

Taking the Nation's Pulse

By Larry Hugick and Andrew Kohut

As the November elections approached, the American electorate became increasingly angry, unanchored and self-absorbed. Thousands of in-depth interviews with American voters conducted by the Times Mirror Center this past summer revealed a public intensely frustrated with the current political system and, as a result, open to alternatives.

By the fall, this hostility had begun to express itself in a greater willingness to support Republican candidates in the mid-term congressional elections. In early October, a majority of registered voters questioned by Times Mirror (52%) said they were inclined to vote for the GOP candidate in their district, while only 40% expected to vote for the Democrat. During this same period, a Gallup survey found likely voters favoring the Republican candidates by 48% to 46%, and an ABC News poll of the voting-age public showed a 47% to 44% GOP advantage (surveys conducted 10/7-9/94 and 10/5-9/94, respectively).

These findings represented a historical high watermark for the Republican Party. The party's congressional candidates had not demonstrated such strength in national polls since Dwight Eisenhower's second year in office. This fall, the GOP was in a position to carry the popular vote for the first time since 1946, when the party gained 55 House seats and 13 Senate seats to win control of both legislative bodies.

Times Mirror's polling through the summer and early fall identified three negative trends in the public's thinking that were converging to seriously undermine congressional Democrats' re-election prospects in 1994. Simply put, Americans had become increasingly anti-incumbent, anti-Washington, and anti-Clinton. If acted upon, the voters' foul mood promised to bring about the most sweeping political changes of the modern era. It was not only freshman Democrats and those in marginal districts who were at risk of losing their

seats—even House Speaker Tom Foley seemed likely to be a casualty.

Nearly every shift in Americans' political beliefs and values identified through Times Mirror's polling seemed to work against the party in power. Two years after electing a Democrat to deal with domestic problems they felt were not sufficiently addressed by previous Republican administrations, Americans appeared to do an about-face, expressing greater skepticism

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about what government programs could achieve and less sympathy for the problems of the poor and disadvantaged. Blacks and whites were also becoming more polarized on racial issues, reversing the trend observed during presidential election year 1992.

These were the powerful forces that presented the GOP with its best opportunity to seize control of Congress since the 1950s. Against these trends stood the power of local versus national politics, and the well-demonstrated capacity of congressional incumbents to create a distinction in voters' minds between themselves as individual officeholders and Congress as an institution. The outcome of the midterm elections would ride on whether the sour national mood was strong enough to overcome the practice of personal and local politics which had served the Democratic Party well at the congressional level for nearly 50 years.

The Mood of America: On the One Hand...

The public mood during the 1994 election season was most distinguished by the frustration with politics which had been building momentum since the mid-1980s. Although substantial majorities of Americans expressed distrust and displeasure with government and politicians when our survey program began in 1987, such feelings have intensified significantly in recent years. Today, an antigovernment mood pervades nearly all segments of the population and characterizes much of the public discourse on politics and policy.

By a number of measures, the public is more negative and politically discontent than it was even two years ago. Our mid-1994 survey found only 33% of the public agreeing that most elected officials care what people like them think, down from 36% in 1992 and 47% in 1987 (see figure 1). Similarly, of those polled this year, only 42% said they believed the government is really run for the benefit of all people, a 15-point drop from the 57% recorded in 1987.

Widespread political discontent has been accompanied by a new emphasis on what might be called "outsiderism:" the belief that new leaders are better than old ones and that experience in politics is more of a vice than a virtue. In mid-1994, 60% of those surveyed agreed that we need new people in Washington, even if they are not as effective as experienced politicians. By comparison, 44% agreed in 1987 (see figure 2). Indeed, the terms "career politician" and "Washington insider" had already taken on a derogatory tone in the 1992 Campaign.

Views on Race, Government and Social Justice Break a Republican Way

Elected officials were not the only group who had become a focus of public anger and dissatisfaction in 1994. Federal agencies and their employees were also held in lower esteem by the public. Nearly

70% of those polled in the summer agreed that something run by the government is usually inefficient and wasteful, that the federal government controls too much of our daily lives, and that dealing with a government agency is often not worth the trouble. More Americans in 1994 were dubious about what government programs could accomplish than felt that way in Ronald Reagan's last years in office.

