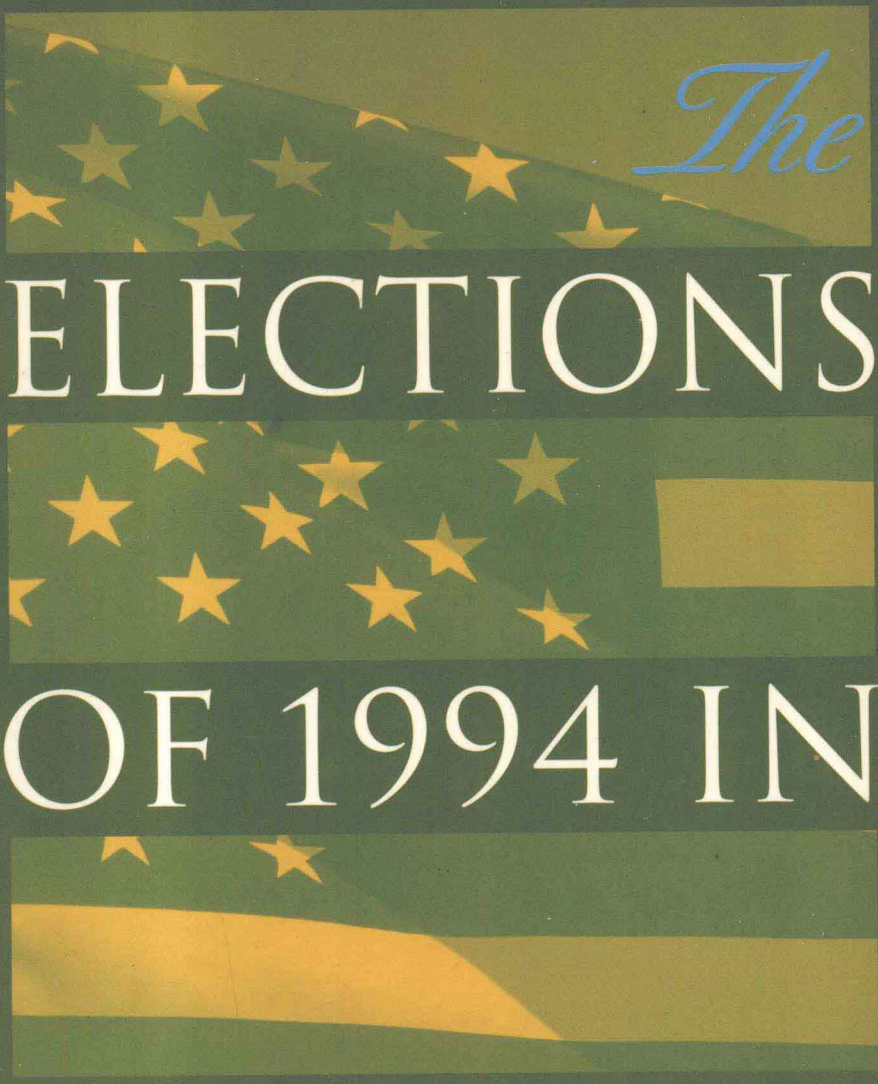
MIDTERM: *The* ELECTIONS OF 1994 IN CONTEXT



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Midterm

The Elections of 1994 in Context

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Transforming American Politics

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TRANSFORMING AMERICAN POLITICS
Lawrence C. Dodd, Series Editor

Dramatic changes in political institutions and behavior over the past three decades have underscored the dynamic nature of American politics, confronting political scientists with a new and pressing intellectual agenda. The pioneering work of early postwar scholars, while laying a firm empirical foundation for contemporary scholarship, failed to consider how American politics might change or to recognize the forces that would make fundamental change inevitable. In reassessing the static interpretations fostered by these classic studies, political scientists are now examining the underlying dynamics that generate transformational change.

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Foreword

CHARLES O. JONES

It is a measure of the progress made in studying elections that most of the time we can predict the outcome. Every so often, however, we are startled by the results and scramble to search for deeper meanings. Forevermore, the 1994 congressional elections will be classified among those events marking important change. Special features abound: the Contract with America, a bold party platform signed by a huge majority of House Republican candidates; the end of 40 years of Republican minority status in the House of Representatives; a candidate for Speaker of the House essentially campaigning for the job; the only newly elected Democratic president in this century to lose both houses of Congress at the midterm; and the continuing transformation of the South from a Democratic to a Republican stronghold.

