

Extension of Remarks



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Editor's Introduction

Republican Rule: Some Reflections on a Sea Change

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In the late-1980s and early-1990s I watched, along with the rest of the world, as the Soviet Empire collapsed and disintegrated. My friends who were Soviet specialists roamed the halls muttering to no one in particular and I felt sorry for them; the country that they studied was coming apart at the seams and they would have to rebuild their subfield from the ground up. What a *bummer*.

Who knew that a few years later many of us would be muttering in the halls as the Republican takeover of the House challenged our understanding of congressional elections, and the Republicans sought to reshape the institution. In August of 1994 I had just returned to my teaching post in North Carolina from a very rewarding stint as an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow. I had worked as a policy analyst for the (Majority) Democratic Senate Leadership. I was confident that -- despite President Clinton's sagging approval ratings and the failure of Democrats to pass a health care reform bill -- the Democrats would maintain their healthy majorities in both chambers. So confident was I that when one of my students (a lifelong Democrat) in my Congress class argued that the Republicans would takeover the House in the midterm elections I very nearly publicly mocked him; there was, I said, based on my knowledge of the congressional

elections literature, no reason to believe that was possible. Needless to say my student was right.

Midterm elections are historically difficult for the party of the president; but the 1994 midterm elections combined with a "perfect storm" of other electoral factors to produce the historic takeover. Prior to the 1994 midterms there was an unusually large number of Democratic retirements, especially in the South, that created substantial vulnerability for the party. If those Democrats had not retired and won at the same rate as all Democratic incumbents (about 80% of all Democratic incumbents were reelected that year) in 1994, the Democrats would have maintained a slight majority in the House. Second, newly drawn congressional districts that concentrated Democratic voters in many Southern States resulted in a large number of districts that were more competitive for the Republicans.

While the 1994 midterm elections challenged our understanding of congressional elections the Republican takeover and reforms represented a challenge for congressional studies. Much of what we knew about the House in particular was premised on *Democratic* control of the House. We were confronted with the sad fact that most congressional scholars knew comparatively

little about the House Republican Party. A generation of scholars had largely dismissed study of House Republicans arguing that the Republicans were a “permanent minority” and that, since the House was a majoritarian institution, concentrating on House Democrats was only reasonable.¹ Further, congressional scholars in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s argued, Republicans were probably the same as Democrats; any findings from the study of Democrats would be similarly applicable to Republicans.

This tenth anniversary of Republican Rule in the House provides an opportunity to gauge what, if anything, is different about Republican control of the House (and the Senate). In this issue of *Extension of Remarks* several talented congressional scholars make first assessments of Republican Rule. Don Wolfensberger, a long time Republican Staffer on the House Rules Committee considered the role of Newt Gingrich in shaping the early Republican Revolution, and what the Revolution has become. He suggests that, in some important respects, Republican Rule is not all that different from the Democratic Rule that the Republican insurgents decried. John Baughman likewise argues that important remnants of Democratic patterns remain in the Republican House, though the Republicans have sought some new strategies to cope with their comparatively smaller majorities. Jeff Ladewig and John Bourbeau examine the use of conference committees during the Democratic 98th Congress and the Republican 106th Congress to determine whether the partisan shift has resulted in significant changes in these important – though often ignored – institutional structures. Finally, Nicol Rae considers how the Senate has been impacted by the rising Republican tide in the House.

¹ Connelly and Pitney (1994) are an obvious example of two scholars who did not ignore the existence of the Republican Party in the House, though it is only by the grace of a question mark that the title avoids being a declaratory statement!