

**The Contract with America:**  
**Say What People Want to Hear and Hear What People Want to Say**

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## **Part One: Synopsis**

### Background:

In 1992, the Democratic Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, beat sitting Republican president, George H.W. Bush, and independent businessman, Ross Perot, for a seat in the White House. This was a novel election because just because George H.W. Bush became the fifth U.S. president not to be reelected for a second term, but because this was one of the few elections where an independent candidate had success on the national level. Though Bush campaigned on conservative principles that were successful in the Reagan era, like limited government, he sunk in the polls for not taking a strong enough on addressing the country's slow economic recovery after the 1990-1991 recession (Rosenbaum, 1992).

Moreover, unlike other Democratic candidates, Bush could not play Clinton as a "northern liberal" because he was governor of Arkansas: a state that had voted for a Republican president four out of five of the previous elections (Defrank, Goldman, Matthews, Miller, & Murr, 1994). Unlike the America of morality and social conservatism that was born under Reagan and perpetuated by Bush, Clinton had been accused of dodging the Vietnam draft, having extramarital affairs, and smoking marijuana.

However, failure to firmly address economic concerns of the electorate and Perot's unexpected success gave Clinton an edge over Bush when election day came.

### The Context:

Two-years into Clinton's presidency came the 1994 midterm elections. For the past forty years, the Democrats had been the majority party in Congress. However, as the midterm election approached, Clinton's approval ratings were the lowest of any newly-elected sitting president since World War II (New York Times, 1993). Since his inauguration, inequality rose, and unemployment had remained high, and the economy had still yet to recover from the recession (Wattenberg, 1999). The poor state of the economy and Clinton's poor approval ratings set the stage for Republicans to capitalize on public discontent with the Democrats' big-government philosophy in the upcoming midterm elections. As such, in 1994, during their annual retreat in Salisbury, Maryland, House Republicans strategized on how to win the House and the Senate in the coming election (Luntz, 2008). It was during this retreat that Republicans created the Contract with America, or as Newt Grinch called it, "a platform that clearly highlighted not just [their] principles but a plan to get it done." (Luntz, 2008)

### The Strategy:

To create a concise but comprehensive platform, Republicans employed political pollsters and strategists to conduct focus groups to understand what words resonated well with voters. It was through concept testing that the Republicans agreed on the name "Contract with America." Given the conservative versus liberal culture war in the 90s, strategists decided to leave out the word "Republican" from the title of the platform to remain inclusive and not run the risk of turning off voters (Luntz, 2008). The main challenge in forming the Contract was choosing which issues to highlight. The architects of the Contract had to satisfy each party member by choosing issues that were relevant to their constituents while also avoiding polarizing

issues, like abortion, that conveyed partisan cues. Republicans understood that the American public was tired of partisan politics and wanted something different (Luntz, 2008), which is why they framed the Contract as empowering the people against the government rather than Democrats versus Republicans. The Contract outlined ten reforms, and ten bills Republicans would bring to the floor for debate in their first one hundred days as the new majority party. Among the points mentioned in the Contract specifically addressed balancing the budget, having all laws apply equally to members of Congress, and vote term limits on career politicians. Most importantly, at the end of the Contract, they included: “Respecting the judgment of our fellow citizens as we seek their mandate for reform, we hereby pledge our names to this Contract with America” (Luntz, 2008). This was an important addition to the Contract for two reasons. The first reason is that it told voters essentially to not vote for them if they did not follow through on their promises. The second reason is that Republicans did sign their name to the Contract. Two months before midterm elections, in September, 367 Republican candidates signed the Contract on the steps of the U.S. Capitol (Gingrich, N., Arney, R., Gillespie, E., & Schellhas, B., 1994). Unlike typical elections, all Republican candidates campaigned on the platform set by the Contract rather than with their individual agendas.

