If you talk to state legislative Democrats, they'll tell you that their latest round of polling is showing improvement in most of their races since the summer. The Republicans, however, believe they have history on their side.

The House Democrats say their candidates are sticking to a strict and intense precinct-walking program. That, plus the end of the Rod Blagojevich trial, allowed them to stabilize their campaigns. They see polls showing their candidates doing better than they were and believe they've turned the corner.

The Democrats have a lot of things going for them that they didn't have during the big 1994 national Republican landslide. It's their map, there's no more straight-party voting, they have a tried and true incumbent-protection program, and their gubernatorial candidate isn't doing as badly as their '94 candidate (although he's getting completely and totally blown out Downstate). They have at least two statewide officials (Lisa Madigan and Jesse White) who will serve as "stoppers" for the party. The Democrats also have a president from this state who has managed to keep Illinois in his corner more than just about anywhere else.

But the House Republicans point to recent history as a guide. Two years ago right about now, they thought they were doing okay against the Barack Obama Democratic tide. They believed their losses would be manageable. By mid-October, the Obama wave was in full force, and there wasn't anything they could do about it.

Pretty much the same thing happened in 1994. September polling showed problems, but the Democrats thought it could be contained, and they derided the House Republicans for jumping into several new races where nobody gave them a chance. By the middle of October, the bottom fell out. And it was even worse come election day when Democratic voters failed to show up. The Republicans won just about every one of those contested races.

It's no coincidence that the House Republicans say they're planning a move into new races in the coming days. They're following their own playbook.

The Senate Democrats say they continually adjust and monitor their likely-voter polling screens

to make sure they're not unduly surprised. And, so far, they like what they see. But one Democratic operative joked last week that his caucus rarely asks whether respondents approve of the General Assembly's job performance. The results were just too depressing.

A solid Democratic source who has seen two complete House Democratic polls of collar-county districts says one showed a 14-percent legislative approval rating; the other came up as 12.

"The scary part," the Democratic source said, "is if they blame all these losses on this wave, that means they think they haven't done anything wrong to cause this." Instead, the source argued, his party needs to come to terms with the fact that they're exacerbating the national party problem with their own mismanagement. "Illinois has created its own wave," he insisted.

A top state Republican (who monitors just about every GOP poll taken in this state) privately predicted last week that the wave could very well be bigger than 1994's. He has a point.

The populist anger seems more vicious and is far more organized via the Tea Party and the Internet. The 24/7 news media is more uniformly outraged and is aiming its anger right at Democratic leaders. Reform groups of all shapes, sizes, and causes are far more bitter because of their legislative losses. Downstate independents have completely abandoned Governor Pat Quinn. The usually pro-Democratic network of human-service groups and their supporters are despondent over budget cuts and late state payments. And the state's economic problems under total Democratic control are infinitely more severe than they were 16 years ago, when the Republicans held the governor's mansion and all but one statewide office. The state's current unemployment rate is almost double what it was in 1994, and vast swaths of the Democratic base are the hardest hit. And then, of course, there's that monstrous state deficit, the mismanagement, and the whole Blagojevich disaster.

Any Democrats who aren't ahead by double digits right now had better work like their very lives depended on it. And all Republicans who are losing by anywhere near that margin should do the same. This has been the most fascinating state campaign season I've ever seen. And it's only going to get better.

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