

# Extension of Remarks

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## 1996 Elections: Toward a Republican Reign?

This edition of Extension of Remarks consists of:

*The Congressional Elections of 1996*  
Gary C. Jacobson, UC San Diego

*The 104th Republicans:  
Of Classes and Cannon Fodder*  
Tim Barnett and Burdett Loomis, University of Kansas

*The 1996 Senate Elections:  
Open Seats and the Geezer Repeats*  
Ronald Keith Gaddie, The University of Oklahoma

*The South in the House, Version '96*  
Charles Bullock III, University of Georgia

*The More Things Change...:  
Republican Realignment in the Mountain West*  
Peter F. Galderisi, Utah State University

*The 1996 Minnesota Senate Race:  
How to Win An Unpopularity Contest*  
Steven E. Schier, Carleton College

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# The Congressional Elections of 1996

Gary C. Jacobson, UC San Diego

The idea that the Democrats could win the White House by eight million votes without winning control of Congress would have been unthinkable only a couple of years ago. Yet by the time it happened, no one was surprised. More eloquent testimony to the profound shift in the balance of partisan competition in congressional elections in the 1990s could scarcely be imagined.

The Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, and the uses they sought to make of it, were the dominant forces shaping the 1996 campaigns. After heady success with quick action on the Contract with American, House Republicans overplayed their hand on the budget in 1995, reviving the Clinton presidency from the near death it had experienced after 1994. Clinton shrewdly accepted their goal of balancing the budget by 2002 but rejected the means—cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, and education—that Republicans proposed to get there. The Republicans became the prime victims of their own “train wreck” strategy of trying to force his hand by shutting down the government. Clinton held firm, and the public sided with him decisively (Jacobson 1996a).

Republicans had mistakenly assumed that public support for the goal—smaller, cheaper government—meant public support for the means—cutbacks in specific programs and regulations—as well. Clinton was able to exploit the fact it did not, and the vow to protect “Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment” became the mantra of his victorious reelection campaign. But the Republican defeat on the budget raises an obvious question: If the Republican Congress’s mistakes reelected Clinton, why did they not also cost the party control of Congress?

## The Congressional Elections of 1996

Despite Clinton’s easy reelection, Republican congressional candidates did remarkably well in 1996. Table 1 summarizes the results in House elections since 1992, and Table 2 does the same for Senate elections. On election day 1996, Republicans lost a mere eight House seats, net. Moreover, because of Democratic opportunists switching to the Republican ranks after the 1994 election and net Re-

publican gains in special elections held during the 104th Congress, the party won only two fewer House seats in 1996 than it had won in 1994. Republicans did even better in the Senate, adding two new seats to the ten they had picked up in 1994. Unlike Clinton, congressional Democrats enjoyed little in the way of a rebound from their 1994 debacle. Why not? Part of the explanation lies in the electoral politics of divided government during good times, which I shall discuss later. More fundamental however, were changes in the structure of electoral competition for congressional seats that were both revealed and magnified by the

## The Structure of Competition For House Seats

1994 elections. Both sets of circumstances were visibly in place well before 1996, so the Democrats’ failure to retake Congress was not surprising; indeed, it was predictable (and predicted; see Jacobson and Kim 1996).

The most important structural change in the balance of competition for House seats was the reallocation of House seats that followed the 1990 census. The states in the South and West that gained seats were, on average, considerably more Republican in their voting habits than the states in the Northeast and Midwest that lost the seats. The drawing of majority-minority districts also helped Republicans by packing (overwhelmingly Democratic) African American voters into minority districts, leaving neighboring districts relatively more Republican (Hill 1995). This change in the underlying competitive balance was easy to overlook in 1992, when Bush’s dismal showing dragged down the whole ticket; but even then, the Republicans’ pickup of 10 House seats despite losing the White

House signaled that the competitive balance had undergone a fundamental change. Regression analysis of post-war House election results indicates that, in elections since 1992, Republicans have won about 43 more House seats than they would have won under equivalent national conditions during the 1946-1990 period (Jacobson 1997). During that era, they won an average of 180 House seats; adding 43 seats gives them an approximate base of 223, a narrow majority very close to their current House strength (228 seats).

A second, related improvement in the

Table 1. Membership Changes in the House, 103d to 105th Congresses

	Republicans	Democrats	Independents
103rd Congress			
Elected in 1992	176	258	1
104th Congress			
Elected in 1994	230	204	1
At time of 1996 election	236	198	1
105th Congress			
Elected in 1996	228	206	1
Change from 1992	+52	-52	0
Change from 1994	-2	+2	0
Change on election day	-8	+8	0
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Incumbents reelected	196	165	
Incumbents defeated	17	3	
Freshmen	32	41	

publican gains in special elections held during the 104th Congress, the party won only two fewer House seats in 1996 than it had won in 1994. Republicans did even better in the Senate, adding two new seats to the ten they had picked up in 1994. Unlike Clinton, congressional Democrats enjoyed little in the way of a rebound from their 1994 debacle. Why not? Part of the explanation lies in the electoral politics of divided government during good times, which I shall discuss later. More fundamental however, were changes in the structure of electoral competition for congressional seats that were both revealed and magnified by the

Republicans' competitive position emerged from the 1994 election itself. Most of the seats the party added in 1994 were seats a Republican should have held in the first place. A serviceable measure of a district's partisan leanings can be computed by taking the average division of its two-party vote for president in 1988 and 1992. The national mean for this measure is 49.9 percent Democratic; its median is 48.3 percent Democratic (Jacobson 1996b). Of the fifty-six districts newly taken by Republicans in 1994, thirty-seven (66 percent) had voted Republican, on average, in the two preceding presidential elections. Democrats took back only three of these thirty-seven seats (8 percent) in 1996, compared to five of the other nineteen (26 percent).

The Democrats' problems were compounded by another legacy of 1994: the loss of majority control. Predictably, the insults of minority status prompted an exodus of Democrats from the House, giving Republicans a shot at open seats in Republican-leaning districts. A higher number and proportion of Democrats than Republicans voluntarily left the House in 1996, and a smaller proportion of the Democrats did so in pursuit of higher office

(Jacobson 1997). As in 1994, a disproportionate share of the Democrats abandoned seats that had been voting Republican at the presidential level, particularly in the South; of the twelve such seats, the Democrats lost six. Revealingly, twenty three of the twenty-eight retiring Democrats announced their departures before the end of 1995, while a majority of Republican retirees (eleven of twenty-one) announced theirs in 1996. Strategic retirements inspired by the Republicans' seeming ascendancy through most of 1995 made it harder for Democrats to exploit the shift in public opinion away from the Republican Congress after the budget showdown.

Strategic responses to the new competitive environment worked to the Republicans' advantage in other ways as well. The Republican takeover of Congress transformed the campaign money market. Democrats no longer had their majority status and committee power to attract campaign contributions from business-oriented Political Action Committees, who after, 1994, were freer to follow their (Republican) hearts as well as their pocketbooks in allocating do-

nations. How thoroughly the switch in party control altered the distribution of campaign funds for 1996 will remain in question until the Federal Election Commission publishes the complete data for the election cycle later in 1997. Republicans did enjoy an unusual fundraising advantage at least through 1995 (Jacobson and Kim 1996). After the budget showdown, the Democrats' chances of retaking the House improved, and some contribu-

are typical success rates for the two groups during the postwar period. Of course, experienced challengers are much more likely to run for seats where their party's candidate has a plausible chance to win, but their electoral superiority remains after other relevant electoral conditions are taken into account (Jacobson 1989, 1997).

The Democrats' problem was that only 22.1 percent of their challengers had previ-

ous experience in elective office, a figure below their postwar average of 25.3 percent and not at all typical of the party in a "good" Democratic year. The Democrats needed to pick up at least 19 seats to retake the House in 1996. In every postwar election in which they have added 19 or more seats to their total, at least 31.2 percent of their challengers had served in elective office; the average for these five elections (1948, 1958, 1964, 1974, and 1982) is 35.7 percent. If history is any guide, then, Democrats did not have a sufficient number of high-quality challengers to retake the House. Indeed, the data in Table 1 show that even if strategic retirements had not cost them any open seats, they did not defeat enough Republican in-

cumbents to win a majority. The signs of Democratic revival evidently came too late to bring out a class of challengers capable of taking back the House.

