

# LEGISLATING THE REVOLUTION

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*The Contract with America  
in Its First 100 Days*

JAMES G. GIMPEL

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in Its First 100 Days



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# PREFACE

*Legislating the Revolution* is the story of the first 100 days of the 104th Congress—the first Republican-controlled Congress in forty years. Few anticipated that the 1994 elections would overturn Democratic rule in the U.S. House of Representatives. During their four decades of outsider status, Republicans had acquired the semi-official title, the “permanent minority.”

The Republicans’ *Contract with America* was heralded by many as the compass that led the GOP out of the wilderness. In the pages that follow, I carefully trace out the origin and development of this remarkable set of ideas. Pundits quarrelled among themselves about the extent to which the Contract had influenced balloting on election day. Although most Republican incumbents and challengers had signed the document, it was not the centerpiece of many campaigns. A month after they had taken control, a majority of Americans reported having never heard of the Contract.

Regardless of its role in the election, on November 9th Republicans realized they would have to deliver on the Contract’s promises—no simple task for a party that had never led before. At the time, few observers thought the Contract’s legislation could pass in 100 days. Given precedent, the program just didn’t seem realistic, even in the House, which has always been the more efficient of the two chambers of Congress. Republican members had long been told by Democrats and pessimists in their own party that they would never live long enough to lead a majority. Suddenly, on a Wednesday morning, the Republicans woke up to find themselves not only leading but having to do what the experts considered impossible.

The new chair of the Appropriations Committee, Robert Livingston (LA), admitted that assuming this powerful post would not be a barrel of laughs in a time of fierce austerity. But he happily waved good-bye to the powerlessness of serving under the previous majority, exclaiming, “This sure beats minority status!” and he also reminded me that “Being in the minority ain’t pleasant.”<sup>1</sup> And from Connecticut Republican Christopher Shays, a moderate not always in synch with the conservative leadership of his party: “For me, being in control is an absolute thrill. The biggest power is in agenda setting. We can showcase whatever we want to

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<sup>1</sup>Interview with Congressman Bob Livingston (LA), 4/13/95.

showcase.”<sup>2</sup> The sheer joy of having the opportunity to lead would serve as the catalyst for Republican party unity well beyond the first 100 days.

Giving up leadership was far more difficult than assuming it. Democrats who had been in charge on Capitol Hill for years found themselves locked-out of the key corridors of power. For the northern liberals who had occupied the important leadership slots in several previous Congresses, minority status was a particularly bitter pill. Some informally observed that there was a strong relationship between the shrillness of Democratic protests in committees during the first 100 days and the number of leadership posts that Democrats had lost on those committees. As Maryland Democrat Albert Wynn succinctly pointed out, “If you are a legislative activist, its very frustrating to accept it [minority status]. Bills won’t get a hearing. If they do come up, you know they’ll be defeated. This takes a lot out of you.”<sup>3</sup>

Some moderate Democrats quietly concluded that the change was good for their party, “It sends the Democrats back to their original principles,” said senior Democrat Paul Kanjorski (PA).<sup>4</sup> “Having them [the Republicans] in power inflicts some pain but their takeover helps define the parties,” he added. “I was uneasy about the perpetual leadership of the Democrats,” admitted Indiana Democrat Andrew Jacobs.<sup>5</sup> “In the games I play, like tennis, you take turns serving.”

For conservative southern Democrats who were usually ignored by their party leadership, the change was hardly noticeable. “There hasn’t been much difference for me. When you’re a conservative Democrat, you’re a minority in the Democratic party,” said Kentucky Democrat Scotty Baesler.<sup>6</sup> From Tennessee Democrat John Tanner: “For me, there isn’t a hell of a lot of difference between the Democrats running the House and the Republicans running it.”<sup>7</sup> The Contract did accentuate long-standing differences between the Democrats’ conservative and liberal blocs, leaving most southern Democrats wondering if they had any future at all in their party. By September, three of these House members had joined the Republicans: Nathan Deal (GA), Greg Laughlin (TX) and Billy Tauzin (LA) with a fourth, Mike Parker (MS), daring the Democratic leadership to throw him out of their caucus.

