An electoral earthquake hit the American political landscape in 1994. For the first time since 1954, the Republican Party won control of the House of Representatives, and at the same time gained control of the Senate for the first time since 1986. Not for 40 years, then, had Republicans controlled both houses of Congress, and only for the third time since the beginning of the twentieth century had the Republicans won control of Congress with a Democrat incumbent in the White House. When the Republicans won their majorities in 1994, they ended the longest uninterrupted period of single-party rule in the entire history of Congress. Just one member – 88-year-old Sidney Yates, a Democrat from Illinois – had ever served in a Republican-controlled House of Representatives. Republicans gained 52 seats from Democrats in the House, including those of 34 Democratic incumbents. Democratic losses in the House were the heaviest for either party in any mid-term election since Harry Truman’s Democratic Party lost 55 seats in the 1946 elections. Between 1946 and 1994, the next highest losses were in 1982 following the worst recession since the 1930s, and then they were only half those of 1994. For the first time since 1952, the Democrats’ percentage of the vote fell below 50 per cent. Among the Democratic casualties were House Speaker Tom Foley (D.WA), who became the first Speaker to lose his seat since 1862, former Ways and Means chair Dan Rostenkowski (D.II), and Judiciary chair Jack Brooks (D.TX). Not a single one of the 169 House Republican incumbents lost – a feat not achieved by any party since 1948; and the party won over two-thirds of the open seats previously held by the Democrats – an unprecedented achievement since 1790. In the Senate, Democratic incumbent losses were limited to two, but one of these was Senator Jim Sasser (D.TN), favoured to succeed George Mitchell (D.ME) as Senate majority leader, and for the first time since the introduction of direct election of senators in 1914 all the newly elected senators were Republicans.

Electoral surges against the president’s party are not unusual in mid-term elections. In the twentieth century, they occurred in 1922, 1930,
1938, 1942, 1946, 1966 and 1974. Usually, however, they have occurred in the sixth or later – rather than the second – year of a party’s control of the presidency. The exceptions are 1922 and 1994 – just two years after Democrats won control of the presidency for the first time since 1980.3

The events of 1994 occurred against a background of growing public distrust of Congress – and indeed, of virtually all major political and other institutions in the United States – and of a sense of disenchantment. The end of the stalemate, or ‘gridlock’, in American political life, supposedly ushered in by the election of Bill Clinton and the restoration of unified single-party government, had not produced the promised benefits. If we think back to the mid-1980s, it seemed that only a scandal could defeat an incumbent House member as incumbents’ re-election rates climbed to 98 per cent (elections for the Senate continued to remain competitive even when incumbents were running). The public’s confidence in government was relatively high, particularly when compared with the 1970s following the Watergate scandal.4 Public approval of Congress’ performance rose to 42 per cent in September 1987 – the highest level since before Watergate, although 51 per cent disapproved (net disapproval = 9 per cent).5 By 1992, a major change had occurred. In the context of the stalemate between the Democratic Congress and President Bush over the budget deficit in 1990, the savings and loan bailout, the resignation of House Speaker Jim Wright and the Clarence Thomas hearings, the public’s confidence in government fell.6 As Congress’ net disapproval ratings increased to 41 per cent, House and Senate incumbents’ shares of the vote dipped sharply, although few incumbents lost their seats. ‘Congress-bashing’, wrote Nelson Polsby, ‘is back in style.’7 After a brief rise following the Gulf War, public approval of Congress’ performance continued to slide in the wake of continuing stalemate in 1991 and 1992 over the deficit, the House ‘bank’ scandal and other manifestations of congressional misconduct, Ross Perot’s anti-incumbent message and the nascent term-limits movement. According to Gallup, by March 1992 net disapproval of Congress had reached a massive 51 per cent. In the 1992 congressional elections, incumbents’ share of the vote plunged to the lowest levels in the House since 1974 and for the Senate since 1980.8 House Democrats lost 16 incumbents and Republicans eight. While the damage to Democratic incumbents was not major, with the benefit of hindsight, voter discontent in 1992 seemed to presage the political earthquake of 1994. With the election of Bill Clinton and the return to single-party government, net disapproval of Congress narrowed to about 40 per cent in the first half of 1994, but then, under the onslaught of a skilful national campaign against the ‘corrupt’ Democratic Congress led