### The Senate Contests

Retirements also hurt the Democrats in Senate contests, and their troubles were compounded by the luck of the draw. Thirteen senators retired in 1996, the largest number of voluntary departures since senators have been elected directly by voters. Eight of the thirteen were Democrats, four of them from the South. The timing of retirement announcements again suggests strategic withdrawal; all eight of the Democrats, but only one of the Republicans, had announced their retirements by November, 1995. Republicans won three of the seats left open by departing Democrats, two in the South (Alabama and Arkansas), and one in Nebraska, a state won handily by Bob Dole. Republican Senator Larry Pressler of South Dakota was the only incumbent defeated in the general election, and his was the only Republican Senate seat lost in 1996. (An appointed Senator

Table 2. Membership Changes in the Senate, 103d to 105th Congresses

	Republicans	Democrats
103d Congress	43	57
104th Congress	53	47
105th Congress	55	45
Change from 1992	+12	-12
Change from 1994	+2	-2
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Incumbents reelected	12	7
Incumbents defeated	1	0
Freshmen	9	6

tors no doubt hedged their bets. The full effects of the new financial environment will probably not appear until 1998, when the durability of the Republicans' majority status will not be in doubt.

Finally, the shock of 1994, the prospective imbalance in campaign funds, and the reality that, even if they won, they were likely to be in the minority evidently made it more difficult for Democrats to recruit high-quality candidates to take on incumbent Republicans. Quality candidates are crucial to a party's success because congressional elections remain largely candidate centered events. A favorable national climate does a party little good in districts where it fails to field a candidate with the skill and resources to take advantage of the climate. A simple but powerful measure of quality is experience in prior elective public office. In 1996 as in all previous postwar House elections, challengers who had previously won elective public office were far more successful than were those who had not. Experienced Democratic challengers won 23.4 percent (eleven of forty-seven) of the contests they entered, whereas only 3.9 percent of the 158 amateurs defeated the incumbent. These

from Kansas, Sheila Frahm, lost the Republican primary to Sam Brownback, the eventual winner.)

Democrats had bad luck in the class of Senate seats up in 1996. As in 1992, Senate and presidential outcomes tended to match, though more so in states won by Dole than in states won by Clinton. Republicans won fourteen of the seventeen seats at stake in states won by Dole, while Democrats won ten of the seventeen seats at stake in states won by Clinton. The Republicans' good fortune was that states won by Dole were more likely to have Senate contests. Only three of the nineteen states won by Dole lacked a Senate race in 1996, compared to fourteen of Clinton's thirty-one states. By the luck of the draw, Democrats were poorly positioned to take advantage of whatever help Clinton's victory might have provided their Senate candidates.

### The Campaigns

Strategic career decisions taken by prospective Democratic congressional candidates, along with the other structural shifts in the balance of competition for seats, clearly made it harder for Democrats to exploit Clinton's victory. Yet it remains a question just how exploitable Clinton's victory was. Democratic congressional candidates sought, like Clinton, to portray the Republicans in Congress as a gang of irresponsible extremists in thrall to Newt Gingrich. But their efforts were only modestly successful. Why was a stance so helpful to Clinton not equally helpful to congressional Democrats?

There are several reasons. First, many potentially vulnerable Republicans did what Democrats had routinely done to hold on to seats against contrary national tides during their 40 years of hegemony: run as independent champions of local district interests. Republicans took Congress in 1994 by nationalizing the election and moved lock-step to act on the agenda outlined in the Contract with America during the first few months of 1995. Had they stuck together throughout the 104th Congress, the 1996 congressional elections might have become a referendum on their collective performance as a party. That is certainly what Democrats tried to make it once Republicans had moved from the popular generalities to the much less popular specifics of their "revolutionary" budget.

In the end, however, the Republicans' brief flirtation with responsible party government fell to the desire of individuals to win reelection and the party as a whole to keep its majority. After the budget debacle, Republicans with moderate constituencies bolted the party on such issues as repeal of

the assault weapons ban, weakening endangered species protection, and raising the minimum wage (Salant 1996). Vulnerable Republicans highlighted the votes on which they had parted from Gingrich, who himself encouraged members to run against him if it would help their campaigns (Koszczuk 1996). The Contract with America, so prominent in 1994 and 1995, was conspicuous by its absence from many of the Republican incumbents' 1996 campaigns.

The Republicans' tactical retreat culminated in the passage of spending measures, welfare and health insurance reforms acceptable to Clinton in the spring and summer of 1996. These popular actions strengthened Clinton's record and thus his candidacy, but they did the same for congressional Republicans, both as achievements in their own right and as counters to charges of extremism and intransigence.

### The 1996 Election in Historical Context

The closest historical precedent for the Republican triumph of 1994 was 1946, the most recent election in which the GOP won control of Congress at midterm with a Democrat in the White House. Democrats hoped, and Republicans feared, that the precedent for 1996 would be 1948, when Harry Truman's political resurrection swept the Democrats back into control of Congress. Unfortunately for the Democrats, the historical model for 1996 was not 1948, but 1984, when Ronald Reagan cruised to easy reelection on a tide of good economic news while his party was picking up only fourteen seats in the House and losing three in the Senate.

Both Reagan and Clinton ran upbeat campaigns extolling a strong economy and popular policy successes. Both drew upon extraordinary political skills to extend their appeal beyond their party's normal electoral base. Both won easy reelection. But neither of their campaigns offered much leverage to their congressional challengers. If times are good and the president deserves another term, why replace the incumbents or majority party in Congress, who can plausibly claim a share of the credit for peace, prosperity, and progress? Other status-quo presidential elections under divided government—Dwight D. Eisenhower's reelection 1956 and Richard M. Nixon's reelection in 1972—offer confirming examples. Every postwar president reelected to a second full term has had remarkably short cottails. All four saw their party lose Senate seats, and their largest pickup in the House was Reagan's paltry fourteen seats in 1984.

In 1996, the difficulty for Democratic challengers was amplified by the very strategy that revived Clinton's presidency. By accept-

ing so many of the Republican goals—agreeing to balance the budget by 2002, declaring that "the era of big government is over," signing a bill ending welfare entitlements that had been part of the social safety net since the New Deal, opposing gay marriages, and supporting prayer in school—Clinton took command of the political center. But by campaigning on a record indistinguishable from that of a moderate Republican, Clinton gave voters little reason to elect more Democrats to Congress. The contrast with Truman's reelection campaign, a spirited defense of the New Deal, could hardly be starker.

Clinton, of course, faced a very different political environment than did Truman. Truman had a natural majority to rally; now the parties are evenly matched. The New Deal policies Truman defended enjoyed broad public support; now the Republican themes of lower taxes and smaller government hold sway. Clinton won reelection by adapting to a more conservative political environment in much the same way that moderate and conservative Democrats had won congressional seats in areas unfriendly to their party for years. Such a strategy acknowledges political reality but does nothing to alter it.

Clinton helped congressional Republicans in other ways as well. He saved them from themselves by stopping them in 1995 and bringing them back toward the center in 1996. His firm opposition to unpopular budget cuts, assaults on environmental regulation and the Department of Education, and kindred Republican proposals in 1995 forced them to rein in their most extreme impulses and alerted them to the political danger lurking in revolutionary rhetoric and radical policy changes. His maneuvering toward consensus on budget decisions and such issues as welfare reform, minimum wage, and health insurance portability gave them a chance to look responsible and effective.

Moreover, the administration's aura of scandal and widespread doubts about Clinton's personal character gave voters additional reason to keep Republicans in a position to keep an eye on him. Indeed, there is some evidence that the revelations late in the campaign of contributions to the Democratic National Committee from foreign sources moved late-deciding voters into the Republican column, reducing Clinton's margin of victory and thereby preventing the Democrats from retaking the House. Despite the implied affront to the Dole campaign, Republican leaders did not hesitate to make the near certainty of Clinton's reelection an argument for voting Republican for

*Continued on pg 14*

# The 104th Republicans: Of Classes and Cannon Fodder

Tim Barnett and Burdett Loomis, University of Kansas

*We were the cannon fodder of the Great Society.*

First-term Democrat, 89th Congress

*What actually resulted [in a new members' retreat to discuss issues, including campaign finance] was an exchange of ideas on how to become more visible in one's district... [various] innovations might come under the heading of better representation, but they were clearly intended to enhance our chances of reelection.*

Rep. Toby Moffett (D-CN), discussing first-termers in 94th Congress

Since the early 1960s, congressional turnover has declined steadily. Large classes of new members, once the norm on Capitol Hill, have become the exception, not the rule. This trend renders the arrival of a large congressional class as disproportionately important for enacting major institutional and policy changes. Most simply, the arrival of a sizable freshman class usually heralds an alteration in the balance of partisan power within the Congress. For example, the 1958 elections witnessed the increase of 62 new House Democrats (net gain of 49) and a net gain of 15 seats in the Senate, ending a brief era of narrow majorities in both chambers (Sundquist, 1968). The 86th Congress did pursue a substantial Democratic agenda, without much success, but both chambers remained under solid Democratic control through 1980. Conversely, the great turnover of 1992, which included 110 new members, was an exception to most large infusions of new blood, in that the Republicans cut only ten seats from the Democratic margin.