Setting their conservative southern members aside, Democrats overall were quite unhappy with the thrust of the Contract’s legislative proposals. High decibel shouting matches have become commonplace in Congress, and the climate of the hearing rooms was nastier and more vitriolic than ever. Floor debate was frequently punctuated by much cursing, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Democrats bitterly

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with Congressman Christopher Shays (CT), 4/5/95.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Congressman Albert Wynn (MD), 2/28/95.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Congressman Paul Kanjorski (PA), 3/29/95.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Congressman Andrew Jacobs (IN), 3/30/95.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Congressman Scotty Baesler (KY), 6/9/95.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Congressman John Tanner (TN), 4/5/95.

objected to even the most trivial procedural moves, quickly learning and implementing the minority tactics that Republicans had practiced for years.

The Republican-led Congress has generated a lively and interesting political debate that will continue into the new century. For observers who enjoy the hyperbole and excesses of American politics at its most competitive, what I have captured here may prove to be entertaining. But the more serious thrust of this book is that the power shift brought about by the 1994 elections has forever altered our understanding of many aspects of Congress, including elections, policy-making, committees, party unity, and the role of party leadership. My goal has been to chronicle these new developments while recognizing the important continuities with the past.

The research is based largely on over 80 personal interviews with members of the U.S. House of Representatives, interest group representatives, and congressional staff members during the spring and summer of 1995. I spoke with 52 members of Congress from both parties, twenty staff members and about a dozen interest group representatives. All the members of Congress agreed to speak on the record. About half of the staffers and all of the interest group representatives agreed to speak on the record. The interviews of the members of Congress were semi-structured. Certain general questions were asked of every member and more specific questions were tailored according to the member's party, position in the leadership, areas of interest, and committee assignments.

The names of those interviewed who were willing to be identified for the sake of this very grateful acknowledgement are as follows:

**Members of Congress:** Rick White (WA); Bob Ehrlich (MD); Charles Canady (FL); Mark Souder (IN); Lincoln Diaz-Balart (FL); Jerry Weller (IL); Floyd Spence (SC); Enid Waldholtz (UT); Carlos Moorhead (CA); Dick Chrysler (MI); Ray LaHood (IL); Sue Myrick (NC); Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL); Bill Luther (MN); Bob Ney (OH); Lynn Rivers (MI); Amo Houghton (NY); Steny Hoyer (MD); Albert Wynn (MD); Ben Cardin (MD); Peter Hoekstra (MI); Owen Pickett (VA); David Dreier (CA); Barney Frank (MA); Bill Emerson (MO); Jim Bunn (OR); Phil Crane (IL); Joel Hefley (CO); Barbara Cubin (WY); Paul Kanjorski (PA); Rosa DeLauro (CT); Chris Cox (CA); Andy Jacobs (IN); Dana Rohrabacher (CA); Ron Coleman (TX); Dan Frisa (NY); John Boehner (OH); Tillie Fowler (FL); Bill Goodling (PA); Bob Inglis (SC); John Tanner (TN); Christopher Shays (CT); Bob Livingston (LA); Mike Parker (MS); Dave Camp (MI); E. Clay Shaw (FL); Scotty Baesler (KY); Jim Talent (MO); John Hostettler (IN); Roger Wicker (MS); Tim Hutchinson (AR), and Glen Browder (AL).

**Congressional Staff:** Tony Blankley (Speaker Gingrich); Dan Meyer (Speaker Gingrich); Scott Reed (Republican National Committee); Kerry Knott (Majority Leader Armey); Ed Gillespie (Majority Leader Armey); Brian Gaston (Conference Chairman John Boehner); Barry Jackson (Con-

*ference Chairman John Boehner); Chuck Greener (Republican National Committee); Paul McNulty (House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime); Katherine Hazeem (House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution); Elizabeth Humphrey (Lincoln Diaz-Balart); Robert Woodson, Jr. (Bob Inglis).*

