

## **GOP's current position mirrors Democrats' spot in 1993**

By Steven Thomma, Knight Ridder Newspapers

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WASHINGTON - Republicans are starting to find themselves in the same kind of political environment that Democrats faced in the summer of 1993 - the year before the Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years.

Reverse the party labels and the circumstances are strikingly similar.

Now, as then with the other party, Republicans' ethics are under assault. Their opposition denounces their vicelike control as "arrogant." Their ambitious agenda risks overreach and public backlash. Their popularity is sinking. A unified opposition party is holding off until closer to the next election before offering its own agenda - thus withholding any good target for counterattack.

There's one major difference. Both parties have redrawn House of Representatives district boundaries to make their members safer. That makes it much more difficult than in 1994 to sweep the ruling party out of power in a single wave of voter anger. Also, Republicans have more than a year to improve their standing, plenty of time in politics.

Still, Republicans have cause for concern, and Democrats for optimism.

"The mood we have now is not the mood we had then, but it is developing in that direction," said Stuart Rothenberg, an independent political analyst and the publisher of the Rothenberg Political Report.

"Possible gridlock on Capitol Hill. Questions about ethics or abuse of power. Fatigue about incumbent president. All that could lead to an anti-politics, anti-Washington mood not favorable to the incumbent party."

Many Americans already are in a down-on-Washington mood. Three polls show support for Congress dropping, with some measures rivaling lows of 1993-94.

An NBC-Wall Street Journal survey last week showed 33 percent public approval of how Congress is doing its job, while 51 percent disapproved. That was near the

32 percent approval-56 percent disapproval rating of May 1994, six months before Democrats lost control of Congress.

Perhaps more telling is the weak support that Americans give their own members of Congress. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that only 49 percent of Americans approved of their own representatives, while 23 percent disapproved. That's comparable with 1993.

"A 49 percent approval rating is not exactly a stunning endorsement for members of Congress, who typically have extraordinarily high re-election rates," said Andy Kohut, the director of the nonpartisan Pew center.

Neither party is scoring well with the public, but Republicans fare worse, largely because they're in charge. What's behind this? Violence in Iraq, high gas prices, economic anxiety. President Bush's approval ratings also are near all-time lows, but Republicans in Congress have extra burdens.

First is the ethics cloud hanging over House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas. He's accused of taking foreign trips financed by lobbyists or foreign interests, and last year he was rebuked three times for other ethics violations.

House Democrats are using DeLay's troubles to bludgeon his party, which is ironic given his nickname: the Hammer. Democrats are raising money for their "Hammer the Hammer Fund," \$82,000 so far. They charge that DeLay's actions aren't isolated, but rather illustrative of a corrupt party. They're trying hard to find ethically clean candidates to challenge Republican incumbents.

While DeLay's everyone-does-it defense has led to revelations that other members, including Democrats, have taken lobbyist-financed trips, even that worries some Republicans, who fear it could bring the entire House under a cloud, much as the 1991 House bank scandal tarred members for years.

Also, Republicans are sharply limiting the Democrats'

role in decision-making. Last week they began moving to strip Senate Democrats of their ability to block judicial nominees. Earlier, they excluded Democrats from House-Senate negotiations on an energy bill and all but two Democrats from bargaining over a major Medicare overhaul. Such sessions traditionally have been bipartisan.

"Abuse of power," said a group of Democrats protesting outside the Senate last week. "Put an end to DeLay's House of Scandal," said a House Democratic Web site.

Compare those slogans with Republican vows in 1994 "to restore accountability to Congress" and "end its cycle of scandal and disgrace."

Today's Republican agenda also adds risks.

Bush's proposal to overhaul Social Security has cost his party and him support, much as President Clinton's plan to overhaul health care did in 1993-94. The Republican attempt to intercede in the case of Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged Florida woman whose husband wanted to remove her life support, proved popular with the party's base but prompted a broader backlash, much as Democratic efforts to let gays serve openly in the military did in 1993.

Finally, Democrats refuse to lay out an alternative agenda until they get closer to the 2006 elections.

Republicans in 1994 didn't unveil their "Contract With America" until September, late enough to avoid months of counterattacks from Democrats but early enough to capture voters' attention.

"We want them to focus on the Republicans now," said Mike Erlandson, a congressional aide and the chairman of Minnesota's Democratic Party.

DeLay said Republicans had little to worry about.

"The American people have no idea what we're passing.

And we have plenty of time to show them what we're passing," he said. "Polls mean nothing."

He added that the Democrats' strategy will fail: "They have no agenda, they have no ideas, they have no leadership. If that's how they think they're going to take back the majority, they're going to be sadly disappointed the day after the election in 2006."