Rather than focus on the individual legislator as our unit of analysis, we will examine entire classes of legislators in the U.S. House. Ordinarily, congressional classes make their mark in two distinct, though related, ways. First, a class may provide the votes that will allow the passage of an ambitious policy agenda. Alternatively, a large class may produce little impact in its first term, but by winning reelection consistently its members may affect policies over a long period of time (see Hibbing, 1991). The 89th Congress (1965-

66) reflects the first kind, and the 94th 4th Congress (1975-76) the second (see Fishel, 1973, Loomis, 1988, respectively). In the latter, survivalist context, first-term members, whatever their policy preferences, can concentrate on winning reelection; the former, "cannon fodder" context, however, tends to place legislators' core goals — reelection, policy influence, and internal power (to say nothing of advancement to higher office) — in conflict. Of course, individual legislators from cannon fodder classes can and do survive to exert great power (e.g., Speaker Tom Foley, first elected in 1964). Likewise, a survivalist class can produce major changes in its initial term, as the Class of 1974 did in providing the margin to oust three senior committee chairmen.

## Survivalist and Cannon Fodder Classes in the Modern House

We have identified six large, partisan classes that have entered the House since 1946. Excepting the 1940s with two such classes and the 1980s with none, each decade has produced a single large, partisan infusion of newcomers. Our criteria for inclusion are straightforward: a class needed to have at least sixty new members of the party that captured the House and at least a 2:1 majority-minority advantage among first-termers. Thus, the 1980 elections that gave Ronald Reagan a short-term conservative (but not Republican) majority does not qualify, although it may represent the closest fit with the 1994 class (see below). Our analysis includes only the majority members of each class.

## *The Long and Short of Electoral Survival.*

No element of congressional life has been more directly related to the increasing electoral effects of incumbency than the shape of political careers. (Hibbing, 1991) Large, partisan classes offer especially strong tests to the power of incumbency as a protector of legislators who often gained their seats by defeating a sitting member or winning an open seat previously held by the opposing party. From the 80th through the 89th Congress, on the whole, large-class legislators found it difficult to hold their seats: 45 percent of the majority members did not return to the House after their initial term, and six of ten did not remain after four years. In short, all these large, partisan classes provided cannon fodder

for the opposition in their first two reelection bids (see Table 1). But then the bleeding stops — in part, to be sure, because a lot of blood has already been spilled. Save for the postwar 80th Congress's Republicans, the remainder of the classes exhibit similar long-term survival rates. Between twelve and eighteen percent of each class (1948, 1958, 1964, 1974) become so-called careerists, as their members extend their tenure to ten terms or more (Bullock, 1972). The class of 1974, largely because of its initial survival rates, remained vulnerable in a succession of subsequent elections; by 1983, through defeat or retirement, more than half the class (51%) had departed the House, just eight percent less than the class of 1958. Still, at the same point in its career, the "cannon fodder" class of 1964 had lost a full 67 percent of its initial members (and from a smaller base of 67 Democrats as opposed to 75 in the 1974 class).

Only occasionally are new members of Congress asked to vote systematically in ways that might compromise their electoral survival; that was surely the case in 1965-6, as congressional Democrats ratified an activist domestic policy agenda. The electorate responded by electing 47 more Republicans to the House, largely because it thought that President Johnson and his congressional allies were moving too far, too fast (Sundquist, 1999). As of the mid-1960s, the effects of incumbency were modest at most (Erickson, 1971). In that we have no full-blown "cannon fodder" situation between the 89th and 104th Congresses, the question in 1996 was the extent to which a class could benefit from the increased effects of incumbency (in particular, the "sophomore surge") to reduce the effects of highly partisan voting record that was often seen as going too far.

## *The Reagan Republicans.*

Before examining the fate of the 104th Republican freshmen, however, we might get some clues from the success rates of the last congressional class to embark upon an aggressive partisan agenda: the Republicans of the 98th Congress, who entered the House with Ronald Reagan and who supported his agenda of tax cuts, some domestic budget reductions, and increased military spending. To be sure, Republicans did not win

control of the House in 1980, but at least for the first few months of the 98th Congress a revitalized Conservative Coalition dominated the legislative process. In 1982, Republicans lost 26 House seats, a number that fell far short of the number predicted by models using data from postwar elections. (Jacobson, 1992, 173) Among freshmen, 13 lost their bids for reelection and two others did not return for a second term; still, more than seven in ten (71%) survived. To an extent, the 1980 Republicans were "shock troops for the Reagan Revolution" (Jacobson, 1992, 45), but after their initial defeats they proved resilient, with an overall survival rate of 54 percent in their fifth term that exceeded that of the 1974 class (49%) and far surpassed the fifth term rate of the 1964 Democrats (33%).

By any objective measure, freshman Republicans in the 104th Congress pursued a more aggressive and extensive partisan agenda than did the 1980 GOP first-termers. Moreover, many of the 104th class reveled in their descriptions as revolutionary. In effect, this class conducted an experiment in its own electoral survival. Indeed, given its members' ideological zeal, the class may have merited the label "cannon fodder" as much — or more — than that of "cannon fodder."

#### The 104th Republicans: From Cannon Fodder to Congressional Elite

*Their strength was their willingness to lose the next election. That's what gave them the moral authority no one else could match.*

Christopher Shays (R-CN)

*They...considered themselves real butt-kickers.*

Sonny Bono (R-CA)

By the end of 1995 the freshman Republicans had contributed greatly to the interpretation of the 104th Congress as the most ideological and partisan in at least thirty years. Not only did the GOP first-

termers lend support to Speaker Gingrich's agenda, as expressed in the Contract with America and the October budget reconciliation, but many pushed the Speaker to be as aggressive as possible in confronting the Clinton Administration. Within a Republican majority notable for its partisan unity, the freshmen offered disproportionate voting sup-

port — to the point that they could pressure the Speaker with their numbers (almost a third of GOP House membership).

Table 1. Large, Partisan Classes since 1946: Survival over Time  
Number and Percentage of Class in House by term:

Con- gress	Maj. Frosh		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10+
80th (1946)	Number: Percent:	73R	29 40%	23 29%	18 25%	15 21%	15 21%	9 12%	7 10%	5 7%	1 1%	
81st (1948)	Number: Percent:	79D	49 62%	30 38%	26 33%	24 30%	23 29%	21 27%	14 18%	13 17%	13 17%	
86th (1958)	Number: Percent:	62D	39 63%	29 47%	29 47%	27 44%	25 40%	22 35%	19 31%	17 27%	11 18%	
89th (1964)	Number: Percent:	67D	39 58%	33 49%	27 40%	22 33%	20 30%	16 24%	13 19%	10 15%	8 12%	
94th (1974)	Number: Percent:	75D	72 96%	61 81%	47 63%	37 49%	29 39%	25 33%	23 31%	23 31%	14 19%	
104th (1994)	Number: Percent:	74R	59 80%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
[97th] (1980)	Number: Percent:	52R*	37 71%	37 71%	33 63%	28 54%	21 40%	15 29%	15 29%	11 21%	—	—

\* Republicans do not capture House in 1980, but GOP/Democratic coalition gave conservatives and Reagan supporters a potential working majority on major legislation in much of 1981.  
Data sources: various Congressional Quarterly Almanacs and Weekly Reports

port — to the point that they could pressure the Speaker with their numbers (almost a third of GOP House membership).

Despite individual exceptions on particular issues, the freshman Republicans generally accepted the assessments that they had helped foment revolutionary politics in the House. At the same time, little of their agenda became law, and their willingness to shut down the federal government quickly came to be viewed as a major miscalculation. Less than a year before mid-term elections, Republicans in general and freshmen in particular faced the real prospect of losing control of the House, just as had their predecessors in 1948 and 1954. By April, 1995, House Republicans had seen their performance on generic congressional trial heats decline from a 12-point advantage six months before to a six or seven point deficit (Gruenwald and Kalb, 1996). In addition, 35 first-term Republicans were among the 44 Republicans targeted by the \$35 million AFL-CIO independent expenditure campaign in the general election, according to PoliticsNow.

Others can sort out the campaign strategies of the freshmen, but central to their efforts

was the attempt to convert their image from revolutionaries to "common sense" legislators. Indeed, the last few months of the 104th Congress afforded them the opportunity to vote for compromise spending packages that allowed them to distance themselves from the harsh implications of the budget votes of 1995 and the effects of closing much of the federal government. The fact is that this class, with all its potential for becoming cannon fodder for the Gingrich revolution, emerged from the 1996 election largely intact and with the prospect for continued — even expanded influence — on Capitol Hill.