***Interest Group Representatives and others:*** Daniel Mitchell (Heritage Foundation); Paul Jacob (U.S. Term Limits); Ralph Reed (Christian Coalition); Brian Lopina (Christian Coalition); David Mason (Heritage Foundation); Dan Weiss (Sierra Club); Grover Norquist (Americans for Tax Reform); David Keating (National Taxpayers Union); Mia Arnold (National Organization for Women); Joan Blum (National Abortion Rights Action League); Marshall Wittman (Christian Coalition); Elaine Ryan (American Public Welfare Association); Mary Elizabeth Teasley (National Education Association); Michael Pons (National Education Association); and Frank Luntz (Republican Pollster).

The idea of writing a book on the Republican takeover of Congress was originally that of David Mason, the Director of the Heritage Foundation's *Congress Assessment Project*. I owe a weighty debt of gratitude to Mason and the research support provided by the Heritage Foundation during the spring and summer of 1995. My research assistants at Heritage, Jennifer Hagen from Claremont McKenna College, Richard Moha from Hillsdale College, and Hans Nichols from Cornell University ran errands and pulled together hundreds of pages of information under my high-pressure deadlines and in spite of my occasionally sour disposition. My research assistants at Maryland, Aparna Srinivasan and Brian Crane, cheerfully undertook the tedious task of collecting and entering data. Two former Capitol Hill colleagues, Mike Boisvenue and Holly Harle, collected valuable insider information that found its way into the book.

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THE  
REVOLUTION



# CONTENTS

## **Preface ix**

<i>1</i>	<i>Republicans Ascendant: The 1994 Elections in the U.S. House</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>The Contract and the Campaign</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Taking Control</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>The Balanced Budget and Line-Item Veto</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>Rewriting the 1994 Crime Bill</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>6</i>	<i>Revitalizing National Defense</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>7</i>	<i>Reforming Welfare</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>Limiting Congressional Terms</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>9</i>	<i>Cutting Taxes</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>10</i>	<i>Conclusion: The Contract Sets a New Agenda</i>	<i>115</i>
	<i>Endnotes</i>	<i>129</i>
	<i>Appendix</i>	<i>145</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>155</i>



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# REPUBLICANS ASCENDANT: THE 1994 ELECTIONS IN THE U.S. HOUSE

November 8, 1994, was a landmark in American electoral history. Republicans walked away with their most spectacular gains since 1948. When network election coverage began that evening, well before polls had closed in most of the country, the surprised and sometimes somber tones of those anchoring election coverage suggested that something was up. Network pollsters had been collecting data throughout the day, and their research showed that a major electoral earthquake was underway. It wouldn't even be a long night in most places. Republicans were winning decisive victories almost everywhere.

One of the most stunning turnabouts came in Washington state where five established Democratic incumbents in the House of Representatives were defeated, including Speaker of the House Tom Foley. Another Democrat lost an open-seat race. Suddenly, the Washington state delegation had changed from nine Democrats and one Republican to eight Republicans and two Democrats.

Overall, Republican pick-ups across the states were remarkably even. A few seats here, a few seats there, totalling 52 new seats in all for a total of 230.\* Not a single Republican incumbent was defeated. Democrats saw their majority drop from 256 to a minority of 204 seats. Thirty-four Democratic incumbents lost, the most since 1966. More important, Republicans would now control the House for the first time since the election of 1952.

\*This would increase to 231 with the April, 1995, switch of Georgia Democrat Nathan Deal to the Republican party; 232 with the June 1995, switch of Texas Democrat Greg Laughlin; and 233 with the July switch of Louisiana Democrat Billy Tauzin.

In the weeks before the election, many had predicted a Republican takeover of the U.S. Senate. The Senate was more evenly divided, with Republicans holding forty-four seats. Democrats were defending twenty-one seats, compared with just eleven for Republicans. Knowing that the president's party almost always loses some seats in midterm congressional elections, a Republican gain of six or seven Senate seats was not wildly implausible. By contrast, a Republican pick-up of the forty seats necessary for a House majority simply seemed beyond reach. Traditional models of midterm seat loss predicted that Democrats would lose only half that many seats.

## EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL QUAKE

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### *President Clinton's Performance*

Several explanations account for the staggering Democratic defeats. Perhaps the most obvious is the public's dim view of President Clinton's performance. Although the president had not won a majority of the popular vote in 1992, his approval ratings were high at the beginning of his presidency (59% among men, 57% among women).<sup>1</sup> Just six months into his term, Clinton began to sag in the court of public opinion. For much of his second year in office, his approval ratings remained below 50 percent. Moderate Republican John Porter (IL) could say without much exaggeration that "If Ronald Reagan was the Teflon president, this president is the Brillo president..."<sup>2</sup> Everything sticks to him.

President Clinton's record in passing legislation was solid. Year-end figures suggested that Congress went along with the president about 86 percent of the time—the best legislative record since Lyndon Johnson's nearly thirty years ago.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there were some significant and highly publicized defeats. The president put enormous effort into health care reform, only to see it flounder and die by August, 1994. At about the same time, a major piece of crime legislation was delayed when a large number of House Democrats sided with Republicans on a procedural vote.<sup>4</sup> Crime legislation eventually passed, but the set-backs overshadowed the victories on many smaller issues.

Then there were the lingering questions about the Clintons' partnership in the Whitewater land deal, kept alive by the flame-fanning of Senator Alfonse D'Amato (NY) and Congressman Jim Leach (IA), the ranking members of Senate and House Banking committees. This attack challenged the president's honesty and character as well as the integrity of certain highly visible administration officials. In the end, several key administration appointees were forced to resign.

The president's woes generated doubts among voters. Many had doubts about his character and competence to begin with and the troubles of 1994 only seemed to firm up these earlier assessments. Poll after poll showed the public's declining confidence in and respect for the president. Complaints surfaced about the president's appearing unpresidential—so much so that people were said to be ignoring him as

he was passing through airports. By mid-October of 1994, the president's approval ratings had sagged to 38 percent among men and 44 percent among women.<sup>5</sup> All of this portended bad things for the president's party in November.

### *Voter Hostility toward Washington*

A second factor underlying the electoral quake of the 1994 elections would have to be the voters' dwindling confidence in the institutions of national government.<sup>6</sup> Criticism of Congress had been particularly harsh and in March 1994, surveys by the Gallup organization showed that the percentage of citizens expressing "a great deal" of confidence in Congress was at a mere 18 percent, compared with 39 percent in 1985 and 42 percent in 1973.<sup>7</sup> The public's attitude was accurately described in President Clinton's post-election news conference, in which he claimed that the message sent in the election was that "We [the voters] don't think government can solve all the problems. And we don't want the Democrats telling us from Washington that they know what is right about everything."<sup>8</sup> The message, according to Democrats, was that the voters were expressing general unhappiness about those in control. The White House denied, however, that the election was a mandate for a shift to the right. The president voiced his conviction that the American people were simply upset with the pace of change in Washington.<sup>9</sup>

Republicans emphasized that the message was more specific: the people wanted less government intrusion and lower taxes. As a sophomore lawmaker saw it, "The elections reflect voters' basic disgust with Washington. The attitude of my voters is that government is burdensome and that people in Washington aren't serious about change."<sup>10</sup>

The truth varies by congressional district and is probably somewhere in between these partisan assessments. Many of the highly attentive voters were casting a protest vote specifically against President Clinton's record and in favor of a Republican alternative. Voters who base their judgments on general impressions of government performance, on the other hand, were simply angry at whoever happened to be in the White House. Two years earlier, many of these same voters had supported Ross Perot.

