

# Misreading A GOP Power Shift

By Paul Sracic

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Over the past four years, a profound but little recognized transformation occurred in American politics. The electorate, coaxed by Newt Gingrich and the Republicans, shifted its expectations away from the White House and toward Capitol Hill. The failure of most political commentators to grasp this fundamental change in perception led to a striking misreading of this month's midterm election results

In the months before voters went to the polls, almost everyone bearing the title "political analyst" I repeated the same bit of wisdom over and over again: "The party in control of the White House has not gained seats in a midterm election since 1934." This "midterm mantra," as I like to call it, had such power that most Republicans went into the election believing that they were certain to add seats to their majority in both the House and the Senate. Some analysts began saying that even moderate GOP gains should be considered a failure because— "on average"— the opposition party had done so well in so many midterm elections.

But did these analysts stop to analyze what they were saying? Their mistake was to assume that the Democrats were the party in power simply because they were the party that controlled the White House.

Exactly why did the president's party suffer in those earlier midterm elections? The answer to this question is of great importance, particularly to the Republican Party, because it explains why their recent loss of five House seats was inevitable and, "on average," not even that bad. Ironically, it also helps explain President Clinton's extraordinary popularity.

Back in 1985, political scientist Theodore Lowi observed that for most of this century the trend has been for a president's popularity to begin to slide about halfway through his first term. It's not hard to see why. Ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs revolutionized American government and its role in American life, the presidency has become the focus of our national aspirations. The result was that anyone who sought the presidency tended to play to these aspirations, often by making outrageous promises.

Once elected, presidents were expected to deliver on their commitments. Of course they couldn't--given our constitutional

system of checks and balances, no one could. But it generally took the American people about two years to figure this out. Because the president serves for four years, the best the voters could do during a midterm election was to bring their wrath down on the president's party in Congress.

As we entered the 1990s, it appeared that this trend of falling presidential popularity would continue into the Clinton administration. Indeed, following the health-care policy debacle of 1993 and 1994 Clinton's job-approval ratings hovered in the 40-percent range and he appeared doomed to be one-term president. But his plummeting popularity had a perversely beneficial result (for him). This is because his apparent vulnerability encouraged the Republicans to come up with their "Contract With America" for the

At the time, the contract appeared to be a brilliant maneuver. Its activist message—elect us and we promise to do these 10 things—cemented what most Americans already believed: The president and his party weren't doing anything. But the price of victory was high, for the Republicans had placed the yoke of performance around their own necks. In a sense, they made themselves as accountable as the

Indeed, there were even polls evaluating the "first 100 days" of the 104th Congress. Beginning with the Kennedy administration, this time period has been a common yardstick for measuring the performance of a new president. The transformation was thus complete. It was left to be seen, however, what the Republicans would do with their newfound responsibilities.

As might have been anticipated, the Republicans in Congress were no more successful than most presidents had been. After all, they were faced with the same fragmented system. This was made obvious to all

when the government shut down in the fall of 1995. How better to demonstrate the OOP's inability to satisfy expectations than to allow the machinery of government to grind to a halt? This was the last thing that the American people wanted.

Although it was the president's veto pen that shut down the government, and not the Republicans in Congress, the GOP's cries of "foul" fell on deaf ears. Why? Because it was no longer the president's job to fulfill the dreams of the American people. After the 1994 elections and the Contract With America, that job belonged to Congress. The president's role was to maintain checks and balances: in short, to keep the Republicans under control.

And that is what he said he was doing. In part, this explains why Clinton was reelected in 1996 and why the Republicans lost seats in that election, too. In the view of the voters, he was doing his job. The Republicans were not.

The American people didn't expect much of Clinton and he seemed to know it. He also understood, however, that the American people retain a preference for active government. Indeed, the Republicans

played right into the president's hands when they pursued impeachment over policy in the months before the election. Of course, the nasty little secret is that the president probably would have vetoed any policy initiatives proposed by the Republicans.

Nonetheless, all of the expectations were on Congress, and that's where the voters put the blame. So the midterm mantra needs rephrasing: It is not the president's party that stands to lose seats during a midterm election, but rather the party perceived to be in power. For now at least, that is the party that controls Congress.

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