With two forced retirements (Waldholz/Greene and Cooley), successful Senate candidacy (Brownback), and 12 defeats, the 105th Congress will welcome back 59 of the 74 first-term Republicans (80%). This group survived at a higher rate than the 1980 class and can

look forward to an off-year election that will favor their party. More importantly, however, the Class of 1994 has benefited from committee appointments that will cement their power for years to come. In the 105th Congress, 16 of the 1994 Republican freshmen (27%) will hold assignments on the traditional power committees of Appropriations, Ways and Means, and Rules. In the modern (postwar) House, no other class has received as many power committee slots, even after accumulating more seniority. In comparison, after three terms the classes of 1948, 1958, 1964, and 1974 had won four, ten, seven, and 15 such assignments, respectively.

Most notable in these committee assignments is the willingness — even preference — of House Republicans to give important seats to electorally marginal members. For example, none of the four new Republican members (two 1994 freshmen, two 1996 newcomers) of Ways and Means received more than 52 percent of the vote in 1996. Such an appointment pattern reflects the dual anticipation that the com-

*Continued on pg 14*

# The 1996 Senate Elections: Open Seats and the Geezer Repeats

Ronald Keith Gaddie, The University of Oklahoma

The outcome of the contest for control of the U.S. Senate was never in much doubt. Vulnerable Republican incumbents such as Larry Pressler and Jesse Helms were balanced by the retirement of four senior Democrats in the South. While this election seems anti-climactic — a net swing of two seats, and only one incumbent defeat — there are several elements of the 1996 Senate elections that merit closer examination. This brief essay discusses two elements of the 1996 Senate elections — open seats and the success of an elder southern Republican incumbent — that contributed to the maintenance of the GOP majority.

## Open Seats

*"Democratic retirements . . . are the chief stumbling block to the party's winning back the Senate," Robert Balkin, The Washington Post, October 28*

Open seats are the most common avenue for electoral change. Since 1968, 98 senators have been elected through open seats, compared to 81 incumbents who were defeated in either primaries (17) or general elections (64). Although partisan change is more likely to occur through incumbent defeats, the current GOP majority is built on the switch of six Democratic open seats in 1994. While only one incumbent lost in 1996, dramatic change was afoot in the Senate, where fourteen senators (eight Democrats and six Republicans) opted to retire, thereby creating a post-war record number of open seats.

**Table 1: Open Seats and Party Switches, 1968-1996**

Triplet	Open	$\Delta$ party	$\Delta$ D to R
1968-72	16	11	7 (63.6)
1974-78	25	15	6 (40)
1980-84	12	7	4 (57.1)
1986-90	15	6	3 (50)
1992-96	30	9	9 (100)
Total	98	48	29 (60.4)

As indicated in Table 1, the trend in seat changes favor the Republicans. Since 1968, about half of open senate seats switched parties. Of those switches, over 60 percent are from Democrat to Republican. If one looks at triplets (sets of three concurrent congressional elections that include all

Senate seats), the only cycle where over half of switches were to the Democrats was 1974-78. For the remaining cycles, two-thirds of the switches that occur are to the GOP, including all nine open seat switches since 1992.

One consequence of incumbent retirement is the "retirement slump" in the general election. In 1996 there was a partisan bias to the slump: the average retirement slump was over 16 points for Democrats, while Republicans experienced an average falloff of about 11 points. The impact of Democratic retirements in the South is the source of the partisan difference. Republicans have long argued that the presence of dominant Democratic incumbents squashed GOP opportunities. When the four southern cases are removed from the calculation, no partisan difference is apparent in the slump. However, the average slump in the four southern seats is over 27 points.

Several explanations of the open seat outcomes in 1996 appears in Table 2. In column I a coattails model of senate elections tests how the two-vote for the senate tracked with the two-party vote for Bob Dole? The senate vote did track with the Dole vote: 62 percent of the variation in the open seat vote is explained by the Dole vote. This result also indicates that in the open seats, the GOP candidates ran ahead of Dole. The slope of the coefficient indicates that Dole only had to carry about 47 percent of the vote in order for a Republican to win the two-party Senate vote; coattails were not a driving force in 1996.

What about other controls, such as candidate quality and campaign finance? Abramowitz and Segal (1992) and Campbell and Sumners (1990) find spending and experience are important in senate elections. When controls for spending (the ratio of Republican to Democratic dollars) and experience (net advantage on the Krasno-Green Index) are introduced (column II), no significant impact is observed. House members seeking the Senate nonetheless performed exceptionally well in 1996: seven won open seats, and one (Bob Torricelli) defeated a House colleague (Dick Zimmer) for the New Jersey seat.

An improvement in the model occurs when controls are introduced for the normal vote trends (the average of the two-party vote over three elections) and the South (1 if a southern state). These variables (column III) also heighten the importance of the Dole campaign to GOP

prospects in open seats. A stronger Dole performance would have benefited Republicans, especially outside the South. In the South, realigning trends took hold, and the absence of Democratic incumbents unleashed in the South. Republicans ran eight points better in the South than elsewhere.

The variable that best explained the outcome of senate elections was the magnitude and direction of the gender gap (columns IV and V). Drawing on state-by-state exit poll data from CNN and PoliticsNow, the magnitude of the partisan gap can be estimated. The regression results indicate that the gender gap controls overwhelm all other indicators, including the Dole vote, and these controls provide the best explanation for the outcome of senate open seats. The driving force behind senate elections is the partisan gap among women: the gap among women alone explains 75 percent of the variance in the vote, while the male partisan gap explains 55 percent; together these variables explain 83 percent of the variance. The slope of the female partisan gap is twice that of the male partisan gap, indicating that the GOP essentially lived or died in open senate races based on their ability to attract female voters.

## "The Sunshine Boys"

Despite the retirement of several senior senators in both parties, the oldest senator sought reelection: 93-year old J. Strom Thurmond. While Thurmond was returned to office with a majority, his was one of the closest races in the South or involving an incumbent (Wyman, 1996). This was the first election in Thurmond's senate career where his popular support fell below 55 percent.

Polls commissioned by Thurmond indicated that the voters of South Carolina preferred that he not seek another term in office (Ayers, 1996). Trial heats conducted throughout the summer showed Thurmond running ahead of all of his potential opponents, but with the expressed support of less than half of the voters surveyed (Wyman, 1996). In exit polls conducted for CNN, 31 percent of South Carolina voters who had reservations about Thurmond's age nonetheless chose to reelect him (CNN, 1996). Thurmond's reelection margin (53-44, or

54.6 percent of the two-party vote) illustrates the lack of enthusiasm for his bid.

Thurmond's reelection was dependent on the support he garnered from black voters. The failed Democratic primary candidate, Cecil Williams, an African-American minister, endorsed Thurmond over Democratic nominee Elliott Close. Exit polls indicate that Thurmond garnered 21 percent of the black vote (CNN, 1996). If one extrapolates from these data, based on 25 percent of all turnout being black, it appears that about 5.3 percent of the total vote cast on November 5 were black ballots for Strom Thurmond. This figure represents the difference between Thurmond's vote share and his receiving less than a majority. Had those ballots been cast for his opponent, Thurmond may have found himself retired to Edgefield County to await the result of the next Ms. South Carolina pageant.

There are lessons for Republicans and Democrats from the close call of this Republican icon. For Republicans, it is worth noting that while the South is realigned to the GOP, realignment plus incumbency is not sufficient to ensure electoral security. Despite his status as an icon, Thurmond received less white support than any GOP incumbent in the South. Other factors extended beyond the racial basis of the southern realignment, and those factors served as a countervailing force to the Republican electoral tide. For Democrats, the lesson is simple: don't take black ballots for granted. If the black voters had supported Republican candidates in Louisiana and Georgia at the levels observed in South Carolina, the GOP would likely have gained those seats. Conversely, more traditionally-Democratic voting by blacks might have toppled Thurmond.

#### A More Partisan Senate?

Conservative icons such as Thurmond will continue in office, but the new senate will make them appear more mainstream, as even more ideological freshmen senators enter the chamber. The 1996 Senate elections continued the obliteration of the moderate middle in the U.S. Senate. The four retiring southern Democrats — Nunn, Heflin, Johnston, and Pryor — were replaced by two Democrats and two Republicans, of whom only Max Cleland (D-GA) has centrist bona fides.

Of the eight House members who advanced to the Senate, only one had an ADA score between 25 and 75 — Johnson (D-SD) — who was also the only incoming senator

to vote with the Contract with America more than 25 percent of the time but less than 93 percent of the time. All other former House members entering the Senate were lockstep in support of or in opposition to the 1994 Republican agenda.

