

THE POLITICS OF
DIVIDED
GOVERNMENT

EDITED BY
GARY W. COX
AND
SAMUEL KERNELL



WESTVIEW PRESS

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Gary W. Cox
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CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>List of Figures</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xv

□1

INTRODUCTION: GOVERNING A DIVIDED ERA

Gary W. Cox and Samuel Kernell 1

The Script of Divided Government • 4

On the Essays that Follow • 8

PART ONE FEDERAL CAUSES

□2

DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: IS IT ALL IN THE CAMPAIGNS?

John R. Petrocik 13

An Issue Explanation of Divided Government • 15

The Theory of Issue Ownership • 17

Issue Ownership and Divided Government • 28

Candidates and Issues: Members of Congress Versus

Presidents • 30

Conclusion • 34

Notes • 36

□3

THE REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL ADVANTAGE IN THE AGE OF PARTY DISUNITY

Martin P. Wattenberg 39

The History of Party Disunity • 42

State-Level Data on Divisive Presidential Primaries • 43

Nationwide Data for the Disunity Hypothesis • 45

Conclusion • 54

Notes • 55

□4

**THE PERSISTENCE OF DEMOCRATIC HOUSE
MAJORITIES**

Gary C. Jacobson

57

Structural Explanations for the Democratic House

Majority • 59

Political Explanations for the Democratic House

Majority • 66

Conclusion: An Ossified Congress? • 79

Appendix • 82

Notes • 82

**PART TWO
FEDERAL CONSEQUENCES**

□5

**FACING AN OPPOSITION CONGRESS:
THE PRESIDENT'S STRATEGIC CIRCUMSTANCE**

Samuel Kernell

87

Pluralist Theory of the Presidency • 88

A Party Theory of the Presidency • 91

The Bargaining President and Divided Government • 98

The Veto • 101

Conclusion • 108

Notes • 110

□6

**GOVERNMENT ON LAY-AWAY: FEDERAL SPENDING AND
DEFICITS UNDER DIVIDED PARTY CONTROL**

Mathew D. McCubbins

113

Of Checks and Balances: The Thesis of Presidential

Ascendancy in American Politics • 115

Committee Power, the 1974 Reforms, and Party

Governance in Congress • 128

The Partisan Roots of Deficit Spending • 138

Conclusion • 141

Appendix • 142

Notes • 150

□7

DIVIDED CONTROL OF FISCAL POLICY
Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins

155

The Determinants of Fiscal Policy • 157

Divided Control and Fiscal Policy • 161

An Econometric Model of Tax Receipts • 165	
Results • 168	
Conclusion • 170	
Notes • 172	

PART THREE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

□8	
DIVIDED GOVERNMENT IN THE STATES	
Morris P. Fiorina	179

The Illusion of Democratic Dominance in State Elections • 181	
Patterns of Party Control in the States • 183	
Potential Explanations • 189	
Conclusion • 200	
Notes • 200	

□9	
LESSONS FROM THE POST-CIVIL WAR ERA	
Charles H. Stewart III	203

The Electoral Basis of Partisan Division in the Mid-nineteenth Century • 205	
Divided Government and Public Policy: The Case of Taxing and Spending • 217	
Divided Government and House Rules: The Case of Appropriations Oversight • 224	
Conclusion • 227	
Appendix • 229	
Notes • 236	

□10	
CONCLUSION	
Gary W. Cox and Samuel Kernell	239

The Causes of Divided Government • 241	
The Consequences of Divided Government • 242	
A Case in Point: The Budget Crisis of 1990 • 245	
Notes • 247	

<i>References</i>	249
<i>About the Book and Editors</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	264

TABLES

1.1	Party control of Congress and the presidency, 1875–1992	3
2.1	Voter perception of issue-handling competence of the parties, 1988	21
2.2	Responses of voters regarding peace and prosperity and the Bush vote, 1988	25
2.3	Change in the relationship between the vote and attitudes and issue handling, May to November 1988	26
2.4	The effect of perceptions about important problems on presidential voting, 1988	27
2.5	Issue agendas in the nation and in elections, 1988	30
2.6	The effect of perceptions about problems on House voting, 1988	32
2.7	The effect of information levels on voting for incumbents, controlling for incumbency	33
3.1	Party identification and ideology, 1988	41
3.2	Primary vote total and favorability ratings, 1988	44
3.3	Margins over closest opponent in nominations and general elections	45
3.4	Convention television exposure, 1956–1988	49
3.5	Index of nomination fighting, 1964–1988	51
3.6	Standard deviations of candidate feeling thermometer ratings by party, 1984	54
4.1	Vote swing to House candidates of the party gaining votes, 1946–1990	61
4.2	Open seats changing party control	62
4.3	The effects of redistricting on the outcomes of House elections, 1968–1990	64
4.4	The effects of redistricting on the outcomes of House elections, 1982–1990	65
4.5	The “Most Important Problem” and “Most Important Issue,” 1988	72
4.6	Determinants of the vote for president and House, 1988	74