These developments have encouraged a stronger-than-usual policy reading of the election that has enhanced, even amplified, Speaker-designate Newt Gingrich's plans for taking charge of the national agenda. The contract and the media event of its signing in late September were ridiculed by most analysts. Many Democrats, including the president, appeared delighted to campaign against the document. It was widely believed that the Republicans had made a strategic blunder since they were bound to do well in the election and the contract could be used by Democrats against Republican candidates. One Democratic political consultant, Paul Begala, was quoted as saying, "There is not a night that I don't thank God for the contract."

On November 8, the Republicans won control of both houses of Congress, as well as control of several statehouses and state legislatures. No Republican incumbent governor, representative, or senator was defeated. The net gain of 52 House seats exceeded the expectations of the most optimistic Republican. It was the greatest net gain for Republicans since 1946 and was the basis for interpreting a mandate for the new Speaker. Imagine—a policy mandate for a leader of the House of Representatives! Not all congressional leaders would know what to do with such a charge. Gingrich, however, had the clear intention of bringing each of the contract's ten proposals to a vote in the House within a 100-day period. He proceeded to make organizational changes to achieve this goal, to set the House to work early in the new session (and late into each working day), to maintain strong party unity, to attract substantial Democratic support on several bills, and to pass

all but one of the proposals (a constitutional amendment for term limits that requires a two-thirds majority). It was a stunning performance, if not exactly the recommended method for legislating.

Meanwhile, the new Republican Senate was deluged by the legislative product of the House. It performed its historical role of retarding the pace, with the minority Democrats employing all of the delaying tactics relied on by the Republicans to thwart President Clinton's program in the 103rd Congress. Still, there was no question that the agenda was being set on Capitol Hill in the Gingrich-led House of Representatives. And it was an agenda of such scope and weight as to occupy the Senate through the first session of the 104th Congress.

President Clinton was hardly a player in the early months of the new Congress. He was widely viewed as having lost an election without being on the ballot. Having to forgo a traditional policy function of the presidency, agenda setting, he was forced to rely on a veto strategy. This option was problematic for Clinton for two reasons. First, in an effort to avoid so-called gridlock and to build support for his program among Democrats, Clinton had not vetoed any bill in his first two years in office. A veto strategy is effective primarily as a credible threat. Because Clinton had not used the veto, the viability of a threat to do so had yet to be established. Second, the veto is not the preferred option for a policy-ambitious president like Clinton. Great presidents are not those who say "no" but are those who formulate new ideas for meeting urgent needs. Therefore, the 1994 congressional elections produced high anxiety in the White House as Clinton's staff searched for the means by which he might regain the initiative of his early months in office.

It is not too soon to begin analyzing this historic election. We will, of course, know much more about its impact with the passage of time. For example, it is said that the true test of the Contract with America will be the number of bills enacted into law, a reasonable basis for evaluation, to be sure. But we already know that the Republicans did better than expected in the 1994 elections, finally achieving majority status in the House of Representatives. What is the explanation? And it is a fact that there has never been a 100-day period in the House led by the Speaker to match that in the early months of 1995. How did it happen? Nor have Democratic presidents typically had to cope with such challenging political conditions. What are Clinton's options? A recounting of the special nature of what has happened and advance appraisals are clearly in order.

Philip Klinkner has identified exactly the right topics for treating the 1994 elections and their effects, and he has chosen an impressive group of scholars to analyze the results and explain what they mean. This collection offers historical perspective, contemporary context, and implications for the immediate future. It examines developments in voting behavior (including the "angry white male" and the Christian right), effects on the party system, regional shifts (with special emphasis on the South), and the ever-important subject of campaign finance. Political scientists will pay heed to this election for decades to come. *Midterm: The Elections of 1994 in Context* offers students a splendid beginning in their endeavors to comprehend the significance of one of the most startling and engaging political events in the post–World War II era.