Grant's (1996) examination of Senate primary candidates in open seats indicated that

has indicated he will not be a candidate for governor, Wendell Ford (KY), John Glenn (OH), Fritz Hollings (SC), and Dale Bumpers (AR) are in their 70s and they are all likely to step aside.

If the Democrats named above retire, three centrist southern Democrats will remain in the Senate: Graham, John Breaux (LA) and Charles Robb (VA); the ideological disposition of freshman Max Cleland (GA) is centrist, while Mary Landrieu (LA) has leftward leanings. The partisan trends and the historic performance of the president's party at the second midterm indicate that seats left open by Democrats in 1998 stand a good chance of switching to the GOP column. The outcome of the 1998 election will reinforce the conservative, Republican majority.

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Table 2: Explaining the Vote in Open Seats

Variables	I	II	III	IV	V
Constant	22.43	25.87	15.39	38.61	50
Dole Vote	.60*	.48*	.45*	0.03	
Spending Ratio		0.52			
Experience Advantage		1.76			
Normal Vote Trend			.26*		
South			8.42*		
Female Partisan Gap				.40*	.42*
Male Partisan Gap				.22*	.23*
Adjusted-R <sup>2</sup>	0.62	0.61	0.76	0.82	0.83
N=14, *p<.01					

this extremism permeates the freshman class. Extreme candidates were more likely to prevail over moderates in the open seat primaries; an examination of his categories of ideology for the party nominees indicates that moderate candidates did not do well against the extremists, and that often voter choices were clearly defined in terms of the ideology of the candidates (see also Todd and Schneider, 1996).

#### Toward 1998: Sitting in the Catbird Seat

The GOP sits in an enviable position with regard to the Senate. In a thirteen state South (the eleven secession states plus Kentucky and Oklahoma), Republicans hold 18 of 26 senate seats; if the retirement trend proceeds as expected, and partisan trends are unabated, the GOP could hold a 21-seat conservative base among the 26 southern senate seats. This would mean that the GOP would only have to hold 30 of the 74 northern seats to preserve a majority in the chamber. By comparison, Democrats would have to win over 60 percent of non-southern seats to regain the chamber. In 1998 this would mean picking up five current GOP seats, in addition to holding the 18 currently-Democratic seats. Such a pickup by the incumbent president's party at the midterm has occurred on one other occasion — 1934 — and back then realigning trends favored the Democrats.

Looking toward 1998, the prospects are not good for the Democrats. More Democratic (18) than Republican (16) seats are up, and the exodus of moderate Democrats is poised to continue. While Democrat Bob Graham (FL)

# The South in the House, Version '96

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In 1996, as during most of its history, the South sailed against the general electoral tide. As Democrats gained ten seats in the rest of the nation, the South saw the GOP win five open seats which more than offset the defeat of three flawed freshmen.

The net gain of two in the region paled against the shift of nine seats to the GOP in 1992 and 16 two years later. Nonetheless, GOP advances were not inconsequential in light of the national pattern and, when coupled with Republican gains in the US Senate and state legislatures, show that the GOP tide continues to rise in what for generations was a placid Democratic inland sea.

While the partisan drift of the South (in House, Senate and presidential voting) was opposite that of the North, pervasive incumbent success marked both regions. That incumbents won reelection is not surprising, except that in four southern states redistricting was widely thought to have endangered some members. Yet the only casualty in a redrawn district, Texan Steve Stockman (R), was already endangered and his district changed little in the court's reconfiguration.

## Party

The 1990s have brought unprecedented success to the GOP. At the beginning of the decade, Republicans held about a third of the region's seats in both chambers (Aistrup 1996). In the new Congress, Republicans command 57 percent of the House seats from the 11 southern states with majorities in the Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee delegations. Democrats have majorities in Texas and Virginia while the North Carolina and Arkansas delegations are evenly divided. Before 1992, Republicans constituted a majority only in Florida and held half Louisiana's seats.

Republicans have been especially successful in the Deep South where they now control almost 70 percent of the seats. Republicans fill all but 11 of 36 seats apportioned to Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina and of those, only four are filled by whites. Across the entire South, which for decades sent more than 100 white Democrats to the House, only 19 experienced white, non-Hispanic

Democrats took the oath on January 3, 1997.

Despite continued erosion of their once impregnable position, Democrats can take some heart from successfully defending most of the 18 seats vacated by members of their party. Key to success was the nomination of conservatives and moderates who convinced voters that they were not simply drawing members of the northern, liberal wing of the party (see, e.g., Black and Black 1986). The open seats won by Republicans included four of five vacated districts won by George Bush in 1992 (Bullock 1996). Partisan realignment in these districts may have advanced so far that only the retiring incumbent could stand against it.

## Race

White Democrats have been replaced not just by Republicans but also by African Americans of their own party. Affirmative action gerrymandering demanded by the Department of Justice added 13 new majority black districts to the four that already existed. Beginning in 1995 in *Miller v. Johnson*, courts found violations of the Equal Protection Clause in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas districts drawn predominantly on the basis of race. In correcting the constitutional violation, six districts ceased to have black majorities. An attorney with the ACLU, which worked to insure that Georgia had three majority black districts, lamented, "I really fear that this court is sending us back to the dark days of the 19th century" (Matthews 1995). Some white Democrats hoped that their party would regain seats in districts that had fallen to Republicans earlier in the decade but now had larger concentrations of black voters. When the returns were counted, neither the fears of African Americans nor the hopes of white Democrats had been realized.

Of the African Americans whose districts were whitened, all but Louisiana's Cleo Fields sought reelection and all five who ran succeeded. Two members performed better in the new districts than they had in the older, blacker ones. North Florida's Corine Brown saw her vote share break 60 percent for the first time and, despite the free-for-all special elections held in 13 Texas districts, Sheila Jackson Lee boosted her percentage four points to 77.

Excepting Fields, Georgians Cynthia McKinney and Sanford Bishop had the most changed districts. McKinney had represented

a 63 percent black district that, like General Sherman's march, went from Atlanta to Savannah. When her 260-mile long district was dismembered, she opted to run in district 4 that the 1990 census showed to be 37 percent black. In district 2, Bishop's African-American percentage dropped from 57 to 39 as the boundaries were recast to follow county lines and the finger that twisted into Macon was amputated.

The reconfiguration forced McKinney and Bishop to spend more money, campaign more aggressively, and in Bishop's case, move to a new address. Challengers in both parties believed the rhetoric — some of it from McKinney — and sought to take advantage of what they believed to be hopeless situations for the incumbents.

The incumbents easily overcame primary challenges as McKinney took 67 percent of the vote in defeating three white challengers, including the 1994 Democratic nominee in the district and a two-term state senator who had represented a majority-black district. Bishop bested two opponents with 59 percent of the vote.

Even after she won renomination without a runoff, many thought McKinney to be in trouble since she managed only 46 percent of the combined Democratic and Republican votes cast in the primary. Moreover, her very liberal voting record had ADA, ACLU and COPE scores about 25 points higher than Bishop's (Barone and Ujifusa 1995) and she had been an outspoken supporter of the president.

To win in November, McKinney needed white votes and one source might have been the district's Jewish population which is high for the South, constituting somewhere around six percent of the electorate. When McKinney's opponent criticized her for voting against a motion sponsored by Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) to sanction the anti-Semitic comments of one of Louis Farrakhan's lieutenants, McKinney's father denounced the challenger as a "racist Jew," further alienating a possible source of white support. The tumultuous campaign, coupled with the challenger's ability to raise funds to publicize his moderate agenda (pro-choice and gun control), led *Congressional Quarterly* to rate this contest a toss-up (Kalb 1996) while the *Southern Political Report* gave

McKinney a slight lead (Wyman 1996).

The outcome was not close. To near-unanimous black support, McKinney added almost 30 percent of the white vote for a 58 vote share, equalling Newt Gingrich's victory margin in a neighboring district. McKinney was helped by racial transition underway in DeKalb County, where the great bulk of her constituents lived and implementation of the Motor Voter Law which resulted in African Americans comprising 41 percent of the registrants.

In rural, southwest Georgia, Bishop had advantages stemming from his support of the economically-important peanut crop as a member of the Agriculture Committee. His moderate record — the Conservative Coalition index showed him to be the most conservative black Democrat — and biracial appeals enabled Bishop to survive in one of the racially tenuous portions of the state. Bishop took 36 percent of the white vote on his way to a 54 percent majority, confirming his belief that "Cotton, peanuts and soybeans are all more important than my race" (Grann 1996).

