

Research Article

From Permanent Minority to Revolutionary Majority

“25 Years of the Republican Revival in the United States”

Saumyajit Ray

Assistant Professor, Centre for Canadian, US & Latin American Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

I N F O

E-mail Id:

ray.saumyajit@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Ray S. From Permanent Minority to Revolutionary Majority. *J Adv Res Pub Poli Admn* 2019; 3(1&2): 1-6

Date of Submission: 2019-08-07

Date of Acceptance: 2019-10-14

A B S T R A C T

The Republican Party in the United States regained control of Congress after four decades during the midterm elections of 1994. Believing as it did that its revival lay in rediscovering itself as a rigidly ideological organization opposed to any kind of compromise with the Democratic Party and its policies and programs promoting Big Government, Republicans under then House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-GA) presented Americans with a positive governing agenda that doubled up as its campaign document in 1994. In November that year, Republicans under Gingrich (subsequently elected House Speaker in the 104th Congress) won handsomely, recapturing Congress for the first time after 1954 and posing a serious threat to the political and legislative goals of President Bill Clinton, Gingrich's bête noire. That campaign document, called the Contract with America, and that victory turn 25 this year. This article intends to remind students of American politics (and even the general reader) about that remarkable document (never had a campaign document been published during an off-year election) and that revolutionary victory on that occasion.

Keywords: Republican Party, Congress, Presidency, Contract with America, Newt Gingrich

Introduction

Seldom did the Republican Party get the opportunity to set the national agenda as it did after its recapture of Congress after four decades in 1994. The attempts of the principal ideologue of the conservative Right Wing of the party, Ronald Wilson Reagan of California, 40th president of the United States, to cut down the welfare state (Big Government in Republican parlance) was repeatedly foiled by a Democratic Congress despite his immense personal popularity. The Right Wing, which was conscious of the fact that it was necessary to control Congress to have any reasonable chance to achieve its ideological goals, started paying full attention to winning congressional

majorities from 1994. The way to do it would be to develop a positive governing agenda that would not only clearly help distinguish it from Democrats, but present Americans with a legislative alternative to the welfare statist programs of the Democratic Party, variously titled as New Deal, Fair Deal, New Frontier, and Great Society. The Republican Party's revival came after four decades, but the rigid ideological turn that the midterm elections of 1994 gave it has sustained it as a fighting force in American politics. But the party had been in decline for long, so much so that even its supporters had reconciled themselves to permanent minority status in Congress. By all means, its revival in 1994 was revolutionary.

Republican Decline in Congress

The Republican Party's downslide in Congress began during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower himself: the party lost four consecutive elections when Ike was still in the White House, with its candidate for president in 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, losing as well. The GOP's worst performance came in the elections to the 89th Congress in 1969 when it won only 140 seats in the House of Representatives and 32 seats in the Senate (compared to the Democrat's 293 House seats and 68 Senators).¹ The Johnson landslide that buried his conservative Republican challenger, Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, buried the GOP as well. This was rivaled by the elections to the 94th Congress ten years later, held in the aftermath of Watergate and the pardon of former President Nixon by President Gerald Ford in September, 1974, when the Republicans managed to get only 144 seats in the House (Democrats 289) and 38 in the Senate (Democrats 61).² When the beleaguered president failed to get elected on his own in 1976, his party improved its tally by a mere two seats.

Jimmy Carter's lackluster presidency caused Republicans to make substantial gains in the mid-term elections of 1978: 159 seats in the House (Democrats 275) and 41 in the Senate (Democrats 59). In 1980, the party elected 192 Representatives (Democrats 242) and 47 Senators (Democrats 53), the highest before 1994, riding the Reagan wave. Even though Reagan's popularity and approval ratings as president remained high, his party slid to 167 seats in the House (Democrats 266) and 45 in the Senate (Democrats 55) in the midterm elections of 1982. Reagan's re-election in 1984 also helped the GOP to improve its position in the House (182 seats to the Democrats' 252) and in the Senate (47 seats to the Democrats' 53). But the Reagan recession had already set in and the president's party had to bear the brunt for it in the 1986 mid-term elections: 177 House (Democrats 255) and 46 Senate (Democrats 54) seats. Vice President George Bush won Reagan's "third term" in 1988, but his party's tally slipped by one seat each in the House and the Senate. Bush's uninspiring presidency coupled with the continuing recession resulted in the GOP's worst show in ten years in the mid-term elections of 1990: 166 House (Democrats 268) and 43 Senate (Democrats 57) seats. When President Bush lost his re-election bid to Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas two years later, the GOP gained ten seats in the House and one in the Senate. But it was not a case of ticket-splitting: the GOP was still the minority party in Congress.