The connection between Perot voters and Democratic losses in 1994 is probably not coincidental. Republicans had deliberately crafted their campaign appeals to attract the independent voters who wanted change. Table 1-1 presents some evidence of the influence of the Perot vote on Democratic defeats in the 1994 House races. These figures show the difference in Perot's 1992 vote share between the congressional districts Democrats won in 1994 compared with those where Democratic incumbents went down. In those districts where Democrats lost their seats to Republican challengers, Ross Perot ran substantially better in 1992 than he did in the districts of Democratic winners. Similarly, the seats the Democrats lost were much more marginally Democratic in the 1992 presidential election than were the remaining seats. Bill Clinton won an average of 40 percent in the congressional districts

**Table 1-1 Differences in 1992 Perot and Clinton Support between Districts Where Democrats Lost and Those Where Democrats Won**

Seat status	Perot % 1992	Clinton % 1992
Incumbents won	16.1 (n = 192)	51.4 (n = 192)
Incumbents lost	20.4 (n = 34)	39.6 (n = 34)
T-test	T-value = 4.40	T-value = -8.69
Significance	$p < .001$	$p < .001$
Cases	226	226

N reflects the Democratic Districts from the 103rd Congress where incumbents were defending their seats. Figures for incumbents who won include Vermont Independent Bernard Sanders who affiliates with Democrats on matters of House organization.

Source: *Almanac of American Politics, 1994* and author's calculations.

where his party's incumbents lost, compared with a much higher 51 percent in the winning Democrats' districts. In other words, the president was not very popular to begin with in the losing Democrats' districts. His performance in the interim did nothing to help convince Perot voters that the Democrats were the ticket in 1994.

### *Republican Opportunism with the "Contract"*

Issues are important in democratic politics because they give voters an idea of what program of action a political party will pursue if its members are elected. If this program fails, incumbents supporting that program can be held accountable at the next election. This is the classical statement of the party responsibility model of good government. In American politics party responsibility rarely exists in this form because candidates can rarely agree on a coherent program. Constituencies and their interests vary widely from place to place. Popular issues in one area are unattractive in other areas.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the American political system is highly decentralized and candidate-centered compared with other democratic systems. In cases in which the party platform and constituency preferences are at odds, members of Congress have a strong incentive to ignore the party. When the national parties do provide issue guidance, candidates freely ignore it. For these reasons, congressional elections are said to be local (rather than national) contests and party government is correspondingly weak.

In the context of a highly decentralized American political system, it was risky to attempt to nationalize the 1994 congressional elections on a set of themes that would bind all candidates. Perhaps the effort would have failed miserably had there not been such widespread unhappiness about government's size and ineffectiveness. Public opinion was unusually homogeneous on this issue. Little insight was needed to spot the prevailing dissatisfaction with government that was evident in polls

throughout 1993. At the direction of two aggressive House Republican leaders, Newt Gingrich (GA), the Minority Whip, and Richard K. Armey (TX), the Conference Chair (*Conference* is the official name of the Republican party in Congress), House staff put together a package of legislative proposals calling it the “Contract with America”. The Contract was designed to attract the attention of the increasing majority of Americans who were unhappy with Congress, unhappy with the president, and dissatisfied with government. Many of these citizens were Perot voters who repudiated business as usual with their protest votes in 1992.<sup>12</sup> Key to the sales pitch was that Republicans would promise to place these agenda items at the top of their legislative calendars during the first 100 days of a Republican-led 104th Congress. Republican leaders were quick to point out that there was no explicit promise that these agenda items would *pass* in a Republican Congress, only that they would be debated and brought up for a vote. This would be an important qualification many Republicans would later call attention to as elements of the Contract ran into opposition and delay in the U.S. Senate. But even though House Republicans realized there was no guarantee their Contract would become law in this Congress, the successful effort to

**Table 1-2 Elements in the Republican “Contract with America”**

Title	Bill	Focus of legislation
Congressional Accountability Act	H.R. 1	Apply anti-discrimination laws to Congress
Line-Item Veto Act	H.R. 2	Enhance president’s rescission authority
Taking Back Our Streets Act	H.R. 3	Crime control
Personal Responsibility Act	H.R. 4	Welfare reform
Unfunded Mandate Reform Act	H.R. 5	Reducing burden of federal mandates on states
American Dream Restoration Act	H.R. 6	Tax code reform
National Security Restoration Act	H.R. 7	Defense/military procurement
Senior Citizens’ Equity Act	H.R. 8	Social Security reform
Job Creation/Wage Enhancement Act	H.R. 9	Deregulation/tax code reform
Common Sense Legal Reforms Act	H.R. 10	Product liability/tort reform
Family Reinforcement Act	H.R. 11	Child support/adoption
Balanced Budget Amendment	H.J. Res 1	Balanced budget
Citizen Legislature Act	H.J. Res 2	Term limits, 12 years for House members
Citizen Legislature Act	H.J. Res 3	Term limits, 6 years for House members

bring House candidates and incumbents on board a common agenda was a step away from the every-person-for-him/herself character of American politics.