The standards for racially polarized voting set forth by the Supreme Court in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986), the first case to interpret Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act (the provision that gave rise to recent racial gerrymandering), have been interpreted by some to mean that jurisdictions are vulnerable whenever minority-preferred candidates poll a majority of the black, but not the white, vote. From that perspective, the vote for McKinney and Bishop was racially polarized. It is useful to put those vote shares in perspective. Exit polls show Bill Clinton supported by only 29 percent of Georgia's whites in 1996 while Max Cleland attracted 37 percent white support in becoming Sam Nunn's successor. White Democratic nominees in congressional districts 8 and 10, two of the districts that inherited substantial numbers of African Americans excised from districts 2 and 4, attracted no more than a third of the white vote. Recent statewide Democrats have consistently failed to get the bulk of the white vote when facing competitive Republican nominees (Bullock and Furr 1994). In 1994, white Democratic congressional nominees (only one of whom won) averaged 35 percent of the white vote. The bottom line is that the two black, congressional Democrats did as well as white Democrats now do in Georgia suggesting that for white voters, party is more important than candidate's race.

Rather than interpret her victory as evidence that African Americans can win in majority white districts, McKinney asserted

that she triumphed only because of incumbency and that a majority-black district is essential to win the initial election. Testing her proposition must await a changing of the guard, but is her argument reasonable?

There is little debate that incumbents are advantaged and African Americans tend to attract more white voters as incumbents (Bullock 1984). It is not clear, however, that blacks would be unable to win in the five reconfigured districts. The first hurdle to election is to win nomination. As growing shares of white southerners vote in GOP primaries, black voters can dominate Democratic primaries in some majority white districts as occurred when McKinney was renominated in 1996.

African Americans who often get near-unanimous black support in the general election could win these districts with less than 30 percent of the white vote, a threshold that is increasingly feasible. When running for open seats in 1992, McKinney and Bishop each polled approximately 30 percent of the white vote and black candidates seeking the Florida seat ultimately won by Corrine Brown took between 20 and 29 percent of the non-black vote (Lichtman 1996; Maggiotto 1996). Therefore it is not unreasonable to expect that black non-incumbents could win in the districts crafted in the latest round of redistricting.

#### Summary

Although there is still some bleeding, southern Democrats are no longer hemorrhaging. In 1996, Republicans nibble away at what remains of white Democratic strength but were denied major gains as the South's traditional party often nominated moderates, or even conservatives. Even as the region's congressional preference becomes increasingly Republican, five African Americans survived in majority-white districts by running about as well among white voters as white Democratic nominees do.

#### Notes

1. In addition to the four districts that gave the pluralities to Bush in 1992 (Bullock 1996), the area in Texas 5, as redrawn in August 1996, gave Bush a narrow plurality.
2. District 18 in Houston had been held by an African American since 1972 but lacked a black majority until redrawn in the 1980s.
3. North Carolina's 12<sup>th</sup> district was also struck down in June 1996 but the trial court delayed the drawing of new districts until after the November elections.
4. In district 8 the Democrat got about 34 percent of the white vote while the white

Democrat in district 10 took 30 percent of the white vote.

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# The More Things Change...: Republican Realignment in the Mountain West

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In the 1970s and 1980s political analysts discussed the potential for a long-term Republican realignment. Attention was generally focused, and with good cause, on the changing dynamics of elections in the once most Democratic region of the country, the South.<sup>1</sup> As the Southern movement to the Republican Party was progressing, however, a quiet revolution had already occurred in the less-populated states of the Mountain West: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming.

The Mountain West was once the second most Democratic region in the country, with Republicans winning only one-third of all House elections from 1932 to 1965.<sup>2</sup> In 1984, the year of Ronald Reagan's landslide reelection victory, it was clearly the most Republican, as Republicans captured 70.8%, or 17 of the region's 24 House seats (29% above the national proportion), held 68.9%, or 11 of 16 Senate seats (15.9% above), and won 66.1% of the presidential vote (7.3% above). The movement to the Republicans was slow, characteristic of what political analysts call a secular, creeping, or rolling realignment. The causes were many: a change in social class identification, with a parallel change to more conservative attitudes about welfare; economic diversification with less dependence upon national government revenues; an increasing frustration with national public land policies; a reaction to Democratic social policies; along with a strategic application of Republican Party resources to open House and incumbent Senate seats (Galderisi et al. 1987; Lyons 1987). The Mountain West was clearly "Reagan country." The president's popular support in each of the region's states exceeded the national proportion in 1984, with Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming providing three of his top four victories. Only in preserving their hold on the region's governorships (7 of 8 after the 1984 elections, all 8 before) did the Democrats show any sign of continuing strength (perhaps aided by the

fact that only two governorships are decided in presidential election years).

Recent studies of regional demographic trends indicate the continuation of Republican dominance. "People moving here are largely conservative; many are fleeing what they consider ill-conceived liberal government on ei-

West Republican realignment? Perhaps. With little variation, the Republicans have maintained their virtual lock on the state legislatures (controlling 13 of 16 chambers). They now reside in 6 of the 8 governor's mansions—almost a complete reversal of their 1984 fortunes.<sup>4</sup> And history dictates that the

**Republicans in the Mountain West: House Results, 1984-1996**

	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996
% seats	70.8%	62.5%	62.5%	54.2%	54.2%	75.0%	83.3%
% votes	61.4%	57.1%	55.6%	52.8%	50.3%	58.1%	56.2%
ave. dist. vote %	60.7%	56.5%	55.0%	52.6%	49.9%	58.1%	55.3%
ave. win. vote %	71.3%	66.9%	68.6%	66.7%	60.2%	64.6%	59.4%
natl. % vote	47.0%	44.6%	45.5%	45.0%	45.6%	52.4%	49.0%

Republicans should increase their regional margins of victory, if not their numbers in the 1998 midterm House elections.

The issue of realignment in

ther coast; and they either adopt or bring with them the kind of independent streak that has always dominated Western political thinking." (Kenworthy 1996). Recent electoral trends seem to verify this analysis. After the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans controlled 18 of the 24 House seats and 11 of the 16 Senate seats (respectively, 21.9% and 16.8% above the national figures).

In 1996, the Republican Revolution of 1994 continued seemingly unabated. The Republicans won two more U.S. House seats (20 of 24, or 83.3%) and maintained their overwhelming control of the Senate delegation (12 of 16, or 75%).<sup>3</sup> All 15 Republicans who ran for House reelection were victorious, including three freshman who were targeted by the Democratic Party (as well as labor and environmental organizations) for defeat, and the Republicans held on to their two open seats. Democrats were less fortunate in the six seats they held. Democratic incumbents were reelected in three districts, but Bill Orton lost his tenuous hold on Utah's heavily-Republican third district as he faced a credible and well-financed challenger for the first time (not to mention a pre-election monument designation in his district by the president). They also lost one of their two open seats (Montana), held by Pat Williams since the consolidation of that state's 2 districts after reapportionment. The Senate races were a draw. All 3 incumbents, including 2 Republicans, were reelected (although with lowered electoral margins) and the Republicans held the seats vacated in Colorado and Wyoming.

Is this a solidification of the Mountain

region is however not fully resolved. Although the size of the Republican House delegation is larger than it was in 1984, the comparative depth of Republican support is smaller. In 1984, Republican House candidates won 61.4% of the regional vote (compared to 47% nationally), with mean averages of 60.7% of the vote in each of the 24 districts in which they ran and 71.3% in the 17 districts they won. In 1996, Republican candidates still managed to do better here than the country as a whole (and better than they did from 1988-1992), but they won only 56.2% of the regional vote, with district averages of 55.3% and 59.4%, respectively. Only one candidate surpassed the average 1984 victory level. Compared to 1984, or any year since, the party is doing more with less: the difference between the proportion of seats won and votes won now stands at over 27%.<sup>5</sup>

Voting patterns in the region for national office are highly volatile. Aggregate Republican presidential strength has varied by as much as 28% since 1984. Independent and third party presidential support has been as high as 25.6%. The Republican proportion of the House vote has varied by as much as 11.1%, the proportion of House seats by as much as 29.1%. As elsewhere, more Republican seats are being won at the margins, where minor shifts in demography, mobilization, candidate quality, and local and national trends can spell success or defeat for either party's candidates. For example, a last minute campaign warning Republican vot-

*Continued on pg 15*

# The 1996 Minnesota Senate Race: How to Win An Unpopularity Contest

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The 1996 Minnesota Senate election promised to be a sharply contested affair, and in this respect at least, it did not disappoint. The contest pitched the most liberal Senate incumbent seeking reelection in 1996, Paul Wellstone, against the man he had unseated six years earlier, Rudy Boschwitz. Both candidates suffered from serious image problems with large segments of the electorate; the least unpopular would win. All of the ingredients for a competitive race were present: a formidable challenger with substantial campaign resources, an incumbent with a conspicuous and controversial record, and both campaigns' use of skilled Washington operatives and extensive campaign commercials (Jacobson, 1997, pp. 78-79).

