


CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE 1996 *and* 1998 ELECTIONS



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Washington, D.C.

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1414 22nd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

CQ Press on the Web: <http://books.cq.com>
CQ Press customer service: (800) 638-1710; (202) 822-1475

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Printed in the United States of America

Second Printing

Cover design by Rich Pottern Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abramson, Paul R.

Change and continuity in the 1996 and 1998 elections / Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, David W. Rohde.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-56802-474-6

1. Presidents—United States--Election--1996. 2. United States. Congress--Elections, 1996. 3. United States. Congress--Elections, 1998. 4. Elections--United States. 5. United States--Politics and government--1993<\#208>

I. Aldrich, John Herbert, 1937 <\#208>. II Rohde, David W. III. Title. JK526 1996k

324.973'0929--dc21 99-18220

To Joseph A. Schlesinger

Preface



A political earthquake on November 8, 1994, brought the Republicans control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years and of the Senate for the first time in eight. These developments placed President Bill Clinton on the political defensive. Yet two years later he easily won reelection, the first Democratic president to do so since Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected (for the third time) in 1944. Despite losing nine seats, the Republicans retained control of the House, and they gained two seats in the Senate. The 1996 contest was the first election since 1928 in which the Republicans had won control of the House in two consecutive elections. Moreover, it was also the first election in U.S. history in which the Democrats won the presidency without gaining control of the House. Indeed, the Democrats won the presidency in nineteen of the forty-two presidential elections held between 1828 and 1992, and in all nineteen of their victories they also won control of the House.

The Republicans retained control of both the House and Senate in the 1998 midterm elections, but they lost five House seats while holding their own in the Senate. The 1998 election was unusual, especially in light of historical patterns, for it was the first midterm election since 1934 in which the party holding the White House gained seats in the House. In fact, the party controlling the presidency lost strength in the House in thirty-eight of the thirty-nine midterm elections held between 1842 and 1994.

In 1988, with George Bush's election, the Republicans had won the presidency for three elections in a row, and many scholars argued that the GOP was becoming the dominant party in presidential elections. What happened to Republican presidential dominance? What are the prospects for the Democrats to build a new presidential majority? And what happened to Democratic congressional dominance? What are the prospects for ending divided government,

and which party is likely to end it? Have the major political parties weakened their hold on the U.S. electorate, and, if so, what are the prospects for a new political party?

To answer these questions, one cannot view the 1996 and 1998 elections as isolated events; rather, one needs to study them in their historical context. To do this, we have examined a broad range of evidence, from past election results to public opinion surveys of the electorate conducted since 1944.

We employ many sources, but we rely most heavily on the 1996 survey of the American electorate conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies (SRC-CPS) of the University of Michigan as part of an ongoing project funded by the National Science Foundation. We use every one of the twenty-four election studies conducted by the Michigan SRC-CPS between 1948 and 1996, often referred to as the National Election Studies.

These surveys, which are disseminated by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), can be analyzed by scholars throughout the United States. The ICPSR provided these data in April 1997. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the tables and figures in Chapters 2, 4–8, and 10 are based on surveys obtained through the ICPSR. The standard disclaimer holds: the consortium is not responsible for our analyses or interpretations.

Several institutions aided us financially. John H. Aldrich was a visiting professor in the Department of Government at Harvard University when most of this book was written, and he is grateful for its support. The Department of Political Science at Duke University also provided assistance. Paul R. Abramson and David W. Rohde received support from the Department of Political Science and the Political Institutions and Public Choice Program at Michigan State University. Rohde also received assistance from a Michigan State University fund for Distinguished University Professors.

Many individuals helped us with this effort. Bryan Marshall at Michigan State University helped us with the data analysis for Chapters 2, 9, 10, and 11, and Jamie Carson at Michigan State University assisted with the analysis for Chapter 11. Mark Berger at Duke University assisted with the data analysis for Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Walter Dean Burnham at the University of Texas at Austin provided us with estimates of turnout among the politically eligible population, and Martin O'Connell of the U.S. Bureau of the Census answered questions about the census survey of U.S. turnout.