After the death of Senator Robert Taft on July 31, 1953, the Republican Right Wing never found a leader of his stature in Congress.³ Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona emerged as the chief spokesman of GOP conservatives

after Richard Nixon's electoral defeat in 1960,⁴ but his own defeat in 1964, in what turned out to be the biggest landslide in the history of American presidential elections, killed all hopes of a Right Wing takeover of the party. Gradually, GOP conservatives lost command of the party structure. Goldwater's defeat also resulted in changes in the Republican leadership in Congress: Representative Charles Halleck of Indiana, a Right Wing affiliate, was replaced by Gerald R. Ford of Michigan as House Minority Leader.⁵ Ford was no Right Wing Republican (he called himself a "constructive moderate") and thus, Halleck's dismissal signified the end of conservative-led Republican opposition in Congress. But both Taft and Goldwater were senators. The Republican Right Wing never had a leader of substance in the House. Despite Halleck's subsequent proximity to GOP conservatives, he was backed by Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York, a staunch liberal Republican, when he was elected House Majority Leader for the first time in 1947. But the Indiana Representative did little to consolidate Right Wing control of the House Republican Party both during his tenure as House Majority Leader from 1947 to 1949 and 1953 to 1955 and as House Minority Leader from 1959 to 1965.⁶ Ironically, moderate Gerald Ford was replaced by conservative Representative John J. Rhodes of Arizona as House Minority Leader when the celebrated Representative from the Fifth Congressional District of Michigan resigned on December 6, 1973 to take over as Vice President of the United States.⁷ But despite Rhodes' conservative credentials, he had backed Ford for the Republican nomination in 1976⁸ and again, urged Ronald Reagan to retain liberal Republican Bill Brock of Tennessee, curiously identified as a "moderate conservative", as GOP national Chairman in 1980.⁹ Representative Robert H. Michel of Illinois, who took over from Rhodes as House Minority Leader in 1981 in the wake of the Reagan landslide, however, belonged to that generation of Republicans who believed in working with the majority Democratic leadership in crafting legislation and maintaining traditional norms.¹⁰

The Rise of Newt Gingrich

All these changed with the election of Representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia as Minority Whip on March 23, 1989.¹¹ Gingrich, a strident conservative activist who entered the House from Georgia's Sixth Congressional District for the first time in 1979, believed that the House Republican Minority should not compromise to improve Democratic legislation and instead use the chamber as a political forum to express opposition and build political support.¹² He rejected the traditional conciliatory leadership style of House Republican leader Bob Michel and narrowly beat Representative Ed Madigan of Illinois, eighty-seven to eighty-five, for the post of Minority Whip.

Gingrich, the conservative ideologue that he was, sought

to project the race as a debate over the means by which Republicans could gain more power and ultimately emerge as the majority.¹³ He described the race as a choice between his party's co-operative manner of dealing with Democrats and the most assertive, even hostile, style that he had demonstrated since entering Congress in 1979.¹⁴ Gingrich wanted to demolish the minority mindset of the House GOP leadership and thus, to him, a victory over Madigan, a Michel protégé, meant a majoritarian GOP revolution in the House. Beating Madigan was like beating Michel himself, and putting an end to his brand of conciliatory politics. Interestingly, Gingrich reached far beyond his conservative base to GOP moderates and other senior Republicans who shared none of his faith in aggressive tactics but believed Republicans needed someone who was both imaginative and had a breadth of vision to break the Democrats' grip on power in the House. At a time when the House Republican leadership appeared lifeless and resigned to permanent minority status, the moderates found that Gingrich had both the vision and the charisma to lift it out of the morass.¹⁵ As a result, the moderates, though not all of them, enthusiastically backed Gingrich in the whip race. The Georgian's victory was the first and most important intraparty victory for the Republican Right Wing for a very long time¹⁶ and the fact that he had transformed the House forever was evident to all.¹⁷

