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Submit news and commentary to:

Editor

IPSA Newsletter

Department of Political Science

Illinois Wesleyan University

P. O. Box 2900

Bloomington, IL 61702-2900

Telephone: (309) 556-3126

FAX: (309) 556-3411

Jsimeone@titan.iwu.edu

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IS THE REPUBLICAN PARTY A RESPONSIBLE PARTY?

Kenneth Janda
Northwestern University

Are the Republicans behaving like a "responsible party" by proposing and pushing their Contract with America? The answer, of course, hinges on what is meant by "responsible." In the parties literature, the term derives from the phrase, "responsible party government." As described in the definitive study by Austin Ranney, advocates of responsible party government argued that popular control of government in a nation-state (i.e., representative democracy) could be achieved only through strong political parties (Ranney, 1954). This doctrine was advocated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Woodrow Wilson, A. Lawrence Lowell, Henry Jones Ford, and Frank J. Goodnow (all presidents of the American Political Science Association). In the 1940s, it was vigorously pushed by E. E. Schattschneider (another APSA president), who even wrote a book titled "party government" (1942). In the middle of the century, the APSA itself called for a "more responsible two-party system" (Committee on Political Parties, 1950).

The parties textbook by Ranney and Kendall (1956) specifies the type of party required for responsible party government. Such a party "regards winning elections not as an end in itself, but rather as the appropriate means for accomplishing its proper end—which is the translation of its platform, program, and principles into actual public policy":

Once in command of a majority of the votes and public offices, therefore, the majority party's leaders introduce in the legislature bills embodying the party program; all the party's members in the legislature loyally support and vote for these bills; and the party leaders make sure that the resulting laws are faithfully carried out by the administrative agencies. When the parties act in this manner, the argument runs, the majority party is clearly and unequivocally responsible for what the government does or does not do; and at the next election the voters hand down a *meaningful* verdict of approval or disapproval of that party by giving it another term in office or turning it out of power (Ranney and Kendall, 1956: 384-385).

The key points in this concept emerge more clearly when summarized in a checklist:

1. Parties should present clear and coherent programs to voters.
2. Voters should choose candidates according to the party programs.
3. The winning party should carry out its program once in office.
4. At the next election, voters should hold the governing party responsible for executing its program.

In the 1950s and even into the 1960s, the possibility and the desirability of responsible parties in the United States was a lively topic among political scientists. But except for a brief revival in the early 1970s following the publication of a critical essay by a former member of the 1950 APSA committee (Kirkpatrick, 1971), the debate over responsible party government faded from the general professional

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literature. The concept was kept alive in the parties literature, however, as an alternative model (e.g., the British system) to the decentralized, loosely organized, and undisciplined parties that we had--and apparently were destined to have due to our political environment (Harmel and Janda, 1982).

Now, thanks to the Republicans, it is time to dust off the concept of responsible parties to see if it applies to contemporary politics. Surely the party attempted to present a clear program to voters in contesting the 1994 congressional elections. The House Republicans kicked off their campaign on September 27 by announcing their Contract with America on the steps of the Capitol in the presence of 150 incumbents and nearly 180 challengers brought in by the national party for the occasion. At the event, Gingrich and company made two sets of promises if the citizenry would vote them into power: On the very first day of the 104th Congress, the new Republican majority would pass eight major reforms in the way the House did business. Thereafter, within the first 100 days of the 104th Congress, ten specific bills would be brought to the House floor. Each would be given full and open debate, and a clear and fair vote. With few exceptions, the House Republicans delivered what they promised within the first 100 days, and many bills that were later enacted into law reflected provision in the Contract.

Does this mean that the Republicans behaved like a responsible party according to the definition? Among the relatively few political scientists who have written to this question, opinions differ. One scholar dismissed the Contract with America soon after it was announced as not a genuine party platform (Lawson, 1995), but another held that it came very close to fulfilling the responsible party model (Mayer, 1994-95). The weakest case relates to point 2; did voters actually vote Republican because of the Contract with America? Although polls showed that only about 25 percent of the electorate had heard about the Contract with America prior to the election, many of these people were probably among the 39 percent who actually voted (Janda, Berry, Goldman, 1995: 6). Moreover, more self-identified Republicans than Democrats voted in 1994 for the first time since 1970 (Berke, 1994).

Clearly, the Republicans succeeded in changing the terms of political debate in 1994 by emphasizing their Contract. While most voters did not base their voting decisions on the party's promises, some no doubt did. Moreover, the party knew from its polling what the voters wanted concerning policy positions, and the Contract repeated their preferences. Furthermore, the Republicans by their Congressional actions in 1995 set up conditions for such a choice in the 1996 elections. At the opening day of the 104th Congress, with the Republicans in control for the first time in forty years, Speaker Newt Gingrich quoted the party's commitment as spelled out in the Contract with America and stated its "absolute obligation" to deliver on its promises (Gingrich, 1995: 119).

In truth, the percentage of voters familiar with the Contract increased over the first few months of 1995, and increasing percentages gave it positive evaluations. But as the Republicans pressed forward and cut spending programs in keeping with the Contract, the public began to turn against parts of the party's agenda. By mid-September, more people disagreed with the Republican's overall agenda than agreed (Wall Street Journal, 22 September 1995: 1). Although it remains to be seen whether the Contract will be an important factor in the 1996 election, the Republicans have given new life to the discussion of responsible party government. Ironically, they have done that at a time when many people think that our major parties are dying, if they are not already dead.

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