Paul Wellstone had never achieved high popularity as a Senate incumbent. His first year in office involved several highly publicized blunders. Wellstone had former vice-president Walter Mondale escort him to his swearing-in, snubbing the tradition that called for his senior colleague from Minnesota, Republican David Durenberger, to accompany him. Wellstone held an ill-advised press conference at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, infuriating veterans' groups. He hectorated President Bush about the Gulf War during a White House reception. Wellstone's vote against the Gulf War further damaged his popularity in Minnesota. By the Spring of 1991, Wellstone's behavior convinced 51 percent of respondents in a MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE poll to disapprove of his performance as a Senator (Congressional Quarterly, 1991, p. 783).

From this low point, Paul Wellstone began to learn and improve on the job. Always an enthusiastic campaigner, he returned home frequently to pursue the retail politics he loved. Over the remainder of his Senate term, he stood out as an energetic defender of government benefits for Minnesotans. He became an important player in the ill-starred health care reform effort of 1993-94, championing a Canadian-style single payer system. Veterans and farm groups found him to be their fiscal friend. The arrival of a Republican Congress in 1994 further aided his efforts to portray himself as a scrappy fighter for the average

person against the Republican "extremist" budget cutters in Washington. By 1996, just over 50 percent of Minnesotans approved of Wellstone's job performance — a definite improvement, but a weak enough showing to mark him as electorally vulnerable (Daves, 1996, p. 6).

Usually reelection contests center on the record of the incumbent. In 1996, Minnesotans had the choice between two incumbents. Rudy Boschwitz made clear early on his intent to run for the seat again. He had passed up the 1994 race, won by Republican Rod Grams, claiming that he was "not ready" to return to politics yet. Less charitable observers saw a strong desire by Boschwitz to "get even" with the upstart professor who had unseated him.

If Wellstone was less than overwhelmingly popular by 1996, so was Rudy Boschwitz. A major reason lay in how Boschwitz lost the 1990 Senate race. Boschwitz held a lead in the high single digits on the Friday before the Tuesday election. Over the weekend, a letter Boschwitz had written to Jewish supporters in the state became public. The letter charged that Wellstone had married a Christian and had raised his children as "nonJews." In a state with a tiny Jewish population, this did not smack of religious tolerance. Tracking polls showed Wellstone with his first lead of the election on Monday night, and he won by just over one percent of the vote in Tuesday. If Boschwitz was to regain his seat, he confronted an important image-repair project first.

Boschwitz's presence in the primary field prevented any other major candidates from entering. Boschwitz managed to block the endorsement of Bert McKasy, a former state commerce commissioner favored by the party's right wing, at the state convention. McKasy withdrew shortly afterwards, and Boschwitz cruised to victory with 81 percent of the vote in the early September primary.

In retrospect, primary night was the Boschwitz campaign's high water mark. A poll released that night showed he was viewed more positively than Wellstone and locked in a 43-42 dead heat with the incumbent (Smith, 1996A). This was a remarkable showing for Boschwitz, given the Minnesota political environment of 1996. The state is more liberal than most. Clinton's job approval consistently rated 10 percent higher than his national average, and George Bush's 10 percent lower. About

10 percent fewer supported the Gulf War in Minnesota than did nationwide. The Dole campaign proved dead-on-arrival in the state. Clinton posted leads over Dole in the fifteen to thirty point range throughout the fall. The Minnesota economy was booming, with unemployment at record lows, usually good news for incumbents.

So how did Boschwitz get close by early September? Since May, the National Republican Senatorial Committee had barraged the state with negative tv and radio spots about Wellstone's record. The spots involved their share of distortions and employed harsh language, terming Wellstone "unbelievably" and "embarrassingly" liberal and "stuck in the sixties, decades out of touch." By early September, this advertising had driven up Wellstone's negatives (Smith, 1996A). The Senator's vote against welfare reform also found its way into the attack ad mix. At one point, the NRSC ran an ad praising Clinton for signing the bill and faulting Wellstone for opposing it.

The Wellstone campaign had responded to this with a defensive crouch. Though it had run some positive ads, the airwaves for months had been dominated by anti-Wellstone messages.

The Senator was still stuck in the Senate, not able to flex his rhetoric on the hustings yet. In early debates between the candidates, Wellstone seemed cranky and out-of-sorts, while Boschwitz, though less rhetorically impressive, seemed more relaxed.

The situation trended steadily in Wellstone's favor during the last six weeks of the campaign. Several reasons account for this. The most obvious reason lay in the mistakes of the Boschwitz campaign. Under the tutelage of Republican campaign guru Arthur Finkelstein, the campaign continued to air primarily negative ads, while the NRSC also churned out attack spots. The result was the highest proportion of negative advertising that any Senate campaign had ever placed before the Minnesota electorate.

By mid-October, Minnesotans had enough. A STAR TRIBUNE poll revealed that a large majority of respondents had seen or heard ads for the Senate campaign. Of those who had encountered any cam-

paigned advertising, 55 percent said it made them more likely to vote for Wellstone, while only 30 were more likely to vote for Boschwitz (Baden, 1996). A large majority of voters believed that the negative ads aimed at Wellstone sought to "attack" him, not "explain his record." Wellstone now led the race by nine points, 47 percent to 38 percent (Baden, 1996).

The Boschwitz ads failed because their tone obstructed their substantive message. One ad featured a pot-bellied cartoon Wellstone waving a "liberal" sign as various of his Senate votes were mentioned. Another showed bedraggled sixties leftovers meeting in convention to induct Wellstone into the "1967 liberal hall of fame." The harsh tone of these ads could only appeal to those already opposed to Wellstone and who took umbrage at the sixties and his liberalism. These voters were already in Boschwitz's pocket. The ads instead needed to explain to voters with reservations about Wellstone just what Boschwitz would do for them.

Boschwitz apparently did not think his image needed repair, but given the circumstances surrounding his defeat in 1990, he was wrong. In the mid-October poll, only half his voters were voting FOR him while half were voting AGAINST Wellstone. The challenger had provided few reasons thus far for an affirmative vote for him. The Boschwitz campaign began to run more positive ads after mid-October, but the harsh attack ads also continued to air.

The Wellstone campaign responded well to the challenge of mid-September. First, the campaign hired Washington consultant Mandy Grunwald (of Clinton '92 fame) to reshape their advertising strategy. Grunwald ran a mix of positive ads and what columnist Joe Klein has termed "empathetic negative" spots (Klein, 1996). A good example of the latter was a spot focusing on domestic violence. It began with Wellstone talking with quiet passion about the scourge of domestic violence and how he gave money from his salary to fight it. Then, viewers were notified that Rudy Boschwitz voted to increase his own pay and had stated that \$96,000 wasn't a lot to live on. Then back to Wellstone who explains that his entire pay increase goes to fight domestic violence. The Clinton campaign used this empathetic positive-negative-empathetic positive approach against Dole with devastating effect. The targets of these Wellstone spots were female voters who would respond to empathetic messages but not to the harsh attacks of the anti-Wellstone forces. By early November, Wellstone led by four points among male voters, but by 21 points

among female voters (Smith, 1996B).

Wellstone got a lift from a visit by the President a week before the election. Boschwitz was reduced to claiming that on many issues, such as GATT, NAFTA, welfare reform and the Freedom to Farm Act, he agreed with Clinton but Wellstone did not. Meanwhile, Clinton was rhetorically embracing Wellstone before a large crowd at the Target Center in Minneapolis. The Senator had found his campaign voice again and proved to be a happy and energetic warrior on the campaign trail. The crankiness of September had vanished. The Wellstone campaign also devoted considerable resources from its substantial \$7 million campaign war chest to voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts.

The Boschwitz campaign in contrast raised about \$5 billion and spent very little on such efforts. Clearly behind going into the final weekend, the campaign attempted a high-risk attack on Wellstone's character, reminiscent of the "Jewish letter" of 1990. Boschwitz appeared at a press conference with several steelworkers who claimed that Wellstone had refused to respond to their questions about whether he had participated in a flag burning in the 1960s. One steelworker claimed that a local official that he would not name had told him that Wellstone had admitted to burning the flag. Based on this hearsay "evidence," Boschwitz called for the Senator to answer the questions about flag-burning. The Boschwitz campaign was forced quickly to back away from this nasty and desperate tactic. The logic behind the attack was mystifying. Flag burning was hardly a major issue for most Minnesotans, and the absence of evidence subjected Boschwitz to harsh treatment from the state media. The *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* headline the next day read "Boschwitz Blunder, Wellstone Windfall" (Ragsdale, Salisbury and Coffman, 1996).