Way back in 1982, Gingrich had a discussion with Richard Nixon on how to revitalize the House Republican minority. The former president advised the young Representative to both assemble a team of committed activists and produce a governing agenda.¹⁸ Gingrich soon recruited a small group of young conservatives who he believed had the perfect combination of conservative philosophy and activist energy, and the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS) was born in February, 1983.¹⁹ The COS had three important goals: abuse and accuse the Democrats, write a platform on which to fight an election, and ultimately take control of the party itself.

Prodded on by senior GOP leaders like Jack Kemp, Trent Lott, and Dick Cheney, the COS began propagating their conservative ideas and harassing the Democratic majority on the floor of the House, taking advantage of live television coverage of House proceedings on C-SPAN, even getting into a major showdown with Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (D-MA) in the process.²⁰

The Gingrich-led COS tried to convince House Republican leaders that it was no use co-operating with Democrats as the Democrats were bent on trampling on the rights of the minority. A dispute in the House over a contested election in Indiana's Eighth Congressional District (GOP leaders believed the Democrats had stolen the election) brought new converts to Gingrich's larger cause and made many

House Republican leaders more receptive to his message.²¹

In 1987, Gingrich called for an ethics investigation of Speaker Jim Wright (D-Texas), raising questions about his personal integrity and business dealings.²² Two years later, the House Ethics Committee announced that Wright had violated in 69 instances House rules on financial conduct²³ and unable to take further humiliation, the Speaker resigned. Though House Republicans were initially skeptical about Gingrich's drive against Wright, they had little sympathy for the eminently partisan Speaker, and Wright's ultimate ouster convinced them of Gingrich's leadership qualities: they began looking at him as someone who could bring them out of years of oblivion.²⁴

Gingrich and his followers fought the traditionalists within the Republican Party but mostly over taxes and deficits. Their principal antagonist was Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Interestingly, after Dole became Senate Majority Leader in 1985 and Minority Leader in 1987 and held the post till he was nominated for president in 1996, he began identifying himself with the GOP Right Wing, especially after the election of Bill Clinton as US president.

Dole argued on the lines of the age-old Republican doctrine that deficits mattered most and reducing them should be the party's top priority. The conservatives, led by Representative Jack Kemp of New York, on the other hand, believed that cutting taxes was more important for the health of the economy (interestingly, Kemp was Dole's running mate in 1996). Gingrich, however, realized that the deficit was harmful for the nation's future and something had to be done about it.

The conservatives' battle with the GOP traditionalists intensified after George H.W. Bush became president in 1989. Within two months of the Bush inauguration, Gingrich was elected as House Minority Whip, to the great consternation of the White House. According to the conservatives, the Bush presidency threatened to reverse the gains Republicans had made under Reagan. They believed that President Bush was steadily moving the party away from Reagan conservatism toward a more moderate middle ground, blurring the distinction between Democrats and Republicans in the process, and they were determined to block him.²⁵ The chance presented itself when Bush abandoned his "no new taxes" pledge, which he had made during the 1988 campaign, and offered to introduce new taxes as part of an overall package for the 1990 budget. Conservatives, believing that they had to draw a clear line against new taxes to reestablish the GOP as the anti-tax party in America, openly broke with Bush.