Substantively, the Contract was a collection of ten bills and three resolutions dealing with a variety of issues (see Table 1-2 and Chapter 2) from term limits to crime to welfare reform, deregulation and deficit reduction. Republican leaders deliberately stayed away from divisive social issues such as school prayer and abortion. They realized that it would be difficult enough to hold the party together without generating internal divisions on such controversial themes. If the Contract were to serve as a platform for all Republican House contenders, it must consist of proposals that would be overwhelmingly popular.

Contrary to popular myth, there was no public opinion polling conducted on the Contract before it was assembled by the Republican leadership. Gingrich and Armey were generally aware that specific items were popular, including term limits and the balanced budget amendment. But the legislation forming the core of the Contract was selected primarily because it was consistent with themes the Republicans had been emphasizing for years. All of the legislation had been introduced in the 103rd Congress in one form or another. The Republican National Committee (RNC) did commission focus-group research and polls once the Contract had been assembled to determine how best to describe the legislation.

Focus group research, or "concept testing" as pollsters describe it, is designed to probe more deeply into citizen responsiveness to political themes and issues than a public opinion poll does. Typically, a focus group is assembled by recruiting twenty-five to thirty people at random to come to a designated location to participate in a discussion about the issues of interest. Each participant is paid \$30 to \$40 for a two-hour discussion session. In the case of the Contract, focus groups were assembled in several locations around the country. The participants were given copies of the Contract in different forms and asked for their reactions. Pollster Frank Luntz was especially interested in the responses of the Perot voters. "The point was to ask them how they felt about the issues in the Contract. We allowed them to argue with each other. We wanted to know what stirred them up."<sup>13</sup> According to Luntz, focus groups are superior to ordinary polls because they allow people to express justifications for the positions they take. Luntz emphasized that the value of focus-group research is to tap into people's emotions and basic commitments. Polls do not reveal deep seated values and commitments because the format of a poll, conducted over a telephone at a rapid-fire pace, does not permit reflection and interaction.

Luntz's surveys were influential in helping to describe the Contract by asking people why they liked certain provisions. For example, respondents to opinion polls would be asked why they wanted term limits. "Is it because we need a citizen legislature?" or "Is it because professional politicians eventually forget who they represent?" In testing phrases such as these, Republican leaders were able to select the descriptions that had popular appeal. In this case, they chose the former, titling the Contract's term limits measure, "The Citizen Legislature Act."

In addition to the legislative thrust, the majority-to-be promised to pass ambitious internal reforms aimed at restoring the "faith and trust of the American people

in their government.”<sup>14</sup> These reforms included what was to be the first bill to pass both the House and Senate in the 104th, H. R. 1, to require all laws that apply to the rest of the country also apply equally to the Congress, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Other internal reforms that would pass as rules changes in the House included procedures to implement an audit of Congress to ferret out waste, fraud and abuse; to cut the number of House committees and cut committee staffs by one-third; to limit the terms of all committee chairs; to ban the casting of proxy votes in committee; and to require committee meetings to be open to the public. In the end, the legislative initiatives promised in the Contract would have both widespread public support and the support of 367 Republicans running for House seats.

None of the proposals in the Contract was truly brand new. Many ideas, such as term limitations and the balanced budget amendment had a long history extending decades into the past. Others, such as welfare reform, had generated momentum in recent years. As in most arenas of life, new ideas on Capitol Hill require acclimation as they compete for acceptance. Through the 1980s, Republicans repeatedly introduced such legislation, only to have it ignored by the Democratic leadership. By the 1990s, however, these ideas had gained substantial momentum and the sponsorship lists had grown quite long. H. J. Res. 1 (to require a balanced budget) had 170 Republican cosponsors and eight Democratic cosponsors at the time of its House passage.