After the House Republicans drafted the Contract, the party leader, Newt Gingrich, recommended that they put in the *TV Guide* magazine. The party chose to put the Contract in the *TV Guide* because it was a magazine that people would have to flip through for an entire week (Luntz, 2008). Though some Republicans were concerned about definitively stating the party’s issue positions because that gave Democrats clear points to attack them on. However, this was a deliberate choice party leadership wanted Democrats to criticize the Contract because the attacks would not resonate well with the electorate that was tired of partisan tactics and negativity. (Luntz, 2008). Furthermore, if media outlets scrutinized the Contract, they were likely to publish it as well. Gingrich bet the people were more likely to read the ten reforms and bills than an entire news story because of the ten reforms and bills were more digestible and easier to read (Luntz, 2008).

### The Result:

The Contract proved to be a successful campaign for the Republican party. For the first time in forty years, the Republicans were the majority of seats in the 104th Congress. Republican House candidates won the most votes than any single party had in a midterm election, winning 36.6 million votes (“Rare Combination of Forces,” 1995). In total, the party gained 54 seats in the House and nine seats in the Senate. The Republicans won the region by garnering 17.1 percent of the vote for Congress versus the Democrat’s 13.5 percent in the South and gained a majority of House seats in the region, both for the first time since Reconstruction (U.S. Bureau of the Census). Their victory in South was impressive given that region had been a Democratic stronghold since Reconstruction and that the president was from Arkansas. The support for the Contract with America demonstrated America’s frustration with the status of the economy and lack of congressional accountability. The Contract was particularly successful in the House elections, where Republicans drew 9 million more votes than in the 1990 midterm elections (“Rare Combination of Forces,” 1995). Of the 34 House incumbents that were defeated, all were Democrat. Because of this Republican strategy, the midterm elections of 1994 are historically referred to as the “Republican Revolution.”

## **Part Two: Analysis**

### **Lesson One: Nothing Happens in a Vacuum**

When implementing a campaign, it is important to consider how events are interrelated because it allows you to be proactive instead of reactive. Understanding the context of a situation brings factors to your attention that you may have overlooked that could have the potential to help or hurt you in the long-run.

When developing the Contract for America, Republicans had to understand what other information gave their platform meaning to voters. Because not every American can be a political expert, voters use heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to understand information (Popkin, 1991). Politicians must ask themselves what other information a voter will use to understand their message. To understand what information resonated well with voters, the GOP had to understand the context of the political environment.

The first aspect of the political environment that Republicans had to understand what had happened in the past. The presidential election of 1992 indicated two important things about how voters were interpreting politics. What made the 1992 anomaly was the fact that an independent candidate who was not a career politician was able to get on the ballot in every state and receive a competitive amount of the national vote. From this, the GOP recognized that voters were looking at politics beyond party lines. The average liberal and the average conservative was closer to the middle (Pew Research, 2017). The traditional method of sending partisan cues was not resonating with voters to the same degree it had before. With this knowledge in mind, for Republicans to be successful in the 1994 midterm elections, they had to avoid sending a message that was too ideological and turn voters off (Luntz, 2008). However, they still need a platform that was strong enough to get attention and fulfill their political agenda.

Beyond just being fed up with partisan tactics, the 1992 presidential election also indicated that the economy was the most important issue for voters. As previously mentioned, a primary reason Clinton gained an edge over Bush was that unlike Clinton, Bush failed to strongly address the poor state of the economy (Rosenbaum, 1992). The electorate prioritized the economy so much that Clinton received the lowest approval rating of any new president since World War II because unemployment remained high, and recovery from the 1990-1991 recession was stagnant. Americans were unhappy with the economy, and they blamed the government.

