positions on most topics.

Many political scientists have identified four critical realignments, occurring in 1828-32, 1856-60, 1896 and 1932-36. Some have counted the Jeffersonian victory of 1800 as the first realignment in American political history, while others have felt that parties then were too weak for such a concept to have meaning.

Many observers, most notably Kevin Phillips but also several leading political scientists, expected a new realignment to emerge from the Nixon victories of 1968 and 1972. Previously, some had predicted that Johnson's landslide victory in 1964 would mark a new era of Democratic dominance, but Republican victories in 1966 ended such speculation.

But the anticipated realignment did not occur. While Republicans controlled the presidency for twenty of the twenty-four years from 1969 to 1993, they failed to translate those triumphs into broader control of the political system. The rise of Republicanism in the South was balanced by its decline in much of the North. Reagan's landslide victories in 1980 and 1984 failed to improve Republican fortunes elsewhere in the political system.

Realignment theory fell into disrepute during the 1970s
and 1980s. "Dealignment" became a fashionable concept, proposing that political parties had become too weak to hold the loyalties of most voters -- and indeed, the number of self-proclaimed independents skyrocketed during the 1960s and 1970s while noticeably fewer voters called themselves strong partisans. By the late 1980s, the Democrats had watched their lead in party identification all but disappear, but no new Republican majority was in sight. The rise of candidate-centered campaigns helped incumbents of both parties.

Joel Silbey is one of the theorists who has attacked realignment as being out of date. He has claimed that weakening party loyalty and an increasing number of independents have put an end to the era of partisan alignment. He sees an era of "postalignment" that began shortly after World War II (Silbey 1991).

Byron E. Shafer has proposed the notion of an "electoral order" based on intermediary organizations and governmental institutions. He also sees three different issue areas: economic welfare, foreign affairs and cultural values. Different institutions relate to these areas in different ways. The presidency is most responsible for foreign affairs and cultural values. The Congress, especially the House of Representatives, plays a stronger role in economic welfare (Shafer 1991, p. 42-50).

Shafer sees the contemporary electoral order as having
emerged after 1968. The electorate is "liberal" on economic welfare, "nationalist" on foreign policy and "traditionalist" on cultural values. These preferences were reflected in an electoral order consisting of a (typically) Republican president, a (usually) Democratic Senate and an (always) Democratic House (Shafer 1991, p. 51-53). At the same time, the primary intermediary organizations in the political world -- the parties -- were increasingly dominated by issue activists who reflected the cultural and foreign-policy divisions that emerged in the 1960s. Shafer asserts that this new order was neither a realignment nor a dealignment (Shafer 1991, p. 60-64).

Shafer predicts that the "next American electoral order" could emerge in a number of ways. Economic trouble could bring the election of a Democratic president. A changing international order or a shift in cultural values could also benefit the Democrats. A shift by the Republican party on economic welfare could help them capture Congress (Shafer 1991, p. 69-71). From the perspective of 1996, Shafer deserves little credit as a prophet. A recession did lead to a Democrat in the White House. But the Republicans gave little sign of moving left on economics in 1994. If anything, they moved right, including tax cuts and a balanced budget amendment in the Contract With America.

**Was 1994 a Realignment?**

It is easy to see that the 1994 elections were a remarkable
A phenomenon. Not only did the Republicans put an end to forty years of Democratic rule in the House, but the sweeping GOP victory at all levels of government is the sort of broad partisan triumph that was supposed to be obsolete in a weak-party era.

As was discussed above, Burnham finds that the degree of partisan change was comparable to such massive shifts as occurred in 1894 or 1932. Abramowitz shows that the extent of partisan change could not be explained by short-term factors such as presidential popularity and economic conditions. Our own analysis finds a close link between districts' vote for president and their House vote in 1994. The 1994 elections seem to bear the marks of a realignment.

But yet one must pause before jumping to such a conclusion. The themes of the 1994 campaign were not new. There was no crosscutting issue that Sundquist would put on a par with slavery or the currency battle of the 1890s. Nor is it clear that a new majority party emerged in 1994. Republican margins in Congress are narrow (although the GOP's hold on governorships is genuinely impressive), the two parties hold about equal shares of the electorate and the election of a Republican president in 1996 now seems unlikely. And as Ladd has noted, the very notion of a majority party may be obsolete in an era where large numbers of voters identify as independents and where ticket-splitting is common (although it was less so in 1994).

A shift has occurred in American politics, but "realignment"
may not be the best word to describe it. Instead of a new crosscutting issue, this shift involves the debate over the role of government that has been raging since the New Deal and the cultural divisions that date back to the 1960s. Ladd describes the first element of this shift when he shows the declining popular faith in an activist government. This is not a new issue, but is rather a reversal of the New Deal order. Voters no longer believe that an ever-expanding federal government is likely to solve their problems. While the health-care debate of 1994 highlighted this change, public opinion has been moving in this direction for about a generation. The 1994 elections cannot be understood in a vacuum.

The second part of this shift was that Republicans were able to transform their presidential majority into a congressional one. Republicans won all but one presidential election from 1968 to 1992 both because of their advantage on cultural issues and because of public skepticism about an activist government; the first factor emerged in the 1960s and the second arose about 1980. (They also had an advantage on foreign policy, but that is irrelevant for the case of 1994).

But Democrats held on to Congress. They kept the debates for Congress focused on local issues, personality and their skill at delivering concrete benefits. In part by using the powers of incumbency, Democratic congressmen were able to escape the oblivion faced by their presidential nominees.
But in 1994, Republicans were able to end this pattern and make the congressional elections focus on the same broad national issues that had helped them win presidential elections. A variety of factors contributed to this successful shift in the terms of debate. Congressional scandals such as the House bank made incumbency a somewhat less formidable advantage, at least for Democrats. Abramowitz and Jacobson note that Republicans were able to overcome Democrats' longstanding advantages in candidate quality and campaign finance. (Given the GOP's successes in state legislative races and the shift in PAC donations, it may be a long time before the Democrats enjoy those advantages again). Above all, the end of divided government allowed the Republicans to make the Democrats the sole target for voters' discontent with Washington.

Republicans consciously followed a strategy of nationalizing and "ideologizing" the elections of 1994. This included, but was not limited to, the Contract With America. This strategy succeeded in convincing Republicans, conservatives and Perot voters to back GOP candidates in overwhelming numbers. As has been noted, most of the seats picked up by the GOP were in areas (especially the South) that had regularly voted for Republican presidential nominees.

Despite all of the good news for the Republicans, one must express two qualifications to this description. The first is that the GOP is still not the majority party. As has already
been noted, it has, at most, achieved parity with the Democrats.

The final outcome of this shift may not be Republican dominance, but closer party competition throughout the American political system. The second is that it is simply too soon to make a final judgment. While it seems unlikely, it is certainly possible that all the Republican gains made in 1994 could be lost in 1996. After all, the GOP won a huge victory in the 1946 elections, only to see it reversed two years later. And the difficulties that congressional Republicans are experiencing now, on subjects ranging from Medicare to Newt Gingrich's ethics, can certainly gladden Democratic hearts. Just one cannot comprehend the elections of 1994 without looking at the previous decades, one may not be able to fully understand their significance until several years have passed.
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Appendix