Acknowledgments

This book had its origins in the stunning events of November 1994, when it dawned on me that midterm elections are rarely given the same thorough analysis as presidential elections, even when they are as obviously important as the elections of 1994. This view was echoed by Jennifer Knerr and Larry Dodd at Westview Press, whose support and encouragement made this project possible. I would also like to thank the contributors to this volume, since it is their ideas and research which provide its value. Special thanks should also go to David Mayhew; not only did he contribute a chapter to the volume but seven of the other authors in this book were his students at Yale University. This book was not intended as a Festschrift. Instead, as he would put it, if you throw a brick into a room full of scholars interested in midterm elections, you are bound to hit a few Mayhew students. Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife, Honorine, who never ceases to amaze me with her love and support.

Philip A. Klinkner

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The 1994 House Elections in Perspective

GARY C. JACOBSON

The 1994 elections set off a political earthquake that will send aftershocks rumbling through national politics for years to come. For the first time in 42 years, Republicans captured the House of Representatives. The 52-seat gain that gave them a 230–204 majority was the largest net partisan swing since 1948.[1] Republicans also took control of the Senate, taking 8 seats from Democrats and immediately adding a party-switching opportunist (Richard Shelby of Alabama) to end up with a 53–47 majority. After a two-year hiatus, the United States again has divided government—one party controlling the presidency, the other party controlling the Congress. But in a startling reversal, this time the White House belongs to the Democrats while Congress belongs to the Republicans. The Republican congressional triumph led a national sweep for the party. Indeed, the only reason the election brought divided government rather than unified Republican control is that President Clinton was not on the ballot.

Clearly, the *results* of the 1994 elections—particularly the House elections, which are the focus of this Chapter—were extraordinary. The question for political scientists who study elections, however, is whether the *process* that produced them was also extraordinary. That is, does the Republican victory mean that the electoral world depicted by the conventional literature changed fundamentally in 1994? Or can we account for the Republican success within the framework of currently accepted ideas about congressional elections? These are the questions I begin to address here. Although answers must be far from definitive at this early date, before all the relevant data are in hand for analysis, the evidence available so far suggests that although the electoral processes shaping 1994 differed in important respects from those of recent decades, most of the familiar patterns held for 1994. Although House elections were, as the post-election commentary emphasized, nationalized to a greater extent than they have been in several decades, local variation was as pronounced as ever and for the usual reasons: incumbency, the quality of challengers, campaign spending, and the interaction of national issues with local circumstances.

I begin by presenting a stylized account of the Republican victory in the 1994 House elections, with special attention to how the nationalization of local contests contributed to the party's success. Marketable national campaign themes did not by themselves give the Republicans their House majority, however. National issues needed effective local sponsors to influence House voters; to win House

seats, Republicans still needed plausible candidates with enough money to get the messages out to district voters. How the effects of national issues were mediated by candidates and campaigns in what continued to be predominantly an electoral process with local focus are shown in the second section part of the Chapter.

WHY DID THE REPUBLICANS WIN THE HOUSE?

Why did Republicans, after four decades of futility, suddenly win a clear majority of House seats? The short answer is that they won by inverting political patterns that gave Democrats comfortable House majorities despite a generation of Republican superiority in presidential elections. In my earlier work on divided government, I offered this summary explanation for the Republicans' inability to win control of the House:

> Republicans have failed to advance in the House because they have fielded inferior candidates on the wrong side of issues that are important to voters in House elections and because voters find it difficult to assign blame or credit when control of government is divided between the parties (Jacobson 1990a: 3).

In 1994, the Republicans won the House by fielding (modestly) superior candidates who were on the right side of the issues that were important to voters in House elections and by persuading voters to blame a unified Democratic government for government's failures.

Until 1994, Democrats were able to maintain House majorities despite Republican dominance of presidential contests by persuading electorates to use different criteria for making presidential choices than for making congressional choices. Most Americans want low tax rates, low inflation, a less-meddlesome government, a strong national defense, and law and order at home. Republican presidential candidates capitalized on their party's superior reputation on these issues to win five of the last seven presidential elections. But most Americans also oppose cuts in middle-class entitlements and many other social programs and fear unemployment, greater exposure to market forces, and greater environmental risk. Democrats held on to their congressional majorities in part by promising to protect popular programs, benefits, and safeguards.

