

Why 2010 Will Not Be 1994

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: October 1, 2009 01:05 AM

In the last few weeks, Republicans have put a new twist on their campaign of never ending fear. Now the Republicans are trying to scare Democrats into thinking that 2010 will be another 1994, meaning that the Democratic Party is poised for a sweeping defeat which will vindicate the Republican Party and show that they were right about Obama, Pelosi and Reid all along.

Republican talking points comparing the upcoming 2010 midterm elections with those in 1994 are, on the surface, somewhat persuasive. The basic Republican argument is that in both 1992 and 2008, a Democratic President and Congress was swept into power; in both 1993 and 2009 that Democratic President spent an awful lot of time on health care; we didn't like Clinton; and we don't like Obama. This outline is filled in with references to Democratic extremism, socialism and perhaps most absurdly, the alleged failure of the Obama administration to reach out to Republicans.

There are, however, numerous reasons why 2010 will not be another 1994. The first is that 1994 was only partially a response to frustration with Clinton, it was also an expression of anger at Democratic control of congress, which in 1994 was a far different issue. In 1994, the Democrats had controlled the House since Harry Truman brought his party to power in 1948. They had also controlled the senate for 30 of the 44 years since that 1948 election. Accordingly, the anger at the Democratic Party in 1994 was also a genuine coalescence of broad anti-government frustration. Today anger towards the Democrats is still concentrated in the Republican base. Presenting the Republicans as the anti-Washington party will be much harder 2010 as the Republicans will only be two years removed from being the insider party themselves. Moreover, the climate of scandals and insider deal making which permeated congress, and by extension stuck to the Democrats, is simply not as strong or widespread as it was in 1994.

The Republican Party is also in a very different position than they were in 1994. In 1994, they could relatively clearly present themselves as the party of change and reform, particularly with regards to congress. Today, Republican control of congress is not a distant memory and major congressional scandals such as those surrounding Ted Stevens, Tom Delay or Jack Abramoff involve Republicans at least as much as Democrat members of congress.

In 1994, the Republican Party largely unified behind Newt Gingrich and his Contract for America which was a concise, if misguided, summary of the change the Republican Party promised to bring if they came to power. Today, the Republican Party has nothing approaching the energy and originality which Newt Gingrich had in 1994. Instead the party has little to offer other than fear and anger.

The demographics of the two parties have changed as well. To some extent the same demographic change that made Obama's African roots far less of a negative in 2008 than they

would have been a generation ago, will work to help the Democrats in 2010. As the country becomes younger, more educated and less white, the fortunes of a party whose base is among older and less educated white voters will not be good. Similarly, much of the Republican gains in 1994 were the final stage in the transition of the south from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican. In 1994, the Republicans were able to pick up more than a few seats in conservative southern districts where conservative Democrats gave way to more conservative Republicans. While Max Baucus, Blanche Lincoln and other conservative Democrats may be in the news a bit this week, they are a far smaller part of the party than they were in 1994.

In some respects, the Republican comparisons to 1994 are harmless because they will likely result in greater Democratic Party focus and energy on the 2010 elections. If the Democratic Party believes there is a danger of losing more than 50 seats in the house and 8 in the senate, as they did in 1994, they will almost certainly run a campaign that is far more aggressive than the lackluster 1994 Democratic campaign when the White House and the Democratic leadership in congress seemed to realize the extent of voter anger and frustration only after it was too late.

The Republicans intent is obviously not simply to see the Democratic Party work harder, but to throw the Democratic Party off of their strategy now and to put the Obama White House on the defensive. To view the defeat in 1994 as the result of pushing too hard on health care, to take one important example, is the precise wrong lesson to take from that election, but it is the one the Republican punditry would like the White House to believe. These next few months are critical for the Obama administration, and ignoring calls to slow down, based on inaccurate comparisons with 1994, will be essential to their success.