4.7	House seat swings between presidential elections, 1932–1988	77
4.8	Public opinion on divided control of the federal government, 1981 and 1989	81
6.1	Average percentage change in budget requests and appropriations by administration for domestic agencies, 1948–1985	123
6.2	Change in appropriations by party control of Congress	123
6.3	Change in appropriations by Congress by presidential administration, 1948–1988	125
6.4	Appropriations for federal departments by fiscal year, 1947–1986	126
6.5	House Appropriations Committee (HAC) treatment of presidential budget requests by partisan control of government	136
6.6	Party ranking of spending allocations, most preferred to least preferred	140
6.7	Two-stage estimation of final congressional appropriations pooled cross-sectional time series of sixty-nine agencies, 1948–1985	146
6.8	On the determination of the federal budget deficit, 1929–1988	149
7.1	Partisan control and federal tax receipts, 1934–1988	166
7.2	Divided government and federal tax receipts, 1934–1988	169
8.1	Gubernatorial and legislative victories in 1978, 1982, and 1986	181
8.2	Gubernatorial and legislative victories in 1948, 1952, and 1956	182
8.3	Second ten most unified states and ten least unified states	190
8.4	Democratic-headed and Republican-headed divided states	191
8.5	How unified governments ended, 1946–1990	198
9.1	Types of partisan regimes during partisan eras, 1789–1991	204
9.2	Partisan control of the federal government, 1861–1931	206

9.3	Percentage of House seats won by the political parties by region, 1860–1910	208
9.4	Popular and electoral votes received by presidential candidates by region, 1860–1908	210
9.5	Percentage of Senate seats held by the political parties by region, 1860–1910	212
9.6	Measures of partisan control of national political institutions, 1860–1930	217
9.7	Composition of federal revenues, 1860–1880	221
9.8	Spending in eleven annual appropriations bills, FY 1872–1916	235

FIGURES

3.1	Party unity by index of nomination fighting	52
4.1	Experienced House challengers, 1966–1990	68
5.1	The effectiveness of the veto as a function of the distribution of preferences	103
7.1	Federal tax rates and the percentage change in real federal receipts, 1934–1989	167
8.1	The decline of unified state government, 1946–1990	180
8.2	Unified government: Southern versus nonsouthern states	184
8.3	Unified Democratic government	185
8.4	Unified Republican government	186
8.5	Democratic governors	187
8.6	Unified legislatures	188
8.7	Divided government with Democratic governor	189
8.8	Divided government with Republican governor	190
9.1	Actual and hypothetical Democratic percentage composition of the House and Senate, 35th–61st Congresses	214
9.2	Yield from import duties as a percentage of the value of all imports subject to duty	220
9.3	Fiscal decisionmaking under different reversion rules	231



INTRODUCTION: GOVERNING A DIVIDED ERA

Gary W. Cox and Samuel Kernell

With rampant inflation and widespread labor unrest following on the heels of the decontrol of the wartime economy, in the fall of 1946 political observers agreed that President Harry Truman's Democrats would do poorly in the upcoming congressional elections. Few, however, appreciated just how severe the backlash against this long-standing incumbent party would be or predicted that the Republicans would take control of Congress. Politicians and pundits alike were unprepared to deal with divided party control of Congress and the presidency. The election returns, however, brought both face to face with just that situation.

Collective consternation over the prospect of divided government was vented in a torrent of extraordinary corrective proposals, all seeking either to restore unity or to prevent this unfortunate constitutional anomaly from arising again in the future. Even more extraordinary, in retrospect, than the volume of proposals is the seriousness with which those proposals were received.

Democratic Senator J. William Fulbright was fast off the mark, so much so that his proposal shared headlines with the election results.

He called for President Truman to appoint a Republican secretary of state and then resign: With the vice presidency vacant, the new Republican appointee would go directly into the White House. Without some such drastic remedy, Fulbright argued, the nation faced an unstable international order like a "big helpless giant that is unable to make up its mind, unable to function" (Morris 1946, 19).

Congressional Republicans were understandably quite open to Fulbright's proposal. Surprisingly, so were many Democrats. Marshall Field, the prominent liberal Democratic publisher of the *Chicago Sun*, gave the idea a ringing editorial endorsement. It was picked up by the wire services and widely circulated by the nation's press ("Fulbright Invites" 1946, 3). President Truman initially dismissed Fulbright's proposal as unworthy of comment, but pursued by White House correspondents for a response, he eventually declared he was not about to alter the Constitution's prescription that he serve out his term.

Others with equally serious misgivings about divided government looked to the future. Senator Carl Hatch introduced a constitutional amendment to extend the terms of House members to four years and thereby eliminate midterm elections, which had produced the century's only other instances of divided government. With party voting prevalent in those days, proponents assumed that by aligning presidential and congressional elections, the House of Representatives and probably the Senate, too, would remain in the hands of the president's party.

