

Year of change: A review of the 1994 elections

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The 1994 elections at the national and state level resulted in significant changes all across the political landscape. In the following articles, University of Maine political scientist Matthew Moen and Bowdoin Professor of Government Christian Potholm analyze the nature of that change and its implications for Maine.

The 1994 elections: The Maine vote in national perspective

By Matthew C. Moen

On November eighth, 1994, the Republican Party swept to its greatest electoral victory in a generation. The last time the GOP had fared so well in a mid-term election was 1946, when it gained 56 seats in the House of Representatives and 13 in the Senate. This article examines the congressional and gubernatorial results nationwide, and analyzes the Maine vote in that context.

U.S. House of Representatives

The most stunning victory for the Republican Party came in the U.S. House of Representatives, where the GOP gained 54 seats and majority-party status for the first time since the 83rd Congress (1954-1955). That shift is the largest for either party since 1946, exceeding even Democratic gains in the wake of Watergate in 1974. Perhaps the most astonishing result of the 1994 elections is that all 157 House Republican incumbents won their reelection bids.

Democratic losses generally mirrored Republican gains, although the picture was worse symbolically than the loss of seats and majority-party control. Major Democratic leaders lost their reelection bids, such as Speaker of the House, Tom Foley (Washington); former chairperson of the Ways and Means Committee, Dan Rostenkowski (Illinois); chairperson of the Judiciary Committee, Jack Brooks (Texas); and, chairperson of the Select Intelligence Committee, Dan Glickman (Kansas). Together, those Democratic stalwarts had served 126 years in the House of Representatives.

Missed in the flurry of attention over the particular seats that shifted to the GOP, however, is that Democratic incumbents actually fared quite well. A total of 190 House Democratic incumbents won, while only 35 lost, for an 84 percent success rate. Moreover, of the 35 who lost, 17 were just completing their first term, so freshman members were much more vulnerable proportionally than senior members. Voters clearly did not "throw the rascals out"; they returned a total of 347 of 382 House incumbents (91percent). What voters did is defeat Democrats disproportionately and give Republicans most open-seat contests. The distinction is significant because it suggests that the 1994 vote was more anti-liberal or anti-Clinton, than anti-incumbent.

Another significant part of the House returns is that Republicans fielded more unopposed House candidates than Democrats for the first time in the 20th century. What helps explain that

phenomenon? First, potential Democratic challengers chose not to contest many races, believing that it would be difficult to win given President Clinton's low approval ratings and the historic pattern of the president's party losing seats in the midterm election. (Republicans were able to field challengers in more races for the same reasons). Second, southern Democrats rarely go unchallenged anymore, as they did in preceding decades. In fact, with the 1994 results, the Republicans now enjoy a 73-64 majority of House seats from the South. Third, Republican efforts to build solid grassroots organizations as the Reagan administration drew to a close finally paid off. Elsewhere, I have shown that religious conservatives deliberately began refocusing their efforts from Capitol Hill to the grassroots as the Reagan era ended (Moen 1992). Their efforts were instrumental in at least a half-dozen House races in 1994, and they clearly were only one part of a much broader grassroots effort.

The contests in Maine for the House of Representatives are perplexing in a national context. In the First District, Republican Jim Longley received 136,560 votes (52 percent) to beat Democrat Dennis Dutremble, who received 125,467 votes (48 percent). That race was entirely consistent with Republicans winning open-seat races; it was also typical in the sense that Longley was one of the 330 House Republican candidates who signed the ten-point "Contract With America." In many ways, the First District race was the typical 1994 House race.

The Second District race was remarkably different. Democrat John Baldacci won 108,793 votes (46 percent), compared to Republican Richard Bennett's 96,952 votes (41 percent). (The other 13 percent of the vote was split between independent candidates.)

Baldacci's victory is directly at odds with national trends. He was one of only 14 Democratic freshmen elected to the House, and he was one of an even smaller number who won in a district previously held by a Republican. The only national context in which Baldacci's victory makes sense is regional. Democrats lost only three House seats in the east, compared to 15 in the midwest, 16 in the west, and 19 in the south. In an interesting twist, Baldacci will face the same situation as his predecessor Olympia Snowe -- a member of the minority party from a small state serving in a large, majoritarian institution. It is very difficult to author and pass any substantive legislation in that role.

In a very different vein, the First and Second District races provide suggestive evidence of the accuracy of the "two Maines" thesis (Spruce 1994). The First District cast 24,013 more votes than the Second District. While that difference may be a function of the competitiveness of each race, it may also be that more educated and prosperous constituents reside in southern Maine, since those attributes are often correlated with voter turnout.