House Democrats also promoted and thrived on a candidate-centered election system in which, as Tip O'Neill famously put it, "All politics is local." As the party believing in the value of government and thus of governmental service, Democrats fielded a higher proportion of ambitious, experienced, and talented candidates who were willing to do the hard work to build and maintain personal followings in their districts. House Democrats became adept at building local majority coalitions out of whatever material was at hand. The party's fractious diversity, which frustrated its presidential candidates' efforts to construct majority coalitions, was no barrier to success in local politics. Democrats ran as staunch friends of organized labor, civil rights activists, feminists, or the environmental

movement when doing so attracted votes, and they avoided such alliances when it did not. Southern Democrats, for example, were able to portray themselves as fiscal and social conservatives despite their national party's image. By keeping the electoral focus local in districts where the national party's liberal reputation was a millstone, Democrats were able to capture and retain House seats that otherwise had distinctly Republican coloration (Jacobson 1990a).

All politics was *not* local in 1994. Republicans succeeded in framing the local choice in national terms, making taxes, social discipline, big government, and the Clinton presidency the dominant issues. They did so by exploiting three related waves of public sentiment that crested simultaneously in 1994: The first was public disgust with the politics, politicians, and government in Washington. The second was the widespread feeling that American economic and social life was out of control and heading in the wrong direction. The visceral rejection of Clinton by a crucial set of swing voters, the "Reagan Democrats" and supporters of Ross Perot, was the third.

An Angry Public

Public contempt for members of Congress as a class has been growing for more than two decades. All of the regular polling questions measuring attitudes toward government have found an increasingly angry and distrustful public. Disapproval of Congress's performance reached an all-time high of 79 percent in one 1994 poll, but this was only the latest, incremental extension of a long-term trend.

Rising distrust and anger were fed by several streams. One major stream flowed directly from the politics of divided government during the Reagan-Bush years. Divided government encouraged the kind of partisan posturing, haggling, delay, and confusion that voters hate whenever Republican presidents and Democratic Congresses faced major policy decisions. It also guaranteed that voters would wind up feeling betrayed by the inevitable compromises that made agreement possible, as they did in 1990 when George Bush and the Democratic Congress cut a deal to reduce the deficit through a combination of tax increases and program cuts (Jacobson 1993a).

The formal end of divided government in 1992 was supposed to end gridlock. It did not. Many of the Clinton administration's most ambitions plans—health care reform, for example—had died in an agony of conflict and partisan recrimination. The truth, revealed early in the 103rd Congress when Bob Dole led a successful Republican filibuster against Clinton's economic stimulus package, was that, as Krehbiel's insightful analysis made clear, divided government did not end at all (Krehbiel 1994). Divided partisan control of *policy making* persists as long as the minority party holds at least 40 seats in the Senate and can therefore kill any bill it wants to kill.

The illusion of unified government put the onus of failure on the Democrats; the reality of divided government let Senate Republicans make sure that the administration would fail. Clinton was elected on a promise of change; but Senate

Republicans could prevent change, and they did. It was not difficult, for although everyone may agree that change is desirable, rarely is there ready consensus on *what* changes to make. The health care issue is Exhibit A. If voters did not get change with Clinton—or if they did not like the changes he proposed—the alternative was to elect Republicans.

Public anger at a government paralyzed by gridlock was intensified by the widespread sense that the problems the political establishment failed to address are indeed serious. The benefits of economic growth during the Reagan years went largely to families in the top income decile. The broad middle class has, by many measures, made little economic progress for two decades; even the most upbeat observers admit that the incomes (including fringe benefits) of the families in the middle half of the distribution were nearly flat over the two decades between 1973 and 1992.[2] Moreover, middle-class incomes have become more volatile from one year to the next, so that even if middle-income people have not done worse on average, their level of uncertainty about the economic future has been appreciably greater.

Although the economy grew during the first two years of the Clinton administration, the fruits of growth again went largely to families at the upper end of the economic scale. Hence, in an October 1994 *Los Angeles Times* poll, 53 percent of the respondents thought the economy remained in recession. The economic discontent that elected Clinton in 1992 had barely faded by 1994, and this time it helped to elect a Republican Congress. In 1992, 79 percent of the voters (in the national exit poll) thought the economy was in bad shape, and 62 percent of them voted for a Democrat for the House. In 1994, 75 percent said they were no better off financially than they were two years ago; 57 percent thought the economy was still in bad shape, and 62 percent of this group voted for the Republican (Langer 1994).

