

## Proposal for the 11<sup>th</sup> Presidential Conference:

### *Running Against the President: The Effect of Republican Campaign Strategy in the 1994 Midterm Election*

James D. King  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wyoming  
Dept. 3197, 1000 E. University Ave.  
Laramie, WY 82071  
jking@uwyo.edu

The 1994 midterm election was at once exceptional and commonplace. The Republicans' Contract with America represented one of the leading attempts to establish responsible party government in the United States, but the president remained the central topic of the campaign in many congressional districts. "It's fine for Republicans to talk about positive programs at Washington TV extravaganzas," wrote Washington Post columnist David Broder, "but across the country their candidates seem to be running, not for any policy, but against President Clinton." Low approval ratings in public opinion polls, difficulty in getting an economic package through Congress the year before, failure of health care reform during the election year, and questions about financial dealings set the stage for a presidential referendum.

Political observers from James Bryce to V.O. Key to a host of modern-day scholars have characterized midterm congressional elections as referenda on the president and the conduct of his administration. Studies of both midterm election outcomes and individual voter behavior have shown public evaluations of the president's job performance to be a significant factor. But the connection is not merely a coincidence. As congressional scholar Gary Jacobson has noted, the "connections between national issues and individual voting decisions are forged by the rhetoric of campaigns." Voters in a district may target the candidate of the president's party because the congressional candidate of the opposition party pastes a bull's eye on the president's chest.

This study tests the effects of making President Clinton the target of Republican campaign rhetoric during the 1994 midterm election by adding a campaign context variable—specifically, whether Clinton was made the focus of the local campaign by the Republican candidate or party—to a model of individual voter behavior. Classification of local campaigns is done based on reports of the campaigns in *Congressional Quarterly* and *The Almanac of American Politics*. A preliminary analysis of the 1994 American National Election Study data shows that casting the campaign as a presidential referendum at the congressional district level lowers the probability of voting for the Democratic U.S. representative candidate and significantly enhances the effect of evaluation of the president's job performance on the voter's decision. A parallel analysis of voting on Senate candidates demonstrates similar results.

The analysis supports David Broder's observation that a major element of Republican campaign strategy in 1994 was casting the election as a referendum on the Clinton presidency.