



1994 Contract With America: Does It Give Hope for 2022 Commitment to America?

After House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) unveiled his “Commitment to America” late last month, it was immediately compared to the 1994 “Contract with America,” largely written by then-House Minority Leader Newt Gingrich and Minority Whip Dick Armey.

Like Gingrich’s 1994 “Contract with America,” McCarthy’s 2022 “Commitment to America” is a series of promises to the American voters, designed to “nationalize” the midterm elections for the House of Representatives — i.e., cause voters to vote for every Republican House candidate across the country. This is, of course, predicated on the idea that the ’94 Contract was both a political and a policy success.



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With this in mind, it is profitable to review what was in the ’94 Contract to give us an idea as to how much fans of limited constitutional government should put their trust in McCarthy’s reincarnation of it nearly three decades later.

The 1994 Contract lifted much of its content from the 1985 State of the Union address of President Ronald Reagan. Certainly, Reagan’s robust conservative rhetoric was unmatched by any other president, from Calvin Coolidge to Donald Trump.

The Contract listed several proposals, some of which concerned procedures in the House and others that had policy implications. With their eye on winning control of the House, Republicans only used proposals that were getting 60 percent or better in public opinion polls. While the Republicans did take the House for the first time since the 1952 elections, and also won nine U.S. Senate seats — giving them the majority there as well — it is still debated just how much political impact the Contract actually had.

But we do know which policy issues the Republicans promised to pass bills on. They pledged eight reforms to how government operated, and included a requirement that all laws that apply to Americans would also have to apply to Congress. They further promised to select a major auditing firm to find waste, fraud, and abuse in Congress, and vowed to cut the number of House committees and the number of staffers on those committees, both by one-third.

They advocated limiting the terms of all committee chairs; banning the use of proxy voting in committee; requiring committee meetings to be open to the public; requiring a three-fifths majority vote to pass a tax increase; and guaranteeing an honest accounting of the federal budget by implementing zero baseline budgeting.

Most of these reforms were no doubt good, but little impact could be expected upon the average



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American voter. While most conservatives would applaud a promise to require a three-fifths majority vote to pass a tax increase, one should consider that 1) this is probably unconstitutional, as it is not within the constitutional authority of Congress to change the number of votes required to pass a tax hike; and 2) the central problem is that Congress already spends great amounts of money without *any* constitutional authority. Instead of promising to require a three-fifths vote to pass a tax hike, members should simply quit spending money on constitutionally dubious items, and taxes would be much lower.

More important were the actual changes in public policy promised under the Contract — or at least a promise to have a vote on these proposed changes in public policy. One proposal was to amend the Constitution to require a balanced budget. Of course, Congress should always have a balanced budget, but, here again, were members of Congress to simply follow their oaths to the Constitution and quit spending taxpayer money on things that are not authorized by the Constitution, we would not need such an amendment.

The Contract also called for tax cuts for small businesses, families, and seniors (good), and term limits for members (not so good). Term limits would require an amendment to the Constitution, and while it might make conservative voters more content to kick out a sitting member of Congress, it really would do little to improve the lives of average Americans. It would also cause some members of Congress to drift even further left (not having to ever again face the voters).

There was also Social Security reform, tort reform, and welfare reform. While all of these systems could benefit from being “reformed,” the best solution is to leave such matters to the states. Be that as it may, welfare reform was a positive that came out of the Contract, although a later, Democrat-run Congress gutted much of its positive features.

The Contract also proposed to give the president a line-item veto. As it stands now, a president has no option other than either signing or vetoing an entire bill. It is rather amazing how Congress is so often content to surrender their powers to the president, and this bill was no exception. Besides that, it is of questionable constitutionality, as the proposal was to implement this idea by a legislative vote, rather than an amendment to the Constitution.

One of the worst features of the Contract was its proposal to give local law enforcement block grants. While support for *local* law enforcement is good, having the federal government give them grants would inevitably threaten the local police’s independence, as federal money would certainly lead to federal control.

Something else within the Contract was the idea of preventing troops from serving under United Nations command unless the president determines it is necessary for the purposes of national security. An additional proposal was to cut U.S. payments for UN peacekeeping operations (a good idea). Finally, the Contract called for the voluntary integration of former Warsaw Pact nations into NATO.

Instead of growing NATO, though, a better idea would have been to give European nations notice that the United States was bringing her troops home from Europe, and to follow through with it. Having more nations for the United States to defend only increases the number of nations who are able to bring the U.S. into a conflict in which we have little to no interest. For that matter, it would be good for America to pull out of the United Nations altogether.

At the time it was announced, President Bill Clinton sarcastically dubbed the Contract with America the “Contract on America.” Of course, this was not surprising, as Clinton would have ridiculed almost anything the Republicans proposed.



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The Commitment to America, like its predecessor the Contract with America, is a mixed bag. Some parts are positive, others are relatively meaningless, and some are downright dangerous — such as federal grants for local police departments. The Commitment to America’s pledge to hire 200,000 more police officers is the same as Clinton’s proposal to put 100,000 more police officers on the street — it is a dangerous intrusion into local law enforcement. Once the federal government starts giving grants to increase the wages and training of police officers, this will lead to more, not less, federal control over local police.

The corruption of the FBI into what is essentially an arm of the progressive Left in the United States should provide great caution as to what could be expected when *all* law enforcement is in the hands of the federal government.

With or without the Commitment to America, Republicans are almost certainly going to regain the House, and possibly the Senate as well. Hopefully, if they do, they will ignore the bad things in the Commitment to America, and concentrate on the good things of the Commitment — or, even better, the Constitution of the United States.

After all, they all take a commitment to follow the Constitution when they are sworn in. That is the commitment they truly need to keep.



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