Republicans strategically used rhetoric from President Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address (Abadi, 2017) to address people who were tired of partisan politics and were not happy with the state of the economy. Reagan had made conservatism successful in the 1980s by appealing to people's yearning for the American dream and by framing issues as the people versus the government. The ideas Reagan personified in his 1985 State of the Union Address helped him enjoy 60 percent or higher approval ratings that year (Jones, Newport, & Saad, 2004). Using phrases from Reagan's address like "job creation" and "career politician" in the Contract with America strategically framed Republicans as being on the side as the people and working with them to achieve the American dream, not just a better economy. Republicans understood that voters use heuristics to make sense of political messages. By analyzing past political events, Republicans learned that sending partisan cues in their platform would backfire because voters viewed politics as them against the government rather than left versus right. They

also learned that voters were judging politicians on how they handled the economy, so they used words associated with economic prosperity and the American dream. And finally, they understood that what Reagan stood resonated well with people, so they integrated his rhetoric to get voters to associate the Contract with those positive feelings.

Unlike the Republicans in 1994, the U.S., when dealing with the aftermath of their troops burning a Quran in Afghanistan, did not consider how the context of a situation influences how people interpret information. Though having had relations in the Middle East for a while, in 2001, the U.S. deployed troops to Afghanistan due to conflicts with the terrorist organization, al-Qaeda. In 2012, six U.S. soldiers were responsible for burning “a large number of printed items” that were taken from a detention center at the Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan (Swann, 2014). Media coverage of the situation reported that the soldiers burned the books because they possibly contained extremist written content that was used to send messages to detainees or was too inappropriate for detainees. Afghan workers stopped the book-burning when they saw what was taking place, and they took out what was left of the burnt books. The burned books were revealed to be religious texts, such as the Quran. Because the Quran is the holiest book in the Muslim religion, this incident sparked protests resulting in the death of 30 Afghans and four American troops.

The aftermath of the Quran burning made U.S. relations in Afghanistan more contentious than they had been in a while. Though it may have been unreasonable to expect every American troop deployed in Afghanistan to learn Arabic, educating the troops more on Muslim culture about have avoided an incident such as this. Moreover, this had not been the first time the U.S. offended Afghans by disrespecting the Quran. This was an instance of how not understanding the past negatively affected an organization’s present, and possibly even the future initiatives. The Republicans in 1994 were diligent in understanding that voters would consider their messaging in the context of past political events.

Moreover, House Republicans understood that learning about the past gave an insight into what would resonate well with voters. In this instance, the U.S. should have reflected on past cultural blunders they made when dealing with the Afghans to prevent making the same mistake in the future. Furthermore, the U.S. needed to understand the context in which Afghans would view the situation. In the minds of Afghans, this instance of American troops burning Qurans would be considered alongside all of the other frustrations Afghans had towards the U.S., which not only amplified the initial reaction to the situation but also affected U.S.-Afghan relations in the long-run. Republicans built off of the past success of Reagan’s rhetoric to make the Contract successful. The U.S. missed the opportunity to learn from past cultural offenses to make their future relations with Afghans better.

### Lesson Two: Simplify Information

Simplifying your message is important because reaching your target publics is meaningless unless they understand your message. When communicating with your audience, it’s not only about what you say. It’s about how you say it. Simplifying your message helps your audience understand what you’re trying to tell them.

When drafting the Contract with America, the GOP understood that what they were saying was as important as who they were saying it to. Given that voters use heuristics to make sense of political information, Republicans had to communicate a message that would send easy,

obvious cues to voters as to what to think and feel. Especially picking up on the mood of the American public being frustrated with politicians, it was important for the Republicans to avoid political jargon and create a platform that every American could understand to help their “we’re on your side image.” To make sure that they communicated their platform effectively to voters, they used lists of ten to propose their reforms and bills. According to one of the principal architects of the Contract, political pollster Frank Luntz, “people are accustomed to seeing things in lists of ten: The Ten Commandments, the top ten records on the Billboard charts, David Letterman’s top ten lists, and so on” (Luntz, 2008). The list initially began with 67 specific items in 12 different categories (Balz, 1994), but ten points were long enough to be comprehensive but small enough to maintain viewer attention and engagement (Luntz, 2008).