Attitudes on welfare, social justice and self-reliance also appear to have moved in a conservative direction in recent years. While nine in 10 Americans still agree that our society should do what is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, there has been a sharp decline in support for social welfare programs as a way to improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged.

In our 1994 survey, 57% agreed with the concept of a government "safety net"—that government has a responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves. This was down from 67% in 1990 and 74% in 1988 (see figure 3). Only 41% of those surveyed said government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper in debt. This was the first time this premise failed to win majority support in a Times Mirror survey.

The public's growing hostility toward social welfare programs was accompanied by a strong and growing support for the principles of self-reliance. Some 88% of the public said they admire people who get rich by working hard, and nearly as many (85%) believed poor people have become too dependent on government assistance.

As is often the case, trends in attitudes about government and social justice are accompanied by shifts in opinion about race. In the Times Mirror series, racial attitudes have shown considerable variation in the past few years—moving first in the direction of heightened concern for the

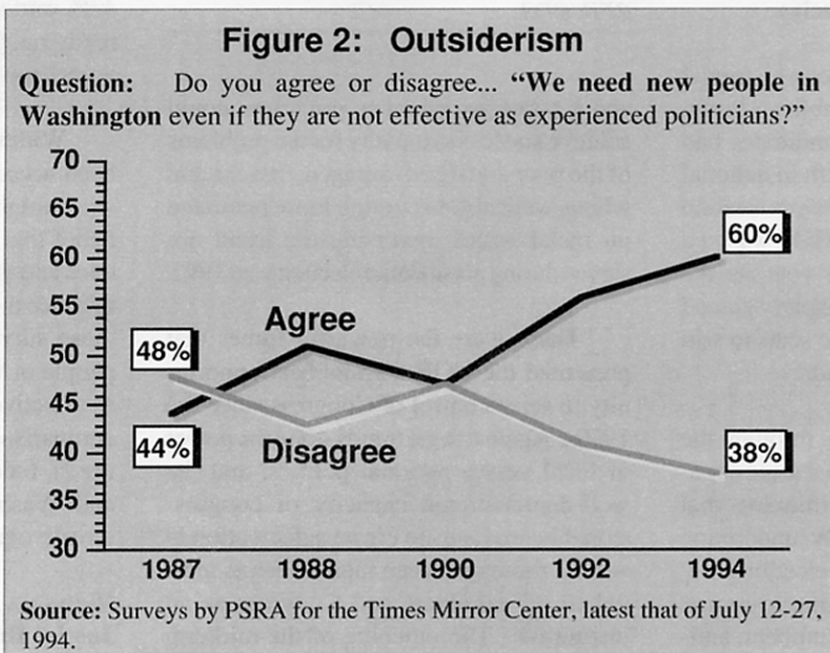
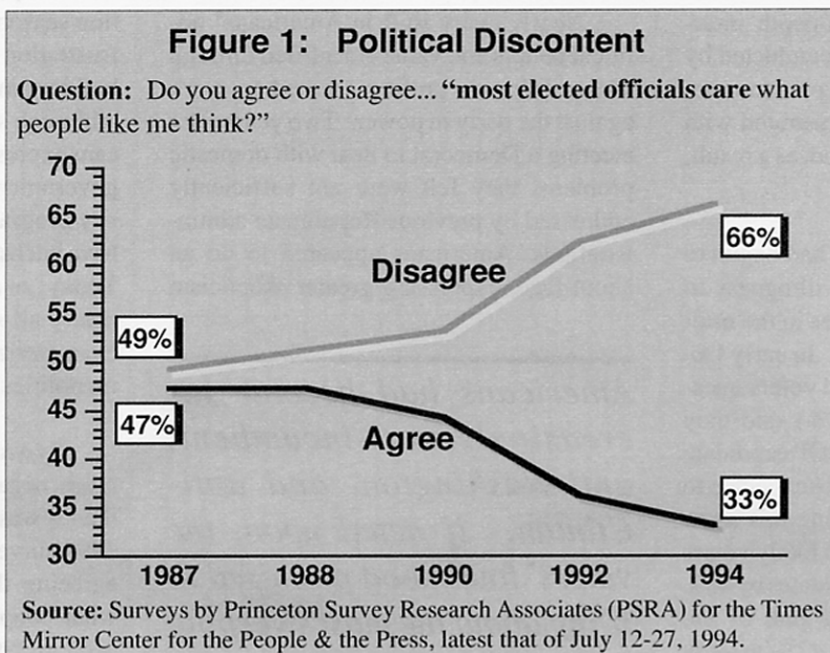
In 1992, a majority of whites (54%) agreed that the position of blacks in this country had not shown much real improvement during the past few years. This finding came in the wake of the verdict in the first Rodney King trial and the ensuing racial riots in Los Angeles. It represented a 23-percentage-point increase from 1987, when only 31% of whites agreed there had been no real improvement in the position of blacks.

