

The Republican Revolution: A Junior Qual Proposal

In the months leading up to the 1994 mid-term elections, William F. Connelly, Jr. and John J. Pitney, Jr. speculated that Republicans had a chance at regaining the majority in the House of Representatives after 40 years as the minority party. We know now that the Republicans gained an incredible 52 Congressional seats and 8 seats in the Senate, becoming the majority in both houses of Congress. What was at the root of this speculation? Why wasn't this drastic swing more predictable? Why did it happen in the first place? I intend to explore literature on both the mechanics behind the Republican Revolution's success, and the underlying ideas that made it possible. To further test the durability of the various theories out there, it would also be fruitful to explore how the Republican's majority has been maintained since the 1994 elections.

Newt Gingrich holds much of the credit for sweeping the Republicans into power. The near universal adoption of his "Contract With America" presented a united front against, and a clear distinction from, the Democratic Party. Though this distinction was made, what accounted for its success? It could have been the perception of rampant corruption within the Democratic Party, the general unease of a singular party controlling two branches of government. Perhaps it was a superior grasp on the mechanics of regime change: coherent, positive, empowering rhetoric. Perhaps it was broad issue brush strokes that left the finer details to be filled in by local political leaders. Or maybe the Contract owes its success not to the substance of its pledges, but to the very novelty and freshness of the idea itself. There is a vast wealth of speculation, both theoretical and empirical, to explore.

As is clear nowadays, rampant corruption, vocal opposition and incredible missteps are not alone sufficient for sweeping a new majority into power. To fully understand the causes of the Republican Revolution, it is also necessary to study the ideas that fueled and shaped the mechanics of the Republicans' success. Were the results of 1994's elections merely the realization of a long-term shift towards conservatism? If so, what fueled that shift? Perhaps it was the manifestation of a new class polarization, or changing attitudes towards civil rights. Perhaps a fusionism between conservative Christianity and Republicanism gave them the majority they needed. I intend to explore what current literature has to say about trends in conservatism and public opinion leading up to 1994. Finally, to support or dispute the theory postulated since the Revolution, I intend to explore what scholars have documented as the factors necessary in maintaining the majority Republicans realized in 1994, especially in the face of single party rule.

A potential route to take in structuring a research design would be to apply any potential sound ideas or theorems elucidated above to the current day, and explore to what extent Democrats could learn from Republicans' successes, mistakes and failures in hopes of regaining a majority in the future.

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