Through the Contract, the Republicans sought to inject a strong measure of party responsibility into the campaign, actually inviting voters to “throw them out” if they failed to deliver on their Contract promises. The move was bold given the conventional wisdom that House races are local, not national. “There were many nay-sayers who thought the Contract strategy would fail,” said Scott Reed, the RNC’s executive director.<sup>15</sup> “Many Republicans in the consulting community were concerned that it wouldn’t help their candidates. The conventional wisdom was that House elections are won on local themes.” This was clearly the message from academic political scientists also: “It has become increasingly difficult to speak of House elections as national elections in any meaningful sense,” wrote three prominent scholars in a 1992 article.<sup>16</sup>

In political circles, the debate about whether the party should emphasize national or local themes had been raging since the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> But as early as 1990, most Republican elites were at least willing to concede that a mix of national and local themes was optimal.<sup>18</sup> It took the leadership of Gingrich and Armev to put together a coherent package. What the Contract provided both incumbent and novice candidates was a ready-made platform that the Republican leadership sensed would be a no-fail vote getter. “It gave those who were new to politics something to talk about,” Reed reported. Candidates did not have to flounder about, casting here and there for popular messages and issues as they often do.<sup>19</sup> Republicans were not compelled to campaign on all aspects of the Contract and few voters on election day knew much about it as a document, much less its background. But they did know something about the issues associated with it. Most candidates chose the items in



the Contract that they thought would resonate with their constituencies and tailored their messages to focus on specific items rather than on the document itself.

In a carefully orchestrated national media event, leadership staff, together with staff from the RNC and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) organized a forum to highlight the Contract as a national campaign theme. The vast majority of Republican House candidates convened on the Capitol steps on September 27th to sign the Contract. This event generated national publicity for the party as a whole, but locally the Contract generated free publicity for challengers and incumbents alike. The public response in some areas was overwhelmingly favorable. Campaigns reported being deluged with telephone calls from voters requesting copies of the Contract. Two-hundred twenty-four of the 367 signatories to the Contract (61 percent) went on to win on November 8th. Notably, several Republican nonsignatories also won in November: Don Young (AK), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL), Lincoln Diaz-Balart (FL), Ray LaHood (IL), Sam Brownback (KS), Jim Bunn (OR), Jim Longley (ME) and Tom Coburn (OK). In Chapter 2, I will deal more extensively with the background of the Contract and how it was used in congressional campaigns.

### *Marginal Seats*

A marginal seat is one subject to frequent changes in party control. The seats most vulnerable to takeover by the opposition are those for which the incumbent won less than 55 percent of the vote in the previous election. In 1994, there were seventy-nine such seats, forty-five of them were in Democratic hands. One upshot of the comparisons presented in Table 1-1 is that Republicans won many of their upset victories by fiercely pursuing seats that were marginal for President Clinton and the Democrats in the 1992 election. Consider the closeness of the races between Republican challengers and Democratic incumbents who lost in 1994. Republicans who defeated incumbent Democrats did so with an average 54 percent of the vote. The remaining seats that were either left open by retirements or occupied by incumbent Democratic victors were much less marginal, with Democrats winning 66 percent ( $t$ -value =  $-7.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The success of Republicans in these competitive districts reflected the targeting strategy of party and interest group donors who tend to aim the bulk of their contributions toward viable candidates.

### *Candidate Quality*

Deficits in candidate quality have been considered a Republican scourge for several years now.<sup>20</sup> The notion is that Republicans have not done well in House elections because they have been unable to field credible challengers. Of course, there is no unanimity about what it means to be a “quality candidate,” but most studies define the term to include political experience.<sup>21</sup> Previous experience is associated with the ability to field a better-managed and better-funded campaign as well as the capacity to draw upon established coalitions.