Others helped us by commenting on several of these chapters. At Michigan State University, Darren W. Davis, Mark P. Jones, Michael Mintrom, Dennis Patterson, and Joseph A. Schlesinger provided numerous suggestions for Chapter 12. Jack Dennis at the University of Wisconsin, Robert E. O'Connor at Pennsylvania State University, and an anonymous reviewer provided us with suggestions based upon their reading of *Change and Continuity in the 1992 Elections*.

Once again we are thankful to the staff at CQ Press. Brenda Carter and Gwenda Larsen guided us in preparing our manuscript. Joanne S. Ainsworth and Chris-

topher M. Karlsten copyedited our manuscript, and Talia Greenberg assisted in its production.

Like our earlier books, this book was a collective enterprise, but we divided the labor. Abramson had the primary responsibility for Chapters 3, 4, and 5; Aldrich for Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 8; and Rohde for Chapters 2, 9, 10, and 11. Abramson and Aldrich are primarily responsible for Chapter 12. We must also take some responsibility for the electoral outcome in 1996, since we all voted for Clinton. Yet, although each of us made several trips to the nation's capital during Clinton's first term, none of us slept in the Lincoln bedroom. In fact, none of us even entered the White House during the Clinton presidency.

Paul R. Abramson
John H. Aldrich
David W. Rohde

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PART 1

The 1996 Presidential Election



Presidential elections in the United States are partly ritual, a reaffirmation of our democratic values. But they are far more than ritual. The office confers great powers upon the occupant, and those powers have expanded during the course of American history. It is precisely because of these immense powers that presidential elections have at times played a major role in determining public policy.

The 1860 election, which brought Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans to power and ousted a divided Democratic party, focused on whether slavery should be extended into the western territories. Following Lincoln's election, eleven southern states attempted to secede from the Union, the Civil War erupted, and slavery itself was abolished. An antislavery plurality (Lincoln received only 40 percent of the popular vote) set in motion a chain of events that freed some four million African-Americans.

The 1896 election, in which the Republican William McKinley defeated the Democrat and Populist William Jennings Bryan, beat back the challenge of western and agrarian interests to the prevailing financial and industrial power of the East. Although Bryan mounted a strong campaign, winning 47 percent of the vote to McKinley's 51 percent, the election set a clear course for a policy of high tariffs and the continuation of a gold standard for American money.

The twentieth century also witnessed presidential elections that determined the direction of public policy. In 1936 the incumbent Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt, won 61 percent of the popular vote and his Republican opponent, Alfred M. Landon, only 37 percent, a margin that allowed the Democrats to continue to consolidate the economic, social, and welfare policies of the New Deal.

Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide over the Republican Barry M. Goldwater provided the clearest set of policy alternatives of any election of this century. Johnson, who received 61 percent of the popular vote to Goldwater's 38 percent, saw his election as a mandate for his Great Society programs, the most far-reaching social legislation enacted since World War II.

Goldwater offered "a choice, not an echo," advocating far more conservative

social and economic policies than Johnson's. Ironically, the election also appeared to offer a choice between escalating American involvement in Vietnam and restraint. But American involvement expanded after the election, and four years later the Democrats lost the presidency.

WHAT DID THE 1996 ELECTION MEAN?

Only the future will determine the ultimate importance of the 1996 election. Some scholars argue that elections have become less important for deciding public policy, and there is doubtless some truth in their argument.¹ But presidential elections often do have important policy consequences. The 1996 election did not offer dramatic choices, mainly because after the Republican victories in the 1994 midterm election, Bill Clinton moved to the political center and did not offer dramatic new initiatives for his second term. If the "era of big government is over," as Clinton proclaimed in his State of the Union message in 1996, so too was the era of big new campaign promises. Clinton's signing of welfare reform legislation, opposed by many liberal Democrats, signaled a move to the political center as did his accepting the goal of balancing the budget by the year 2002. He also advocated some traditional positions on social values, such as the death penalty, school uniforms, and a "V-chip" to allow parents to control television programming.

