

Clinton may find comfort from Truman's experience

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Bill Clinton views what for him is a bleak political landscape, he might draw comfort from this historical tidbit: The last Democrat to lose both the House and Senate stormed back two years later to reclaim it all — and then some.

Harry Truman was humbled in 1946 by a Republican takeover of Congress when dissatisfied voters gave a clear answer to the Republicans' question "Had enough?"

The resulting deluge gave the GOP a 51-45 edge in the Senate and a 246-188 margin in the House, bringing to Congress some Republican newcomers who were later to make their mark in a big way: Joseph R. McCarthy in the Senate and Richard M. Nixon in the House. (Some Democrats, too: John F. Kennedy was in the class of 1946.)

Truman glumly surveyed the debacle and told a friend: "I don't expect this Congress to be any worse than the one I had to deal with for the last two years."

Clinton, assessing the damage after Tuesday's shellacking, said: "They sent us a clear message. I got it."

There is a sense of having been there before. In 1946, the Republicans took 12 seats from the Democrats in the Senate and 55 in the House. On Tuesday, the Democrats lost eight seats in the Senate — nine counting the defection of Alabama's Richard Shelby — and 52 in the House.

Truman was mistaken about the lawmakers he would have to deal with in the 80th Congress. They cooperated with him in foreign affairs but battled his domestic program. So much so that Truman campaigned in 1948 against the "do-nothing Congress" and was elected president to everyone's surprise but his own.

Truman, like Clinton 48 years later, started his presidency by pushing unpopular programs. With Clinton, the irritant was his acceptance of gays in the military; Truman's was a 21-point domestic program dubbed the Fair Deal.

Conservatives in Congress erected formidable barriers against such liberal measures as national health insurance, aid to education, Social Security, full employment and civil rights.

Clinton worked with a Democratic Congress and yet could manage only hair's breadth margins for the economic program that was at the center of his entire election campaign. He had to struggle for a crime bill once regarded as consensus legislation. His health care program was nearly a year in the making instead of the 100 days he had promised, and it died aborning.

Last week, Clinton said he had spent so much time trying to get legislation passed that he had failed to communicate to the American people what he was achieving for them.

Truman had similar cause to complain that he was misunderstood. After all, he had presided over the victory in the greatest war the country had ever fought; he had the gratitude of the millions who were preparing to invade Japan for using the atomic bomb to speed the end of the war.

But he could only lose in any comparison with Franklin D. Roosevelt, who saw the country through the Depression and the war. "To err is Truman," was a popular put-down.

The patrician Roosevelt seemed born to the job he held through three terms and 82 days into his fourth. Truman was a medium-sized man with a medium-sized reputation. He had a thick Missouri accent and reveled in small-town activities like poker with the boys and the Masonic Lodge.

He inherited the frustration built up in the country by postwar rising prices, labor unrest and shortages of consumer goods. Millions of servicemen and women were mustered out on his watch and could not find a place to live. "Had enough?" was a question that went straight to America's gut in 1946.

Yet in the 1948 election, Democrats picked up nine seats in the Senate and 75 in the House, regaining control of both chambers.

Recent election shows strong gender gap

WASHINGTON (AP) — If women voters had prevailed in the midterm elections, the Senate would have remained in Democratic hands and several governor's seats would have gone to Democrats instead of Republicans.

The election saw one of the strongest gender gaps in years, exit polls indicated, as men hardened their conservative views and showed more affinity for the Republican message of smaller government, less spending on social programs and anti-taxation.

Across the country, men — predominantly white men — voted heavily Republican.

Democrats sifting through the lessons of last week's election are faced with the reality that men

are steadily defecting. In exit polls, men identified themselves as 37 percent Republican, 31 percent Democratic and 31 percent independent. Four years ago, they were evenly divided between the parties at 34 percent each and 29 percent independent.

Women, however, are 42 percent Democratic, 32 percent Republican and 26 percent independent — roughly the same split as in the 1990 elections.

"This is something that's been building over the past decade and a half...as the parties became more polarized around issues and the choices became clear," said Susan Carroll, senior research associate at the Rutgers University Center for the American Woman and Politics.

"Through the 1980s and into '90s, men have become more conservative and more Republican, and women have stayed as tied to the Democratic Party as they were going into the '80s."

In virtually every gubernatorial and Senate race last week, women supported Democrats more strongly than men did — even in the cases where women ended up voting overall to elect the Republican.

The GOP takeover of the House was helped by the 57 percent male preference for Republicans compared with a 54 percent preference for women for Democrats. Democratic women crossed over more often to vote for Republican candidates than did Democratic women.

Mayors worry about Republican takeover

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Republicans taking control of Congress start talking about cutting programs, many of the nation's mayors see the knife aimed at their cities.

There has been talk of fiscal conservatism that would lay housing, transportation and human services on the budget cutting board very early. At least one Republican congressman already is touting elimination of the federal agency that runs urban programs as an answer to urban problems.

But mayors indicate they may be willing to absorb some fiscal misery if the GOP will pass a law ridding them of the bane of city finances: unfunded federal mandates — federal laws that local governments must obey and pay for.

Legislation that would have eliminated unfunded mandates was thwarted in the House of Representatives during the last Congress.

Members of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, long angered by the share of city budgets that federal mandates eat, are meeting this week to discuss how they can work with the Republican-dominated Congress.

Already, the mayors have urged incoming Republican leaders to put the unfunded mandates issue high on their agenda. Among the supporters of the previous bill were Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., and Rep. Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., now in line to be Senate majority leader and speaker of the House.

"If we can get relief from these mandates, that will free up local dollars to do other projects," said Mayor Victor Ashe of Knoxville, Tenn., president of the mayors conference. "That's good news not only for cities, but for counties."

Gingrich has said that a major overhaul of poverty pro-

grams and aid to cities is a priority. He immediately targeted 1960s Great Society programs launched by President Lyndon Johnson, such as the Head Start early childhood education program and the Job Corps training program.

"It is impossible to take the Great Society structure of bureaucracy... and the counterculture value system that now permeates the way we deal with the poor and have any hope of fixing them," Gingrich said on Friday. "They have to be replaced thoroughly, from the ground up."

Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas, a member of the House Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee, suggested Republicans could start urban reform by eliminating the departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development.

"The agencies are too big and their regulations are too burdensome," Johnson said. "By eliminating these Big Brother bureaucracies, we can put the power back in the hands of the people who know best how to educate their children and solve community problems."

Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, a Democrat, said Gingrich's agenda shows Republican intent to gut federal programs that aid cities and return to a 1980s economic strategy that eroded the cities' tax base and sent jobs to the suburbs.

"The Great Society, the war on poverty, targeted the areas of greatest poverty and abandonment," Jackson said. "Gingrich says he wants to destroy the whole idea. Their program is slash and burn. That's a war on the poor."

Ashe, a Republican, said he feels cities will fare well under a Republican Congress. He pointed out that in the recently passed anti-crime law, Republicans pushed through a block grant to allow cities flexibility in using federal crime money, even though they led the call to curb spending on the plan.

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