On November 5, Wellstone bested Boschwitz by 50-41 percent. Dean Barkley, the Reform Party candidate gained 7 percent of the vote. The Senator maintained the same percentage he won in 1990; Boschwitz had slipped back. Why? Jon Lerner, campaign manager for Boschwitz, correctly claimed that the environment was "bad" for Minnesota Republicans in 1996. Clinton won the state by sixteen points (51% to 35%) and all incumbent Democratic Representatives won reelection handily. Still, the Boschwitz campaign failed to make the most of their opportunity, while the Wellstone campaign capitalized on the factors working for them in 1996.

Boschwitz's support never rose above 42 percent in any poll from July to November, while Wellstone's trended up to 50 percent. Why? The Wellstone camp effectively deployed its candidate and advertising in Octo-

ber and tied the Senator to a popular president a week before the balloting. The Boschwitz effort continued negative ads beyond the point at which they became counterproductive and had to fight to keep the unpopular Newt Gingrich out of the State in October. In the end, Rudy Boschwitz failed to explain to voters why they should support him. Wellstone had the easier sale to make in Minnesota in 1996, but he also did a better job of making the sale.

Does the 1996 Minnesota Senate race demonstrate a new impotence for negative ads? Hardly. Wellstone and other candidates used negative themes in their ads to great effect in the state in 1996. But the Boschwitz failure does suggest the limits of negative ads. If your candidate is well known and not that well liked, simply going negative on a comparably well known and disliked opponent isn't enough. Your candidate must also appear a more desirable alternative. The Boschwitz campaign was too negative, too much of the time, earning him an unwanted first place in Minnesota's unpopularity contest.

#### Notes

1. Polls throughout the campaign showed Barkley in single digits. He attacked Wellstone for his fiscal indiscipline and Boschwitz for his endorsement of Dole's tax cuts. In the debates in which he participated, Barkley fared well – perhaps because neither of the other candidates attacked him. Polls during the campaign could not reveal whether Barkley took more votes from Boschwitz or Wellstone.

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Continued on pg 15

## Congressional Elections

### Continued from pg. 4

Congress. Regardless of whether many voters deliberately balanced their vote for Clinton with one for a Republican congressional candidate, the public was pleased with the final equilibrium. A majority of respondents to a Pew Research poll conducted immediately after the election said they were happy with Clinton's reelection (53 percent, compared to 42 percent who said they were unhappy), but an even larger majority—65 percent—said they were happy that the Republicans had retained control of Congress (only 27 percent were unhappy)

### 1998 and Beyond

The 1996 elections leave no doubt that the balance of competition for congressional seats has shifted sharply toward the Republicans in the 1990s. The narrow House majority now held by the Republicans approximates their current "natural" strength in House elections and constitutes a decisive break from the solid Democratic majorities of the previous four decades. The House, like the Senate, is now up for grabs by either party, though Republicans probably enjoy a small advantage overall in both

The immediate future continues to look promising to congressional Republicans. The most regular occurrence in American electoral history is the president's party's

loss of House seats in midterm elections, so the Republicans can count on strengthening their grip on the House in 1998. And although the out-party does not invariably pick up Senate seats, the a review of the lineup of seats up for election in 1998 suggests that Republican opportunities for gain outnumber those of Democrats. Speculating beyond 1998 is riskier - no one who has witnessed the reversals of fortune besetting George Bush, Bill Clinton, or the congressional Republicans in recent years should feel confident about any prediction—but if our past experience with electoral politics under divided government is any guide, the Democrats will have a very difficult time winning control of Congress as long as a Democrat sits in the White House. Their best opportunity will come if and when voters become disenchanted with the next Republican administration.

### Notes

- 1 According to a national exit poll, those voters who made their decision in the last few days before the election went for Dole over Clinton, 40 percent to 35 percent. See the *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 1996, p. A22.
- 2 Reported in *Hotline*, 15 November 1996.

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## 104th Republicans

### continued from pg. 6

mittee seats will enhance the reelection chances of members while not moderating their voting patterns significantly. As one Republican staffer noted: "Democrats historically have rewarded their loyal members. Republicans are much more of a team..." (Cohen, 1996). How much of a team remains to be seen, but there is little question that the Republican Class of 1994 has not only survived but will play a major congressional role for years to come.

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The More Things Change...

continued from pg. 11

ers of the hazards of providing Bill Clinton (projected as the national winner long before election day) with a Democratic House (which was still in question) may have helped regional Republican candidates, particularly targeted freshman like Idaho's Helen Chenoweth, in their victories, and may have assisted in the defeat of Utah's Orton—a strange case of some voters supporting divided government by voting a straight-party ticket.

Marginality, as well as electoral volatility, becomes even more pronounced as voting turnout decreases. Diminished voting turnout limits the very notion of electoral, if not congressional, realignment itself. Preliminary estimates indicate that although turnout in the Mountain West continued to run above the dismal 1996 national performance, the regional drop in turnout from 1992 was precipitous, with some states suffering double-digit declines.

The key to the region's future perhaps lies in which party can most attract a growing Hispanic population, which in 1996 reacted negatively to the Republican Party's strong anti-immigrant stand, and which, in this region as well as others, increased its support for Democratic candidates. Bill Clinton won three (Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada) of the four states with the highest proportion of voters of Hispanic-origin (Arizona voting Democratic for the first time since 1948), and barely lost the fourth (Colorado). Compared to 1994, the Republican proportion of the U.S. House vote declined in 70.6% of these four states' districts, while it increased in 71.4% of the districts in Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming.<sup>6</sup>

Whether this demographic and geographic split of the Mountain West continues is in question. For now, the region that was far ahead in its movement to national, conservative Republican politics seems to be catching up to the volatile, competitive, low-turnout politics of the rest of the nation, even as it continues to elect overwhelmingly Republican congressional delegations. As its population increases, the political

trends in this region, with 16% of the nation's senators and governors, will gain increasing national importance.

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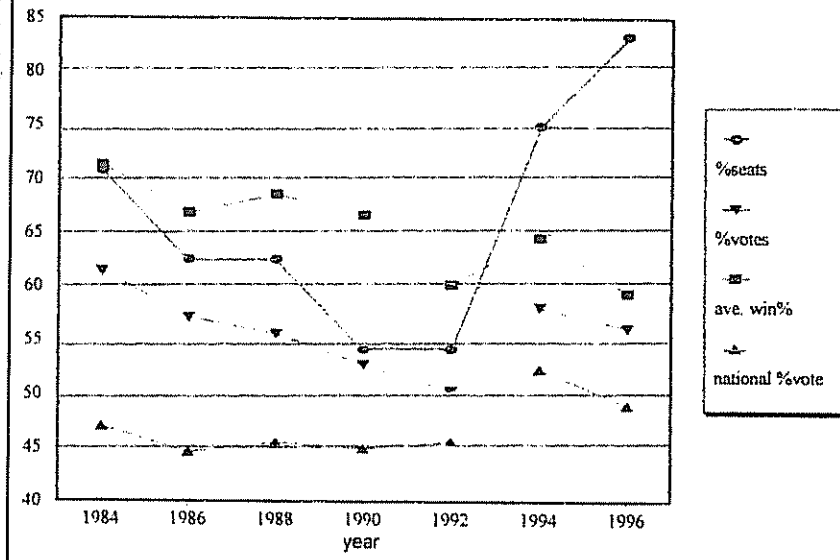
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Notes

1. As examples see Petrocik (1987) and Stanley (1988).

Republicans in the Mountain West House Results. 1984-1996



2. Data for this essay's analyses are taken from Stanley and Niemi (1995). *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections* (1994), annual editions of the *CQ Almanac* (1984-1994), and post-election summaries in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

3. Ben Nighthorse Campbell's 1995 party switch provided this twelfth Senate seat.

4. In the legislatures of Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, Democrats currently provide little more than token opposition. Republican Governors Leavitt (Ut) and Racicot (Mt) won landmark reelection victories, the latter perhaps assisted by the death of his challenger shortly before the election.

5. My limited analysis indicates that this difference cannot be attributed solely to successful partisan gerrymanders.

6. According to ABC News exit polls, Clinton's Hispanic support ran from 66 to 85% in these states. Nationally, Clinton's support is estimated at about 71%, an 11% increase from 1992. National Hispanic support for Democratic House candidates was about 13% higher in 1996 than it was in 1994 (Puente 1996).

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Minnesota Senate Race

continued from pg. 13

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