Economic prosperity, moreover, is not the only measure of the quality of life. The public institutions that serve ordinary people—for example, public schools, police, and courts—seemed to be in trouble. The issues of crime, illegal immigration, and unmarried teenage welfare mothers that dominated the 1994 campaigns in many places were not new, but they gained new urgency as signs that American society was out of control. For millions of Americans, government had delivered neither physical nor economic security, failing conspicuously to reverse what was seen as moral and cultural decline. The large majority that believed the nation was on the wrong rather than the right track (i.e., 57 percent compared to 37 percent in the 1992 exit poll) indicated that the longing for "change" that put Clinton in the White House was not satisfied. Two-thirds of those who thought the nation was on the wrong track voted for Republican House candidates, compared to only 29 percent of those who thought the nation was on the right track.

Stagnant incomes, declining public services, and the rising fear of crime leave large segments of the population with poorer lives and diminished prospects. It is in this context that the perks and peccadilloes of politicians—scandals involving senior leaders in the House and the Keating Five in the Senate, bank overdrafts,

unpaid restaurant bills, post office shenanigans, and pay-raise subterfuges—were so damaging to members of Congress. The image of representatives as self-serving, easily corrupted, and indifferent to the needs of the average citizen or the good of the nation pervaded the 1992 elections and helped produce the largest turnover in the House since World War II. Members were unable to shake that image in the 103rd Congress, and when Democrats were ostensibly in full control of the government, they became the principal targets of popular wrath and disappointment. In 1992, angry and dissatisfied voters voted Democratic in House elections 56 percent to 44 percent; in 1994, they voted Republican, 64 percent to 36 percent (Langer 1994).

The Clinton Problem

Clinton's reputation as a leader was, of course, the chief target and victim of the Republicans' gridlock strategy. But this was not the only problem Clinton posed for congressional Democrats. Although his overall performance ratings were not, comparatively speaking, all that bad, he thoroughly alienated important groups of swing voters: the so-called Reagan Democrats and much of the largely male Perot constituency. The cultural symbolism portrayed by many of the administration's actions was anathema to socially conservative white men, especially in the South. The conspicuous attention to race and gender diversity in making appointments called to mind the affirmative action programs they detested. Support for gays in the military, gun control, appointees like Lani Guinier (failed) and Joycelyn Elders (successful), and the role and style of Hillary Rodham Clinton reminded these swing voters of the cultural liberalism that was at the core of what they did *not* like about the Democratic party. Clinton's reputation with this segment of the electorate probably was worsened by one of his most notable successes: the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which put him at odds with traditional blue-collar Democratic constituents.

Exit polls revealed that only 40 percent of southerners approved of Clinton's performance, compared to 51 percent in the Northeast and 45 percent elsewhere. Among white southern men, Clinton's approval stood at a dismal 27 percent. Moreover, the relationship between presidential approval and the House vote was notably stronger in 1994 than in other recent midterm elections. According to the exit polls, about 86 percent of House votes were consistent with presidential ratings (that is, for the Democrat if the respondent approved of Clinton's performance, for the Republican if the respondent disapproved). The comparable figure for 1990 was 68 percent, for 1986, 72 percent; only in 1982 did consistency ratings approach the 1994 level (82 percent). Clinton's low level of approval was thus more damaging than usual to his copartisans and was concentrated among swing voters. Support for Democratic House candidates among white southerners was 12 points lower in 1994 than it was in 1992 (35 percent compared to 47 percent). Fully 44 percent of the white southern males said that their House vote was a vote against Clinton (20 percent said it was a vote for Clinton); for non-southern

males, the comparable figures were 33 percent and 24 percent. The House vote of white males nationally was 11 points more Republican in 1994 than it was in 1992; Perot supporters, who split their House votes evenly between the parties in 1992, voted 2 to 1 Republican in 1994 (Langer 1994; *New York Times*, November 13, 1994: A15).

In short, voters in 1994 were angry with government; Democrats were the party of government not only because they were in charge but also because their party believes in government. Republican candidates, who liked to claim that they did not, offered themselves as vehicles for expressing antigovernment rage by taking up the banner of structural panaceas—term limits, a balanced budget amendment, and cuts in congressional staff and perks—that were broadly popular and had special appeal to the alienated voters who supported Perot. The policy issues that resonated best with voters in 1994—crime, immigration, welfare dependency, taxes, and big government—were also Republican issues. Recognizing Clinton's unpopularity, especially in the South and especially among white males, Republican candidates sought to portray their opponents as Clinton clones; many of them used TV ads that had pictures of their opponents' face digitally "morphing" into Clinton's face.

