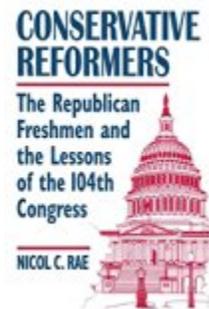


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicol C. Rae. *Conservative Reformers: The Republican Freshmen and the Lessons of the 104th Congress*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. xiv + 255 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0129-2; \$92.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0128-5.

Reviewed by Robert Dewhirst (Northwest Missouri State University)  
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The Republican takeover of both houses of Congress in 1994 after decades of Democratic domination (particularly of at least the House of Representatives) certainly has stimulated an array of scholars examining the likely causes and consequences of the possibly watershed event. Rae's effort here joins other such books as Dean McSweeney and John Owens' *The Republican Takeover of Congress*, Linda Killian's *The Freshmen: What Happened to the Republican Revolution?*, Richard Fenno's *Learning to Govern: An Institutional View of the 104th Congress*, Lawrence Evans and Walter Oleszek's *Congress Under Fire: Reform Politics and the Republican Majority*, and James Gimpel's *Fulfilling the Contract: The First 100 Days*.

In brief, Rae focuses first on why and how the seventy-three freshmen Republicans ran for and won in 1994, thereby capturing the House for their party. Then he examines some of the key obstacles they encountered while trying to govern. Although Rae next does the same for the eleven freshmen Republican Senators in the 104th Congress, the heart of the book clearly is on the freshmen House Republicans.

He concludes by trying to answer the question, "What difference did they (freshmen Republicans) make?" His answer is that the House freshmen made more of a difference than their Senate counterparts. However, while House freshmen Republicans talked of igniting a "revolution" and/or initiating "reforms," the bulk of their efforts toward change were first blunted and then absorbed by the institution of Congress. The freshmen did see some of their desired policy and procedural changes made, but disappointedly (for them) not nearly as many as they sought.

Throughout the book Rae is sympathetic to the Re-

publican freshmen and their efforts. He decries those viewing the incoming members as dangerous radicals. Instead, he argues that the new members, by and large, were more experienced in government than either they or their critics maintained. Moreover, the freshmen brought maturity as well as idealism to Capitol Hill. Regardless of their previous background, the freshmen Republicans, and particularly those in the House, wanted to institute profound changes not only within their chamber but in policies produced as well. However, by the end of the term freshmen-now-incumbent House Republicans became as caught up as their predecessors in such traditional insider practices as continuous fund raising and massaging the electoral perks of incumbency.

Perhaps the most forceful criticism of the book could be that it at times attempts to generalize too much and too far into the future based upon just a few years of Republican dominance of both houses of Congress. Ultimately, a more fruitful approach would be to do as Burdett Loomis did in his study of the freshmen class of 1974 (the "Watergate babies"), *The New American Politician*, which examined the roles they played over many years. Of course, many political scientists currently are willing to weather potential criticism of making a "rush to judgment" because getting an early jump on trying to answer some of the attractive scholarly questions is just too tempting. For example, questions that come to mind include: Just what does it mean to be the majority party in Congress? What are the partisan dimensions to majority domination of Congress? How do Democrats view the proper way to organize and operate Congress differ from how Republicans view the same issues? Of course the Loomis approach is superior to what Rae and others have attempted, but who wants to wait more than a

decade, as Loomis did?

One other reservation about Rae's effort here is that he too often appears to cast an uncritical eye on the potential zealotry (and its consequences) of the Republican freshmen, and particularly those in the House. For example, Rae recounts how House Republican freshmen complained about intransigent Democratic partisanship, without acknowledging that the Republicans also could have intense partisan feelings.

In sum, Rae's book demonstrates the institutional strength and resilience of Congress in general, and the House in particular. As in the past, such as during

the years following the advent of the Watergate Babies, the chamber demonstrated its instinct for survival. The House simply absorbed a large incoming freshmen class by making accommodating, yet not revolutionary, changes sufficient to allow the institution to continue to evolve over time.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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