

The self-destruction of Ronald Reagan's heirs: The Republican Party, which once pledged to give America's voters 'a choice, not an echo,' now gives neither

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By Richard Minitier

ALEXANDRIA, Va. _ In Arkansas, they call Bill Clinton "the comeback kid." The Republicans in Washington are starting to understand why.

President Clinton is one of the most scandal plagued of any 20th century American leader. Nearly half the members of his Cabinet are targets of independent counsel investigations. The president admitted to lying in a federal case and "misleading" the public for eight months. Gleeful Republicans planned big electoral gains.

Instead, the GOP has just lost five seats in the House and fought like a tiger to stay even in the Senate.

This is a historic victory for Clinton. In every prior non-presidential election since 1944, the party in the White House had lost seats in both chambers, an average of 27 seats in the House and four in the Senate.

Shockingly, the opposite happened this time, with the Democrats gaining five seats in the House and defeating two powerful incumbents in the Senate (New York's Alfonse D'Amato, North Carolina's Lauch Faircloth).

The last time the president's party added seats in the sixth year of an administration was in 1822. Clinton, supposedly weak from scandal, did the impossible--he triumphed and put his opponents in a death grip.

President Clinton will survive; House Speaker Newt Gingrich may not. Republicans are stunned.

"I don't know what went wrong. It just doesn't make sense," one GOP congressional staffer said helplessly.

GOP aides are asking two questions: What went wrong? And what does it mean for impeachment?

Behind closed doors, Republicans are pointing fingers at Gingrich, whose fate will be determined in a Nov. 17 caucus meeting.

Critics cite a campaign devoted almost entirely to scandal and devoid of such crowd pleasers as tax cuts and economic growth. Then there was the budget deal, which alienated the faithful. (A record number of conservatives and white males stayed home on Election Day.)

Some members are talking about replacing Newt Gingrich with Rep. Tom DeLay of Texas, who is the House majority whip, or with Rep. Bob Livingston of Louisiana, who runs the powerful

Appropriations Committee.

Some mutter that an empty chair would be better than Gingrich.

The GOP has gone from the party of anti-government rebels to thick-waisted pawns of polls and campaign dollars in just four short years. Usually, there is a period after a party's ascendancy in which its leading members act like statesmen. Not this time.

The 1998 budget deal, the big spending increases in 1997 and the failure to pass a genuine tax cut meant that the GOP simply represented a different set of special interests than the Democrats.

The party that once pledged to give voters "a choice, not an echo" now gives them neither. "My guess," said GOP pollster Frank Luntz, "is that the difference between the parties is at an all-time low."

A New York Times poll is now being faxed around to prominent Republicans. It reveals only 48 percent of Americans believe that the GOP is the party more likely to cut taxes. Worse still, exactly 48 percent believe that Democrats are more likely to cut taxes.

The GOP has lost its best electoral issue. Prosperity was once the mantra of GOP candidates. Now Election Day exit polls show that the wealthier a voter, or the better a voter felt about the economy, the more likely he or she was to vote Democratic.

Although the GOP lost votes in all income brackets above \$ 15,000, support for Republicans among voters who earned more than \$ 100,000 fell by more than 10 percent. Voters now identify prosperity with Democrats. The last shred of the former President Ronald Reagan's legacy is gone.

Yes, the GOP lacked an identity in the election, but the bigger problem was that it lacked an army of minivans.

Traditionally, both parties spend millions driving the party regulars to the polls, giving them free doughnuts and taking them home.

The Democrats still focus on "get out the vote" efforts. The GOP doesn't.

Consultants like Arthur Finkelstein convinced the GOP leadership that "retail politics is dead." Instead, they said, spend the millions on commercials.

This advice wasn't disinterested. Consultants typically receive 17 percent of the gross advertising budget.

"If instead of spending \$ 30 million on ads, Alfonse (D'Amato) spent \$ 28 million on ads and \$ 2 million on 'get out the vote,' he would've won," said a New York GOP election official. "I mean, there was no vans, no buses, no nothing."

Meanwhile, the Democrats used time-tested techniques to move record numbers of union workers and minorities to the polls. Union households made up 22 percent of voters, up from 14 percent in 1994. Black turnout grew to 11 percent, up from 9 percent in 1994.

A surge of black votes made a difference in several key states, including Maryland, where black turnout grew to 19 percent from 12 percent in 1994.

Voters also seemed to send a message on impeachment. Sixty-one percent of voters said, in exit polling, that they disapproved of the way Republicans handled the scandal. Almost as many told pollsters that impeachment should be dropped.

The president may still be impeached by the House of Representatives, but don't bet on it. The GOP is running scared. "We're not profiles in courage around here," said one House staffer.

Thanks to the Republicans, Bill Clinton has won _ again.

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