U.S. Senate

The national results in the U.S. Senate races were less dramatic, but similarly skewed toward the GOP. It gained seven seats on election night, and an eighth the following day with the defection of incumbent Democratic Senator Richard Shelby (Alabama) to Republican ranks. Those gains switched a 55-45 Democratic advantage in the 103rd Congress (1993-1994) to a 53-47 Republican edge in the next Congress. It will be only the second time since 1954 that the GOP has controlled the Senate, the other being the Reagan years of 1981-1986.

While the aggregate results changed majority party control of the Senate, they were not as striking as the House results, nor as unusual in an historic context. The Republicans gained seven seats on election night, compared to 12 seats in 1980 and to eight seats for the Democrats in 1986. Moreover, the incumbent success rate was solid. All 10 Republican incumbents won, while 14 of 16 (88 percent) Democratic incumbents prevailed, for an overall incumbent success rate of 92 percent. Once again, the evidence suggests that the results were more anti-liberal than anti-incumbent, particularly given the fact that the two losers were high-profile people. Harris Wofford (Pennsylvania) was known for his advocacy of health-care reform, and Jim Sasser (Tennessee) was seeking the top Democratic leadership position in the Senate. The incoming freshman class will be the first all-Republican class since 1914.

The Senate race in Maine was a microcosm of those national results. Olympia Snowe captured 304,516 votes (60 percent), compared to Tom Andrew's 185,210 votes (37 percent). It was an unspectacular, lopsided contest.

Looking ahead to the 104th Congress (1995-1996), the state of Maine has certainly lost clout with the voluntary retirement of Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell. Both William Cohen and Olympia Snowe are too junior to be elected to a committee chairmanship. Both will receive subcommittee chairmanships, but those accrue to every senator of the majority party. The only bright spot in terms of Maine's clout in the Senate is that both senators will be "swing votes" in the majority party, where they are positioned to protect the state's interests.

Governors' races

The governors' races across the nation brought more good news for the GOP. Republicans began election night in control of 19 of 50 governorships, and they ended with 30 to 32 seats. (The Alaska and Maryland races ended within a single percentage point and are subject to recount). The results have given the GOP a majority of the governorships for the first time since 1970.

As with their House and Senate counterparts, incumbent Republican governors enjoyed a 100 percent reelection success rate, with all 10 of them winning. In contrast, seven of 12 Democratic incumbents prevailed, for a 58 percent success rate. Notable Democratic losses included Mario Cuomo (New York) and Ann Richards (Texas). Republicans now control the governorships in those key states, as well as others such as California, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, Tennessee, and Minnesota. Those offices should help Republicans "get out the vote" for their 1996 presidential candidate. Nowhere were the Maine results more out of sync with national trends than with the governor's race. With the win of Angus King, Maine was the only state that elected an independent governor, as well as the only state that did not replace a sitting Republican governor with a Republican successor. King received 178,606 votes (36 percent), compared to Democrat Joseph Brennan's 171,787 votes (34 percent), Republican Susan Collin's 116,344 votes (23 percent), and Green Party Jonathan Carter's 32,392 votes (six percent). The election left Maine with a particularly odd political equation -- a narrowly Democratic state house, a narrowly Republican state senate, and an independent governor.

As Maine goes, so goes Maine

The most significant political development in Maine politics prior to the 1994 elections was the voluntary resignation of Senator George Mitchell. It prompted two incumbent House members to relinquish their seats to run for the open Senate seat, and it deprived gubernatorial candidate Joseph Brennan of an exceedingly popular Democratic figure at the top of the statewide ticket. Mitchell's exit absolutely reconfigured Maine politics.

The mishmash of ensuing electoral outcomes accentuates Maine's unique political character. It is a state with an extraordinarily high voter turnout, a proclivity for independent candidates, a personalized politics that is not possible in more populous, urbanized states, and a bifurcated television market that is highly accessible for candidates, both in terms of cost and access. The mixture makes it possible for a state to elect Republican Olympia Snowe overwhelmingly, and Republican Jim Longley narrowly, consistent with national trends, and then to elect John Baldacci as one of only 14 Democratic House freshman nationwide, and Angus King as the nation's only independent governor. Then too, both Longley and King are political novices, while Baldacci has extensive local experience and Snowe some sixteen years of congressional experience. The odd mixture of candidates shows that Maine charted its own course in 1994. It only partly followed the sweeping national trend favoring the Republican Party.

References

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