Without a new King case to influence their thinking, whites were less apt to express concern or sympathy for the condition of blacks in 1994. Forty-four percent of whites interviewed this past summer said there has been no real improvement for blacks, down from 54% in 1992. Black attitudes have also shifted somewhat on this question, but large majorities of blacks have consistently seen their progress stalled. Seventy-three percent of blacks in 1994 say they've seen no real improvement in their own position in recent years, up from 69% in 1987 but down from 82% in 1992 (reflecting the King case).

For the first time in our seven-year series, a majority of whites (51%) interviewed in 1994 agreed that equal rights had been pushed too far in this country; in 1992, less than half of whites (42%) had agreed. While black opinion has also moved in this same direction, blacks remain much less likely to share this perception; no more than one in four blacks said we've gone too far in pushing equal rights in 1994.

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And No Lift from the Economy

While lack of faith in government and politicians was a major source of Americans' dissatisfaction with the state of the country, the economic recovery did little to lift their spirits. Since Clinton took office, surveys have shown higher levels of satisfaction with personal finances, but many people are still downbeat about their financial situation, and complain of inadequate wages. By a relatively narrow 56% to 43% margin, respondents to Times Mirror's mid-1994 survey declared themselves satisfied with their current financial situation. But more tellingly, only 40% of working people said their jobs provided enough income for them to live the kind of life they would like. The level of discontent was as high in 1994 as it was in 1992, and it explained why—despite the recovery—people rated job improvement as high a national priority as

more publicized issues, such as reducing crime and reforming health care.

In short, Bill Clinton and the Democrats could not expect much help from an economic recovery that left middle-class Americans still feeling underpaid and anxious about their futures. In a mid-October Times Mirror survey, only 5% mentioned the economic recovery when they were asked to cite Clinton's accomplishments. In that same survey, a full 50% could not name a single major achievement of the Clinton administration.

As the midterm elections approached, confidence in Clinton was at a low ebb, even in the midst of the kinds of international crises that usually bolster presidential approval ratings. The crises in Haiti and Iraq were the leading news stories at the time the October survey was taken; but in

spite of this, in that same survey, Clinton won approval from only 38% of Americans, his lowest rating in any Times Mirror survey thus far.

