

Polarization Called Key to '94 Elections

Pollsters Challenge Common Assumptions

BY HOWARD GOLDBERG, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK—Forget just about everything you thought you knew about the 1994 midterm elections.

The pollsters have done a post-mortem, and they say a lot of the conventional wisdom just doesn't hold up.

For instance, conventional wisdom says the Republican sweep was simply a vote against President Clinton.

The fact is, among those who say they voted for Clinton in 1992, only 2 percent say they cast ballots for Republicans last week as a way of voting against Clinton, according to pollsters.

"I think it's too simple to say people hate Bill Clinton," CBS pollster Kathleen Frankovic said. Most said Clinton was not a factor in their vote, but "for voters who were making the Clinton connection, it was a decidedly negative connection."

Exit polls conducted by Voter News Service, a cooperative effort of ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, and The Associated Press, found 45 percent approving of Clinton's job performance. That is not markedly different from the ratings Presidents Carter and Reagan got in midterm elections, though Clinton's approval ratings were much lower in some Western and Southern states.

More conventional wisdom: There has been a huge party realignment in the United States.

Spread across the entire population of U.S. voters, the realignment is a matter of a few percentage points, the kind of narrow margin that is hard to measure because of the imprecision of polling.

What the polls made clear was how preferences shifted Republican among certain groups—men, whites, independents, 25–29-year-olds—while Democratic identification deepened among some traditionally Democratic groups.

"The key word here is polarization," said Warren Mitofsky, who conducted exit polls for some major newspapers.

The pollsters, brought together Thursday by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, agreed that a lot of votes were cast Nov. 8 in opposition to something—whether it was an individual, or the party in power, or even more broadly, the idea of government intruding into people's lives.

Still more conventional wisdom: Democrats lost because black turnout was down from 1992.

The 1994 election should be compared with the last midterm election, and minority turnout rose compared with 1990, Mitofsky said. The Democrats lost because they did miserably among white men.

Conventional wisdom: All politics is local, as former House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill used to say.

But in fact, Republican voters, whose party had a national platform called the Contract with America, indicated they were voting on national issues, while many Democratic candidates were running away from Clinton.

Conventional wisdom: Pollsters did a poor job of predicting how people would vote.

Sure, Republicans won landslides in some states where pollsters called toss-ups. And even Louis Harris and Associates gave New York Gov. Mario Cuomo a lead of more than 6 points on the eve of Cuomo's downfall. But most pollsters say that so few Americans vote these days, their main problem is figuring out who will turn out.

"It's harder to predict who will vote than how they will vote," said Humphrey Taylor, head of the Harris poll.

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