Despite appeals by Dole and Michel to Republicans to support their President, the GOP Right Wing helped defeat

Bush's budget proposals in the House.²⁶ Though a new proposal passed the House with Democratic support, Republicans fared poorly in the elections to the 102nd Congress in November 1990, losing ten seats in the House and two in the Senate. It was reason enough for the conservatives to finally dissociate themselves from George H.W. Bush and his "kindler and gentler" presidency. Gingrich and his band of activist conservatives wanted to restore Reaganism as the heart of the Republican Party's governing agenda and take their conservatism to places the GOP had not earlier ventured into. For this purpose, Gingrich turned his attention from legislation to politics and elections in the last half of the Bush administration. And as a first step towards taking over the party, he began recruiting allies methodically. The GOPAC, a political action committee attached to the Republican Party, came handy. Gingrich transformed GOPAC into an ideological training forum from simply an election-fighting machine.²⁷ As Gingrich believed that it was more important to transform the thinking of the candidates about what it meant to be a Republican, he sent prospective candidates audiotapes and videotapes which offered them everything from broad policy prescriptions for ending the welfare state to rethinking America's role in the post-cold war world. Consequently, Gingrich shaped the political philosophy of an entirely new generation of House Republicans who had an extraordinary willingness to hurl themselves against Democratic barricades with as much enthusiasm as Gingrich himself had once displayed. Not only that, from the beginning of the 1990s, House Republican policymaking began to be dominated by conservatives.²⁸

To what extent Gingrich dominated the House Republicans became clear after the 1992 elections. Bush's defeat emancipated the young conservatives and relieved them of any obligation whatsoever to the White House. In the conservative view Bush lost not because he had been too ideological, but because he was not ideological enough. In other words, Bush was defeated because he had deviated from Reaganism, particularly in raising taxes, and revival lay in reclaiming the inheritance that Bush had squandered.²⁹ The conservatives held this view very strongly and it was reflected in the results of the leadership elections of House Republicans in the 103rd Congress.

The most important leadership election turned out to be the one for the post of chair of the House Republican Conference for which Representative Richard K. Armey of Texas, a conservative former economics professor and Gingrich confidante, was challenging incumbent Jerry Lewis of California. The contest turned into a major showdown between the more ideological conservatives with whom Armey identified and the GOP's more traditional and pragmatic wing to which Lewis belonged. Armey beat Lewis by a narrow 88-84 margin and his victory bolstered Gingrich's desire to help create a "responsible" House

Republican Party with a positive and attractive domestic agenda.³⁰

They did not have to look far. President Bill Clinton's popularity sank as his legislative agenda languished in Congress. Republican leaders began expressing increasing optimism about the Fall 1994 elections, especially after the spectacular victory of the GOP's Ron Lewis from Kentucky's Second Congressional District on May 24, 1994. The Republicans were again a party which had both a message and internal discipline. They decided to be the vehicle of the anger rising all over America against the Clinton presidency, Republicans sought to benefit from the immense anti-government sentiment growing among gun-owners, term limits advocates, religious conservatives, small business owners, taxpayer activists and the followers of Ross Perot (the 1992 Third Party candidate), and systemically stoke the populist resentment against Washington. Republicans were again a party with a sense of unity and purpose, the guardians of conservatism: reasons enough for them to begin thinking again about becoming the majority party in America.

Three people were primarily responsible for the Republican Party's revival: Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour, Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole, and House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich. All were disciplined leaders, believing that Republicans had no other option but to revive conservatism of the Reagan variety.³¹ But the central character of the unfolding Republican drama of 1994 was Newt Gingrich. Not only did he instill a sense of unity and purpose in his party, he had planned for a Republican majority in Congress from the time he entered the federal legislature two decades back. Gingrich wanted to offer the American voting public a positive blueprint of conservative governance. Not only did he plan to jeopardize President Clinton's agenda in the 103rd Congress but also to seriously highlight Clinton's failures as president. He called upon Republicans to develop a positive governing agenda and to communicate it to voters in intelligible language, devoid of intellectual gibberish. What Gingrich proposed was a vision statement that would double up as a campaign document that he hoped would turn the off-year elections of 1994 into one of national importance. The idea was to develop policies not only in traditional Republican areas such as defense, economic growth, and budget reform, but in areas of traditional Democratic popular strength like health care, welfare reform, and congressional reform.³²

Gingrich realized that Republicans whom people have trusted more to solve the problems on the public agenda, failed in House elections because House elections, more often than not, have tended not to be issue-oriented. Not only that, the best GOP issues, national defense and general, prosperity were less salient in House elections.