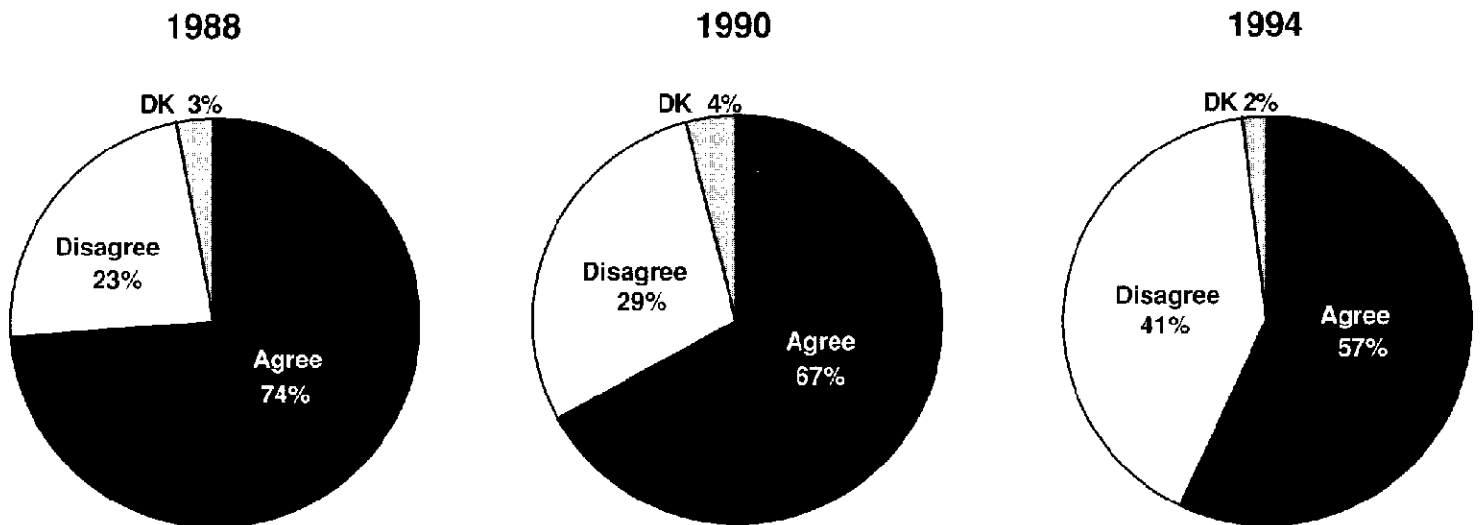
Party Identification Static

While there had been a conservative shift in many basic attitudes since the last presidential election, there has been no fundamental change in political partisanship in recent years. Reflecting discontent with the Clinton Administration, the post-Reagan trend away from the GOP has been reversed somewhat. The longer-term structural changes observed in Times Mirror's surveys of 1987-1994, however, suggest that each party had failed as much as succeeded in adding meaningfully to its base.

By the summer of 1994, the slight Democratic plurality in party affiliation

Figure 3
Declining Support for a Government Safety Net

Question: Do you agree or disagree..., "It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves?"



Source: Surveys by PSRA for the Times Mirror Center, latest that of July 12-27, 1994.

had become even slighter. While the percentage of Americans self-identifying with the Republican Party increased somewhat, there was a decided improvement in the GOP's image for effectiveness. Sizing up the two major parties, Americans once again saw the Republicans as better organized, better managers of government and better at foreign policy than the Democrats. The GOP also demonstrated success in positioning itself as a champion of family values, traditional morality and personal responsibility.

These gains notwithstanding, Americans were still hard pressed to choose between the two parties on bottom-line questions. For example, while the GOP was identified as the party of "virtue," it was not thought to govern in a more honest or ethical way than the Democratic Party. More importantly, neither party had a clear advantage on key issues such as selecting good candidates for office, or being able to bring about the kind of changes the country needs.

Clearly, the historically strong showing of Republican congressional candidates in the fall of 1994 did not result from fundamental changes in the way voters viewed the parties. Frustration with the party in power was a much greater factor than renewed enthusiasm for the opposition party.

Politics Still Local?

The 1990 midterm elections showed that it was possible for voter frustration with Congress to coexist with the re-election of incumbents. Despite the fallout from the check-kiting scandal and the protracted budget debate, incumbents fared reasonably well in the November elections, and the Democrats increased their majority in the House.

Ultimately, the election outcome hinged on whether the angry public mood was a powerful enough force to overcome the preeminence of local politics, the advantages of incumbency and historical voting patterns.

In 1994, there continues to be a wide gap between voters' perception of their home district representatives and members of Congress as a group—although perhaps not as wide a gap as there has been in the past. In mid-October of 1994, Times Mirror found voters endorsing the re-election of their own representative in Congress by a margin of 49% to 29%, while opposing

the re-election of most members of Congress by a larger margin (56% vs. 28%). In 1990, a Gallup survey showed a solid majority of voters (62%) favoring their own representative's re-election.

The mid-October Times Mirror survey also found voters rating local and personal influences as much more critical than national politics and party in determining their vote for Congress. Asked which of four factors would make the biggest difference, 39% selected the character and experience of the candidates and another 27% selected state or local issues. Fewer named national issues (22%) or political party (5%). Based on CBS/*New York Times* survey data from October 1986, local and personal issues were as dominant in determining vote for Congress in 1994 as they had been at a time when the public was less hostile toward Washington and political incumbents.

In the final weeks of the campaign, local influences on congressional elections, including the traditional advantages in fundraising ability and name recognition enjoyed by incumbents, continued to raise doubts about the Republicans' ability to capitalize on the anti-politics, anti-government mood of 1994. Ultimately, the election outcome hinged on whether the angry public mood was a powerful enough force to overcome the preeminence of local politics, the advantages of incumbency and historical voting patterns.

Larry Hugick is director, political and media surveys, Princeton Survey Research Associates; Andrew Kohut is director, Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press