Less drastic proposals simply called for extraconstitutional arrangements, such as having the president confer regularly with Republican congressional leaders. In these "summits," as they were then called, the politicians would hash out mutually acceptable policies to tide the country over until the next election, when the widely assumed Republican victory would return the political order to more familiar terrain. The president spurned these reforms as well.

The extent to which divided government was an aberration in 1946 is well documented in Table 1.1. There had been only three previous instances during the twentieth century, all at the midterm and each accompanied by turnover of party control of the White House in the next election. Contemporaries had no reason to doubt that the 1946 election would continue this pattern.

Table 1.1 also delineates the present era of divided party control, with Republicans holding the White House and Democrats encamped on Capitol Hill. Since their midterm victory in 1954, the Democrats have controlled the presidency in only three out of ten terms, and the Republicans have never captured both houses of Congress.

The prospect of divided party control no longer causes alarm. As it has become the norm, politicians and citizens alike appear to have

TABLE 1.1 Party Control of Congress and the Presidency, 1875–1992

<i>Years</i>	<i>Presidency</i>	<i>House of Representatives</i>	<i>Senate</i>
1875–1879	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1879–1881	Republican	Democratic	Democratic
1881–1883	Republican	Republican	Republican
1883–1885	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1885–1889	Democratic	Democratic	Republican
1889–1891	Republican	Republican	Republican
1891–1893	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1893–1895	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1895–1897	Democratic	Republican	Republican
1897–1911	Republican	Republican	Republican
1911–1913	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1913–1919	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1919–1921	Democratic	Republican	Republican
1921–1931	Republican	Republican	Republican
1931–1933	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1933–1946	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1947–1948	Democratic	Republican	Republican
1949–1952	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1953–1955	Republican	Republican	Republican
1955–1960	Republican	Democratic	Democratic
1961–1968	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1969–1976	Republican	Democratic	Democratic
1977–1980	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
1981–1986	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1987–1992	Republican	Democratic	Democratic

made their accommodations. Republican presidents still campaign for their congressional compatriots, but their statements of how much better off the country would be if it were securely in their party's hands sound more wistful than serious. Growing Republican rumblings since 1990 in favor of a constitutional amendment to impose term limits on members of Congress appear downright quixotic. Meanwhile, Democrats have greater reason to hope every four years that they might manage to win the presidency, but they are busy fortifying Congress's prerogatives and limiting those of the president as though they are pessimistic about their chances.

Many voters split their ballots as if intent on preserving divided party control. Some students of elections have speculated that the U.S. public has, in fact, found virtue in this type of control. Desiring low taxes and a government willing to resist the claims of special interests, many voters, according to this argument, find conservative Republican presidential candidates appealing. At the same time, however, these voters want to maximize the federal dollars to which their communities

are entitled. So, they elect Democratic representatives, who believe more earnestly in these government programs and therefore can more credibly campaign for the services they will provide for the district. The result is a string of conservative Republican presidents and liberal Democratic congresses.

THE SCRIPT OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

One of the central questions of this book concerns how the script of conservative presidents pitted against liberal congresses differs from the earlier one featuring unified Democratic party control, from which much of our current understanding of presidential-congressional relations is derived. When legislative and executive authority is unified, policymaking assumes the semblance of a cooperative enterprise. Presidents and their party colleagues in Congress differ among themselves in their constituencies and electoral calendar, but their electoral fortunes are linked by the favorable (and unfavorable) associations their performances in office imprint on their party's label. Whatever the ideological disputes among governing party members, they have a strategic interest in cooperating to produce an electorally attractive record of public policy. The incentive to cooperate renders the formal "checks" of the constitutional system, such as the veto, less relevant to these actors' performances than had been envisioned by the framers of the Constitution.

Under divided government, however, the formal authority assigned the branches becomes a vital asset as each party's politicians stave off encroachment by the other side. The opposition party in the legislature may find its electoral success, for example, lies in frustrating the president's performance. This, combined with the ideological distance represented by divided party control, is a recipe for conflict and impasse. It is reflected in the volume of Republican presidents' vetoes, in their efforts to centralize administration, and in the similarly unilateral methods Democratic congresses have employed to reduce Republican administrators' discretion in formulating and implementing policy.

Divided government will not always produce conflict and stalemate. On rare occasions, Democratic leaders have managed to muster two-thirds majorities in both chambers to override a veto. Far more commonly, overcoming partisan differences follows the traditional route of negotiation across the branches. But even here, divided government entails special strategic considerations that shape the policy agreements. With the president's leverage largely limited to the veto threat, his impact on legislation will be greater in preventing, rather than promoting, changes in current policy. Typically, this would appear to hamstring liberal Democratic presidents more than conservative Republican ones.