Thus, the key objectives for the GOP were to make issues more important in the 1994 House elections, and to change to the party's advantage the understanding of issues that would predominate in the 1994 campaign, apart from trying to make members and candidates overcome the "minority-mentality", that accepted institutional norms and opposition party status, (insert comma) presenting evidence on the unfairness of Democrats, as part of the grand strategy to nationalize the 1994 elections.

Contract with America

Out of this strategy emerged the Contract with America, described as "the bold plan by Rep".

Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey and the House Republicans to change the nation".³³ This was a matter of great historical importance: never has a campaign document (or rather, a party platform) been published during an off year election. Evolving from the Salisbury conference of GOP House members, the Contract represented, as the Republicans said, the first substantive steps on the road to a smaller government with lower taxes and fewer regulations.³⁴ Actually, the Contract was a ten point platform that not only helped to unify Republican candidates around a sweeping set of policy proposals but also energized some of the party's key constituencies for the Fall campaign. The issues in the Contract were chosen for their popularity and were consciously packaged in the most appealing manner.

Not only that, they addressed the same range of issues the Democratic 103rd Congress had left undone. Broadly, the issues addressed by the Contract were: balancing the budget, stopping crime, reforming welfare, reinforcing families, enhancing fairness for senior citizens, strengthening national defense, cutting government regulations, promoting legal reform, considering term limits and reducing taxes. The GOP unveiled the Contract on September 27, 1994 when 152 incumbents and 185 challengers belonging to the party gathered on the steps of the Capitol and signed the Contract, promising a vote, if not necessarily a passage, of the Contract's ten bills within hundred days of a GOP-controlled Congress.

On Election Day, November 8, 1994, the Republican Party won 236 House seats, gaining 52, and 53 seats in the Senate, in the first GOP control of the House since 1953, breaking the forty-year stranglehold of the Democratic party on Congress. Gingrich claimed the election results were a mandate for the Contract's ten elements. The Contract became the key to the GOP majority in Congress: it had dominated the discourse among the candidates and shaped the campaign from the day it was inaugurated. What voters liked most was the contractual nature of the Contract: "If we break the contract, throw us out". A new class of House Republicans arrived who lifted Gingrich and his vision to

the forefront of the party. They were all creatures of the architect of the new Republican revolution, Newt Gingrich, and represented the purest strain of the Gingrich philosophy. And when the 104th Congress assembled for the first time on January 4, 1995, they elected the Representative from the Sixth Congressional District of Georgia as House Speaker.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the revival of the Republican Party after the unfortunate defeat of President George H.W. Bush in 1992 happened in the hands of its congressional wing. Then House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-GA), whose intention it was to make the House the "co-equal of the White House", seized the opportunity to change the fortunes of his party by doing everything from attacking both the beleaguered 41st president and his successor and ruining the political career of the "most corrupt Speaker of all times", to developing a positive legislative agenda which doubled as a campaign document during the off-year election of 1994. Gingrich's rigid and uncompromising ideological stand made him the architect of the Republican revolution that year, at the same time earning him the negative reputation of an eminently divisive leader. Regaining control of Congress after a long gap of forty years, Republicans were on a new high, and they systematically started undoing the massive structure of the welfare state-which they renamed "tax and spend government"-erected by Democrats over the course of four decades. Under the confrontational leadership of Gingrich, whom they had unanimously elected House Speaker in the "revolutionary" 104th Congress, Republicans realized the power of Congress, and set about doing everything in their capacity to obstruct the liberal agenda of Democratic president Bill Clinton. In fact, it was the congressional Republican leadership that was now setting the agenda as much for Clinton as for the party.

There is no doubt that Bill Clinton of Arkansas did not take kindly to the obstructionist politics of Gingrich and his cronies, but he could do nothing about it. His only satisfaction was his own successful re-election bid in 1996, in which he trounced Sen. Robert J. "Bob" Dole (R-KS), now a Gingrich ally; defeating Dole was like defeating Gingrich himself. A great confrontation ensued between Gingrich and Clinton on the issue of balancing the budget, and House Republicans led by the Speaker shut down the government twice in December 1995 and January 1996. Both the president and the media blamed Gingrich, if not all Republicans, for the deadlock and Clinton benefited from the sympathy he had successfully evoked for himself in American minds during the presidential elections nearly a year later.