Furthermore, a ten-point platform helped Republicans reach their audience effectively. The length of the Contract allowed them to put the Contract in the *TV Guide* magazine because it was brief. The *TV Guide* was something that Americans would have in their house for an entire week. Also, the *TV Guide* was something that people would have to flip through every day, which amounted to “seven unique opportunities to communicate the Contract and all it represented” (Luntz, 2008). Simplifying the Contract into ten items was strategic because it helped them avoid using technical jargon that would have made them seem less like the people and more like career politicians. Simplifying also allows them to send succinct, clear cues to uses that accommodated the heuristics voters use to understand political information. Moreover, simplification enabled them to put the Contract in a magazine where, because of its length, people could digest key details every time they flipped by it.

Like the architects of the Contract, the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) also understood the importance of simplifying your message. Because the recreational vehicle market has such a diverse clientele, the RVIA had to come up with a marketing campaign that would appeal to all their niche market. So, like the Republicans, the RVIA had to hone on what all of their audiences had in common. Republicans knew that Americans, as a whole, did not spend a lot of time digesting politics, so they used mental shortcuts to make sense of information. They had to boil down the Contract to key points and phrases that would send the proper cues to voters. Similarly, the RVIA conducted a lot of market research to find out the characteristics all of their consumers had in common. They concluded that within all the subcategories of RV owners, everyone wants to get “away” in some capacity. “Away” was an umbrella idea that they could market to all of their audiences because it meant something different to all of them, but was the reason they bought an RV (Swann, 2014). The GOP understood that what every voter was going to think about the Contract would be different, the same way the RVIA knew that each of their audiences interpreted “away” differently. But the GOP knew that how all voters digested political information was the same, so simplifying to content was important. Likewise, “away,” though it meant something different to each consumer, was a concept they all associated with RVs. Simplifying the message, in both cases, helped audiences understand what the organization was trying to communicate to them.

### Lesson Three: Accountability

Being accountable is essential in public relations because it affects consumers' trust in your organization. Trust is the foundation of the relationship between the consumer and the

organization. You risk losing consumers if you break their trust by not following through on promises you to them.

In 1992, the American public decided to oust sitting president George H.W. Bush after twelve years of a Republican running the White House. In a democracy, like the U.S., elections are used to ensure that elected officials are responding to their constituents. If a politician satisfies her constituents, she will get reelected. If she does not satisfy her constituents, she'll get voted out. Like in Bush's case, if the public wants change, they will show it through voting. This is why Republicans decided to capitalize on Clinton's poor approval ratings in 1994; they sensed that the public wanted change. For the past forty years, Democrats had been the majority party in Congress, and Americans were sick of the status quo and wanted to feel like their elected officials were listening to them. Republicans knew the importance of having the electorate feel like politicians were accountable to them when creating the Contract.

The reason the House Republicans called the Contract a contract instead of a pledge because "a 'contract' sounds as if signatories, the elected officials themselves, would have to comply with it...or else" (Luntz, 2008). Architect of the Contract, pollster Frank Luntz, found through focus group that a contract was appealing to people because of the idea of an enforcement clause (Luntz, 2008). The concept of a contract implied a sense of accountability that things would get done. Contrastly, promises break, pledges go unfilled, and plans do not sound binding (Luntz, 2008). The way to make the of a contract effective was that it was a contract "with" America. A contract with America implies reciprocity between the politician and the voter, an obligation to the people. A contract also suggests consequences, which is why, to make as effective as possible, strategists added this clause that the end: "Respecting the judgment of our fellow citizens as we seek their mandate for reform, we hereby pledge our names to this Contract with America" (Luntz, 2008). 367 Republicans signed the Contract, which was a tactic that made voters feel like they were in control and that the Republicans had no choice but to follow through or they'd be ousted.

