

The 1994 GOP Success Lacks Coattails

Vin Weber thinks these midterm elections may parallel 1982 when the non-presidential party picked up 26 House seats, totally stopping the president's momentum on domestic initiatives.

Ordinarily that should please Mr. Weber, a former conservative Minnesota congressman and one of the keenest minds in American politics. It doesn't. While he sees big Republican gains on Nov. 8, he doesn't think his party is setting the stage to govern effectively and capture the presidency two years from now.

"We're winning clearly because people are rejecting the Democrats and Clinton,"



Politics & People

By Albert R. Hunt

he says. "But we're saying very little about solving the real problems and issues facing people. When we get to 1996 the Republicans may not have anything more to say to the country about the real problems than the Democrats do."

The 1982 analogy is apt. That year the Democrats dominated the dialogue while turning the campaign into a referendum on Ronald Reagan's domestic agenda; the big Democratic gains that November stopped the Republicans from killing Head Start, gutting the Environmental Protection Agency or seriously reforming entitlements. But too many Democrats mistakenly thought it was a mandate to recreate their glory days. The result: Ronald Reagan was re-elected by a landslide in 1984.

We're certainly seeing a repeat of the first part of that story.

This election has turned into a referendum on President Clinton. He's going to lose badly, killing any hopes to resurrect health care or launch many serious new domestic measures. The only ques-

tion is whether the Republicans win working control or actual control of the House and Senate.

Like 1982, this is good short-term politics. But the Republican national agenda, which on the critical economic issue tries to recapture the winning ways of the early 1980s, isn't a formula for governing or for winning the next national election.

The GOP has other problems. The presidential field looks weak, especially if Jack Kemp doesn't run; top Democratic strategists like Tony Coelho now seriously believe the most likely Republican candidate for 1996 is Dan Quayle. The Republicans are playing footsie with Ross Perot this year, probably to their advantage; in 1996 they're more likely to get their legs cut off playing that game.

To be sure, Democrats do exaggerate some of the shortcomings of the House Republican Contract and the similar, but more modest, Senate Republican Agenda. (The Senate version doesn't call for term limits—not surprising, since it was engineered by Bob Dole, a 34-year congressional veteran.) But the numbers do not even come close to adding up. And the agenda—big tax cuts skewed chiefly to the more affluent, more defense spending and rhetoric about a balanced budget with few specifics—is *deja vu* all over again.

This will only modestly reduce the GOP electoral gains next month; the public disappointment with what is seen as the failure of the Democrats to bring real change is more dominant. But after the election voters aren't going to rally around an effort to revisit and recapture yesterday. This week's Wall Street Journal/NBC News national poll shows that registered voters, for all their unhappiness with President Clinton, dislike going back to the economic policies of the 1980s a lot more.

For the mid-1990s, the Republican contract seems irrelevant. It would do little to stop 10-year-old inner city kids from throw-

ing a five-year-old boy out a window to his death, or eliminate the pervasive fear many Americans have that their jobs are not secure. There's little of the sort of creative conservatism articulated by Jack Kemp or the sort of fundamental effort to reduce government as advocated in "Dead Right," the provocative book by journalist David Frum. Some of these proposals would draw fire from many of us neo-left-

committed to all these measures after all. In Maine, GOP House candidate James Longley worries about "a lack of specificity," while acknowledging that the pledge to cut taxes, boost defense spending and balance the budget doesn't add up.

In Pennsylvania, GOP candidate Rick Santorum pooh-poohed the Senate Republican agenda as simply "some proposals that Bob Dole thought up the night before a press conference."

Naturally most of the Republicans are returning to what works: Attack President Clinton and the failures of united government. Unlike national elections, which are about choices, as pollster Peter Hart notes, midterm elections are about protests; Republicans have a decided edge on the anger vote this year, although in more than a dozen states, from Maine to California, independent candidates will do surprisingly well, probably hurting the GOP.

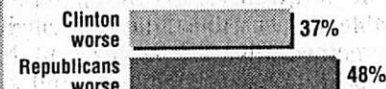
Yet midterm elections can establish the conditions for a party to capture the presidency two years later. In 1978 the Republican agenda of the Kemp-Roth tax cuts, calls for massive deregulation and a much tougher defense posture certainly laid the groundwork for 1980. And, in a negative sense, George Mitchell's sucking President Bush into a budget summit, and the attendant tax hike, became a centerpiece of the 1990 election and critical to the Democrats' success two years later. The Republicans will do better this time than the party did in 1978 and than the Democrats did in 1990. But other than the important likelihood of electing governors in as many as nine of the 10 largest states, this election will provide little help for Republicans in 1996.

Or, as Vin Weber laments while paraphrasing Texas Gov. Ann Richards: "We're going to wake up the morning after the election finding ourselves on third base, thanks to Bill Clinton, and think we hit a triple."

No Nostalgia for the '80s

Republican candidates this year say that President Clinton's economic policies will wreck the economy, while many Democrats say that a return to Republican policies of the 1980s would be worse.

Which is closer to your view?*



*1,203 registered voters polled, Oct. 14-18, 1994

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL/NBC NEWS POLL

ies, but they would set a serious agenda.

The GOP contract has become to many Republicans what Bill Clinton is to Democrats: The opponents bring it up while its supposed champions shy away from it. Already a dozen House Democratic candidates have TV ads criticizing the Republican contract, and by Election Day there may be three or four times as many. This has given many Democratic candidates an opening to join a national debate. Before "we had nothing to say," notes Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. "It was a national monologue and now it's a dialogue."

On Monday, the Des Moines Register reported that two Iowa Republicans, incumbent Jim Ross Lightfoot and Tom Latham, running in an open seat, both backed away from support for the House Republican contract, saying they're not