Nevertheless, Gingrich made "government by Congress" a reality, setting the national agenda during the time he held

office, and proving that a House Speaker from the “other” party, that too in a majority in the federal legislature, can thoroughly disrupt the president’s plans and prove to be infinitely more powerful than an Opposition leader in a parliamentary system. The fortunes of the Republican party were inextricably linked to those of Gingrich, but it goes to his credit that he consolidated the gains of 1994 so strongly that the GOP retained back-to-back congressional majorities for 12 continuous years, when the follies of George W. Bush would hand over the Congress to Democrats (though for a short period of four years) to a Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)-led Democratic party.

Republicans no doubt had more of their own men in the White House than Democrats since 1945, but the realization dawned over a period of four decades that core items of the Republican agenda could only be successfully implemented only when the party commanded a clear majority in both houses of the U.S. Congress. Such a majority, opposed to any kind of compromise with the Democratic minority was also needed to disrupt the plans, programs, and budgetary goals of a Democratic president, if one is at all elected. Those within the GOP who refused to compromise on matters of ideology not only with Democrats but also with the Moderates within the party comprise the conservatives, also known as the Republican Right Wing. Gingrich’s protégés in the party, much after he left office, provided solid support to George W. Bush and his war on terror, frustrated Barack H. Obama time and again, and continue to Back President Donald Trump’s nativist agenda. If not for Gingrich and his Contract with America of 1994, Republicans would never have been an ideologically-motivated fighting force in American politics and American elections today. The Republican Party’s ideological ambiguity, a characteristic of its decades in oblivion, is now history. For that, the party has only one person to give the credit to: a ten-term Representative from the 6th congressional district of Georgia named Newton L. Gingrich.

References

1. The Annual Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1975: The 94th Congress, 1st Session. CQ Press: Washington, DC, 1976.
2. Reinhard, W David. The Republican Right since 1945. The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, KY, 1983, 113.
3. *ibid*, 159.
4. *ibid*, 211. Also Cannon, James. Time and Chance: Gerald Ford’s Appointment with History. The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI; 1998, 81-85.
5. Reinhard, op. cit. 18.
6. How Congress Works. CQ Press: Washington, DC; 1991, 144.
7. *ibid*.
8. Reinhard, op. cit. 230.
9. *ibid*, 249.
10. Koopman, M Douglas. Hostile Takeover: The House Republican Party, 1981-1995. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham, MD; 1996, 136.
11. How Congress Works, op. cit. 145.
12. *ibid*, 24.
13. B Dan, Brownstein Ronald. Storming the Gates: Protest Politics and the Republican Revival. Little, Brown & Company: New York, NY; 1996, 132.
14. Koopman, op. cit.13.
15. Balz & Brownstein, 133.
16. Koopman, op. cit. 140. Also Barnes, Fred. Newt. The New Republic, 24 April 1989: 8-10.
17. Balz & Brownstein, op. cit. 134.
18. *ibid*, 118.
19. *ibid*. 188-99p. Also Fineman Howard, Cooper Matthew. Newt Hits the Showers. Newsweek, 16 November , 1998: 42.
20. Balz & Brownstein, op. cit. 120-21p. Also, How Congress Works, op. cit, 25.
21. *ibid*, 122.
22. *ibid*, 123. Also, Newsweek, op. cit, 42.
23. How Congress Works, op. cit, 21.
24. How Congress Works, op. cit, 21.
25. B Brownstein, op. cit, 126.
26. *ibid*, 285.
27. *ibid*, 186.
28. *ibid*, 146.
29. Koopman, op. cit, 139.
30. B Brownstein, op, cit, 149.
31. Koopman, op. cit, 140-141.
32. B Brownstein, op, cit, 29.
33. Koopman, op. cit, 142.
34. Gingrich Newt, Armey Dick, Gillespie Ed. Contract with America. Times Books: New York, NY; 1994, 4.
35. *ibid*, 21.
36. Ray S. How the Speaker of the US House of Representatives from the ‘Other’ Party Shaped American Politics Since 1945. International Studies, 2014; 49: 3-4: 377-95.