Republicans were thus able to frame the choice in many swing districts as one not between an accomplished provider of pork and diligent servant of district interests and a challenger whose ability to deliver the goods was at best doubtful but between a supporter of liberal elitist Clinton, big government, high taxes, and politics as usual and a challenger opposed to these horribles. The House Democrats' customary strategy of emphasizing the projects, grants, and programs they brought to the district and the value of their experience and seniority not only failed but was turned against them. The more they reminded people of pork and clout, the more they revealed themselves as insiders, that loathed class of career politicians. With the choice framed this way, the old ploy of running for Congress by running against Congress—joining the chorus of criticism to put oneself apart from, and above, the institution (Fenno 1978)—was rendered threadbare as well. The Democrats were unable to duck individual responsibility for the House's collective shortcomings.

Ironically, the Republicans' Contract with America, which became so prominent in setting the Republican agenda after the election, had, in itself, little impact on the voters. On September 27, more than 300 Republican House candidates signed pledges on the steps of the Capitol to act swiftly on a grab bag of proposals for structural and legislative change, including constitutional amendments requiring a balanced budget and imposing term limits on members of Congress, major cuts in income taxes, and reductions in spending on welfare programs for poor families. Although the contract got some attention in the media and was a target of Democratic counterattacks, most voters went to the polls blissfully unaware of its existence. The *New York Times*/CBS News poll of October 29–November 1, 1994, found that 71 percent of respondents never heard of the contract and another 15 percent said it would make no difference in how they

voted. Only 7 percent said it would make them more likely to vote for the Republican House candidate, while 5 percent said it would make them less likely to do so. The most prominent Republican effort to nationalize the campaign thus remained almost invisible to voters. This does not mean that individual parts of the contract were not used effectively by Republican campaigners; they were. But the contract itself had far more impact on Republican candidates (before and after the election) than on voters.

Nationalizing the Vote

Although the contract had little impact, Republicans did succeed in nationalizing the elections to a much greater degree than was usual in recent elections. They won the House by tying congressional Democrats to Clinton, to a discredited government establishment, and to a deplorable status quo. In effect, Republicans ran a set of midterm congressional campaigns that mirrored their successful presidential campaigns. As a result, their House victories echoed their presidential successes far more clearly than they did at any time during the last 40 years.

Most of the seats Republicans took from Democrats were in districts that leaned Republican in presidential elections. A serviceable measure of a district's presidential leanings can be computed by taking the average division of its two-party vote between the presidential candidates in 1988 and 1992.[3] The national mean for this measure of district presidential voting habits is 49.9 percent Democratic; its median is 48.3 percent Democratic. As Table 1.1 shows, Republican gains in 1994 were heavily concentrated in districts where the Democrats' vote, averaged over the two elections, fell below 50 percent. For example, 31 open seats formerly held by Democrats were at stake. Republicans won all 16 open Democratic seats in districts where Bush's share of the two-party vote, averaged together for 1988 and 1992, exceeded 50 percent; they won only 6 of the 15 seats where the Democrat's presidential average exceeded 50 percent. Republican challengers defeated 21 of 73 (28.8 percent) incumbent Democrats in districts where Bush's average exceeded 50 percent, but only 13 of 152 (8.6 percent) where Bush's average fell short of this mark.

The handful of switches to the Democrats followed the same pattern: Democrats took 4 of 5 open Republican seats where the Democrats' average share exceeded 50 percent; they won none of other 16 open Republican seats and defeated no Republican incumbents. The net effect of seats changing party hands in 1994 was a closer alignment of district-level presidential and House results than we have seen in any election since 1952—all the more remarkable because no presidential candidates were on the 1994 ballot. Notice, however, that alignment was much closer when incumbency did not intervene; of the open seats 88 percent went to the same party as the district's presidential majority, compared with 79 percent of incumbent-held seats. The simple correlation between the district's 1988 and 1992 presidential vote (averaged) and the 1994 two-party House vote