Unlike the Republicans, Billy MacFarland, the CEO and founder of the FYRE Festival lost the trust of his consumers by not following through on his promises to them. People bought into the idea of the festival due to fantasies MacFarland's created around it. He had promised a dream vacation experience on a luxurious private island where your favorite bands play, and celebrity idols would lounge in the beach chair next to you. However, when it became apparent to him that he was not going to be able to execute on his promises after people had bought tickets, he became unreachable. None of his employees knew what was going on and what they could the customers. When people who bought began asking customer service for questions about what was going on, they rarely got responses. And if they did get a response, they said very little.

By not responding to questions and being available to consumers, McFarland lost the trust of his consumers, and even the public, that he was going to follow through on the fantastical ideas he sold. An essential tool the Republicans used to build trust with voters was reiterating they would accept the consequences if they did not fulfill their duties to the public throughout the Contract. This tool made it appear like there was an incentive to execute it. When MacFarland did not respond to consumers, people were unhappy that there seemed to be no consequences for his actions, no accountability, which incentivized the creation of the twitter account FyreFestivalFraud. If Republicans did not fulfill the Contract, they sent the message to voters to not reelect them. Since there were no equivalent means for keeping MacFarland,



FyreFestivalFraud exposed his deception of the festival by posting drone photos of the abysmal progress of the festival. People have to feel like there are consequences if they do not get what they are promised to trust an organization.

#### Lesson Four: Unification

Unifying your brand is important because isolated campaigns have the potential to conflict with other branding attempts. Localized campaigns targeting niche audiences also run the risk of falling because the niche audience may not have enough participation in the first place. Unifying a brand through consistent messaging helps create an identity for your organization that consumers can recognize.

What was different about the Contract with America than other campaign strategies was that it was a platform all Republicans running for Congress in the midterm elections stood by. Historically, politicians would follow party lines when forming their agenda. However, there would be nuance among the specific platforms each candidate would run on that would address the needs of their constituents. Typically, it was a broader philosophy rather than specific issues that would unite candidates within a party. However, to fulfill the goal of becoming the majority party in Congress, Republicans knew that they would have to win a lot of seats in districts with Democratic incumbents. It would have been challenging to become the majority party by tackling each district, or even each region, one by one. Furthermore, what messages may work well in one area, may turn off voters in another. Also, no one district could win them the majority in Congress. It was instrumental for the Republicans to create a unified platform that they would support and run on because they had to appeal to voters across the country to win the majority. Having all Republicans stand by the same platform meant that voters did not have to know what was going on local politics or have to figure out what their Republican candidates' positions were. If you knew what one Republican in one state ran on, you could know what every Republican ran on. Moreover, it was a Contract with America, not a contract with any particular district. Unifying under one message helped Republicans address America and appeal to voters regardless of where they lived.

In contrast to the Contract with America, Air New Zealand marketed specifically to niche audiences at the detriment of creating a cohesive brand identity. To attract customers to fly on their airline, Air New Zealand created several different themed flights to appeal to the interests of specific flyers. For example, a large tourist attraction in New Zealand is the filming location of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. To attract people flying to New Zealand with that particular interest, they create a *Lord of the Rings* themed flight. Beyond the flight attendants in customs and themed decor, Air New Zealand flights were like any other flight. By having localized campaigns, if you were not interested in any of their themed-flights, you were not marketed to. The Republicans understood that you miss a lot of potential voters by campaigning specific districts or voter demographics, which is why the Contract with America identified issues that were not polarizing or specifically targeted on voting demographics. Republicans the Contract with America so that every candidate would have success with it no matter where they were campaigning. Air New Zealand should have unified their branding efforts so that they did not overlook potential customers by having localized campaigns. Like the idea that no one district could win the Republicans the majority, Air New Zealand could not rely on specific flyers'



interests to be successful. Republicans did not use any one member's platform to address the country; no single district's issues were going to represent the entire country. No one theme is going to interest all flyers. If Air New Zealand's goal is to attract the most flyers possible, they need to unify their brand, so consumers understand who they and who they are marketing to.

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