But despite moving to the political center, he clearly differed from Bob Dole. Dole specifically proposed a program for a 15 percent across-the-board cut in the federal income tax, whereas Clinton wanted any tax cuts to be specifically targeted. Clinton was opposed to major changes in Medicare and Medicaid, was more supportive of environmental protection, and favored gun control. He wanted to reform, but continue, affirmative action. He differed markedly from Dole on abortion rights. His decision to veto a bill that would have made a late-term abortion procedure (often referred to as "partial birth" abortions) illegal led Dole to charge that Clinton favored "abortion on demand." Under the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, new Supreme Court appointments had come close to placing the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which prevents the states from outlawing abortion, in jeopardy. As Clinton's two Supreme Court appointments during his first term, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Stephen Breyer, made clear, Clinton was committed to appointing justices who supported abortion rights. Moreover, voters who were disenchanted with the Republican and Democratic parties had the opportunity to vote for H. Ross Perot, now running as head of the newly formed Reform party.

Clinton won reelection easily, becoming the first Democrat to be reelected to the presidency since Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected (for the third time) in 1944. But the Republicans held control of both the House and the Senate, the first time they had maintained control in two successive elections since 1928. Between 1828 and 1996, the Democrats had won the presidency twenty times,

but 1996 was the only time they had won the White House without also winning control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Because divided government would continue, many expected relatively little change in public policy. The budget agreement passed by Congress and signed by Clinton in the summer of 1997 demonstrated that there could be bipartisan cooperation. But the possibilities for substantial government retrenchment were clearly limited compared with the possibilities for change under a united Republican presidency and Congress. The "Republican revolution," so boldly proclaimed after the 1994 midterm election, had ended, with Republican representatives complaining about the lack of leadership from Newt Gingrich, the newly reelected Speaker of the House.

Skeptics ask, Do elections matter?² The answer, clearly, is yes. Presidential elections not only can change the direction of public policy, they can also change the direction of American politics.³ The 1996 election can only present clues about the future of American electoral politics. During the Republican presidential victories of the 1980s, many political scientists raised the possibility that a partisan realignment had occurred or was about to occur. In 1985 President Reagan himself proclaimed that a Republican realignment was at hand. "The other side would like to believe that our victory last November was due to something other than our philosophy," he asserted. "I just hope they keep believing that. There's a change happening in America. Realignment is real."⁴

In November 1984 Reagan had won 59 percent of the popular vote. Bush's election in 1988 (with 53 percent of the vote) raised the possibility of continued Republican dominance. But in 1992 Bush won only 37 percent of the popular vote, a 22-point decline from Reagan's high-water mark. Not only had the Republican winning streak of three straight victories been broken, but the Republicans suffered one of the greatest popular vote declines since the Civil War. And in 1996 Dole won only 41 percent of the popular vote.

Obviously, the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections call into question any claims about a pro-Republican realignment. But Clinton won only 43 percent of the popular vote in 1992 and only 49 percent in 1996. In 1992 nearly one out of five voters had voted for Perot, and in 1996 one out of ten voters voted for Perot and for other minor-party candidates. The divided partisan outcome also suggests that a substantial number of Clinton voters voted for Republican House and Senate candidates. Many voters appear to have reservations about both of the major political parties. This raises the possibility that past voting patterns are breaking down, something that political scientists have called a dealignment.

What do the terms *realignment* and *dealignment* mean? Political scientists define *realignment* in different ways, but they are all influenced by the seminal writings of V. O. Key, Jr., who began by developing a theory of "critical elections" in which "new and durable electoral groupings are formed."⁵ Elections like that of 1860, in which Lincoln's victory brought the Republicans to power; the election of 1896, in which McKinley's victory consolidated Republican dominance; and the 1932 election, which brought the Democrats under Roosevelt to power, are obvious choices for this label.