T here is, perhaps, no more con- 

cerning argument for a political 

campaign to offer a clear and con- 
cise agenda to the voters than the 

electoral train wreck which befell 

the Republican Party nationally in this year's 

congressional elections. 

Little more than four years ago, Newt 

Gingrich, surrounded by scores of Repub- 

cil congressional candidates, stood on the 

steps of the U.S. Capitol and de- 

claimed the party's Contract with America — a 

set of action items which the candi- 

dates pledged to enact if the voters gave 

them the majority in the Congress. 

Rallied and derided by Democrats, the 

campaign worked. The Republicans 

scored an astounding victory and put Gin- 

grich in the speaker's chair, the first Re- 

publican to occupy it in nearly a half 

century. It worked because the Democrats of 

1994 were in the same position as the 

Republicans of 1988, running on a platform 

of "business as usual" even though it was 

widely understood that the American peo- 

ple wanted change and wanted their con- 

cerns addressed. 

In 1998, the Republicans told the 

American people they deserved reelection 

because they were running a new, low 

moral character and shouldn't be reelect- 

ed for his behavior. The Democrats, on 

the other hand, told the American people 

they should be elected because they 

would keep the economy strong, save So- 

cial Security, reform education, and tell 

BOM to put the patient first. 

When the smoke cleared on the 

morning after, the Republicans had lost seats in the House, remained static in the Senate, 

and Gingrich — who only 48 months earlier had been granted political sainthood — was 

out on his Georgie peach. 

The Republicans were correct, all right — the President is a man of low moral character and to himself. The Ameri- 

can people responded by saying they knew all about the President's morals and did not want to talk about them. Rather, the people wanted a 

strong economy, Social Security saved, ed- 

ucation reformed, and HMO's ordered to 

clean up their act. 

Four years ago, the American people 

said they wanted a balanced budget, re- 

form of the welfare system, term limits, 

and the other items in the Contract with 

America. And in 1994 and again in 1998, the 
electorate made it clear that its decision 

was issue-driven. (The year 1996 doesn't 

really count, because the Presidential el- 

cition, as it always does, shadowed 

everything else.) 

The Republicans still control the House, 

true enough, but control by six votes means 

that Democrats will be able to exert 

enormous influence in the new Congress; 

enough, quite likely, to force the Republi- 
can majority into accepting much of the 

Democratic legislative agenda. 

A s expected, the pulling and tug- 

ning began almost immediately as 

Republicans assessed the reasons 

for — and the consequences of — the 

less than stellar performance of their party 

nation. While some said the election 

wreckage was the inevitable result of the 

failure of Republican candidates to run as 

sufficiently conservative, others pointed 

to outstanding victories by GOP govern- 
tor candidates around the country as 

proof that moderate, mainstream Republi-

cans is the only style capable of pro- 

ducing victory. 

Christie Whitman came closer to the 

mark than most when she said the election 

result was a statement that the American 

people disdained political litmus tests. She 

put her finger where her beliefs are with 

campaign swings around the country on 

behalf of Republican candidates with 

whom she differs on some social issues. 

The enjoyed unions — more winners 

than losers, however — but she tried might- 

ily to send the message that the Republican 

path to victory was, indeed, paved with 

good intentions — the kind of problem-solv- 
ing intentions which capture the hearts and 

minds of the voters. 

For Republicans to lob grenades at 

one another from foxholes flying flags 

adorned with “conservative” or “moderate” 

sticker is to buy heavily into the 

mutually assured destruction scenario of 

the ballistic-missile-drenched Cold War 

years. If unchecked, Republicans will 

continue to occupy foxholes rather than 

engage in battle. 

A strong economy is not a litmus test. 

Nor is saving Social Security. Nor is 

reform of education. Nor is telling HMO's 

to be more concerned with their patients' 

health than their selfish bottom line 

healthy. Indeed, the Contract with America 

was not a litmus test. 

As Republicans look ahead to 2000, 

they would be well served to look back 

and re-learn the lesson of the Contract 

with America. It told the American people 

that a Republican-controlled Congress 

would do to confront issues and solve 

problems. Put another way, the Contract 

told the voters Republicans would listen 

to their gripe and do something about it. 

While it may come as a shock to 

some, that's exactly what most people 

think government is for. 

Republicans must restate their willing-

ness to listen to the national gripe and 

use the power of government to resolve 

it. Certainly not hard to discern 

what the gripe is. If there's one group of 

people who mistrust political commen-

tators and consultants, it's pollsters. And, 

they are more than happy to tell anyone 

on a daily or weekly basis what is trou-

bling the American people. 

A good many people described the 

election as a “walk up call." It's more like a 

fire bell telling the Republican Party that 

the blaz has just gone to six alarms. 

CAIRL GOLDEN 

No More Litmus Tests 

The problem, of course, is that hospitals 

then shift the cost of those discounts 

onto other users. So, if a clinic wants to get the 

picture of the conflicting goals of the various 

stakeholders in this state and national 

health care drama, your concern de-

pends on who you are: 

- Consumers want flexibility and better 

access to services. 

- Employers want to spend less on em-

ployee coverage (lower costs). 

- States and the federal government 

seek to reduce payments to providers 

(lower costs). 

- Health care providers want greater 

reimbursement to meet their needs 

(higher costs). 

The one thing becoming increasingly 

clear in this muddled picture is that 

these contradictory goals won't be rec- 
nociled on a state-by-state basis. 

This is because the state that of-

fers affordable, quality, accessible 

health care can be answered only by a 

national debate over the provision of a univer-

sal, comprehensive health care system. 

New Jersey has been a leader in health 
care policy innovation, and we should be 
in the forefront of national bipartisan 

debate. Better to start now, while the 

economy is still strong, than to wait for a 

downfall that results in the loss of jobs 

and the health care coverage that comes 

with them. Creating a good health care 

system is difficult enough without hav-

ing to do it in a crisis. 

Jim Florio is a former Governor and 

Congressman. He is a partner in the 

law firm of Florio and Persico's in 

Princeton. He is also a professor at Bu-

gars University's Eagleton Institute of 

Politics.