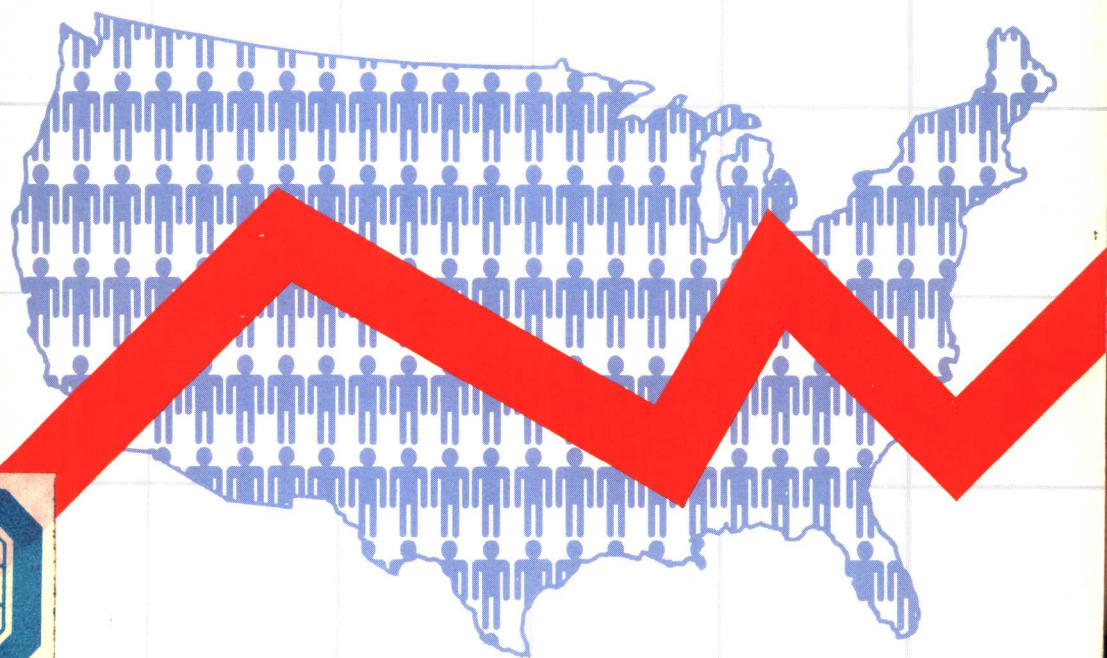


CHANGE AND CONTINUITY in the 1988 ELECTIONS

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*To
David
Heather and Lee
Jennifer and Margaret*

Preface

George Bush's 1988 election victory marks the first time in four decades that the party holding the White House has won three elections in a row, and many scholars now believe that the Republicans are clearly the dominant party in winning presidential elections. Yet the Republican victory was muted, for 1988 was the first election since 1960 in which the party winning the presidency lost seats in the House of Representatives. Although Bush carried forty states, the Republicans lost one seat in the Senate and three seats in the House. Interestingly enough, many Americans may be satisfied with this outcome, for public opinion polls show that a majority prefers different parties to control the presidency and the Congress.

For political scientists the mixed pattern of results poses fundamental questions about the American political system. Although divided control may have advantages, partisan conflict between Congress and the president may make it difficult for political leaders to respond to changing economic and social conditions. Divided control also makes it more difficult for voters to assess responsibility, giving credit for success or attaching blame for failure.

Students of electoral politics are puzzled by the continued pattern of divided government. For several decades, many have argued that the United States was ripe for a partisan realignment in which the basic pattern of electoral politics would change. Most political scientists agree that the winning coalition forged by the Democrats in the 1930s no longer exists, but they argue about what, if anything, has replaced it. Has there been a partisan realignment in which new patterns of voting behavior have been formed? Was there a dealignment in which old voting patterns disappeared without new patterns emerging? Or has there been a new type of realignment—some call it a “split-level” alignment—in which the Republicans continue to win the presidency while the Democrats maintain control of Congress?

To answer these questions, one cannot view the 1988 elections as isolated events, but must place them in 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 over the past four decades.

Our goal in writing this book was to provide a solid social-scientific analysis of the 1988 elections using the best data available to study voting behavior. We employ many sources, but rely most heavily upon the 1988 survey of the American electorate conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan as part of an ongoing project funded by the National Science Foundation. In the course of our analysis we use every one of the twenty election studies conducted by the Michigan SRC-CPS, a series often referred to as the National Election Studies (NES).

These surveys of the American electorate, which are disseminated by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, can be analyzed by scholars throughout the United States. The ICPSR provided a preliminary version of the 1988 election data to scholars in late April 1989; another version, including a study to determine whether respondents actually voted, was provided in mid-July 1989. Unless otherwise indicated, all the tables and figures in Chapters 2, 4 through 8, and 10 are based upon data obtained from the ICPSR. The standard disclaimer holds: the consortium is not responsible for our analyses or interpretations.

We are grateful to Harriet Dhanak of the Politometrics Laboratory at Michigan State University for helping us analyze these surveys. James Meernik and Renée M. Smith of Michigan State University and R. Michael Alvarez and Phil Paolino of Duke University assisted with the data analysis. John Aldrich received a grant from the Council on Research of Duke University to purchase the Gallup data used in Chapter 1. Jerry T. Jennings of the U.S. Bureau of the Census provided us with unpublished information about the Census Bureau's 1988 survey of voter registration and turnout, Walter Dean Burnham of the University of Texas provided us with estimates of turnout in the 1988 election, and Santa A. Traugott of the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan provided us with advice on analyzing the 1988 NES vote validation study.

We are also grateful to Nola Healy Lynch for her careful editing of our manuscript and to Kerry Kern, Carolyn Goldinger, and Nancy Lammers of CQ Press for their help in producing our book. As with our two earlier books, Joanne Daniels of CQ Press provided help and encouragement.

This book was a collective enterprise, but we divided the labor. Paul Abramson had primary responsibility for Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 11; John Aldrich for Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 8; and David Rohde for Chapters 2, 9, and 10. None of us is responsible for the presidential election result, since we all voted for Michael S. Dukakis, the first time in three elections that we agreed about the appropriate electoral outcome. But we have consistently agreed about the interpretation of recent elections. The 1988

election, in our view, raises important questions about the nature of American party politics. Although no book can provide definitive answers about the meaning of these elections, a thorough analysis of the data at hand may lead to a better understanding of recent developments.

Paul R. Abramson

John H. Aldrich

David W. Rohde

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PART 1

The 1988 Presidential Election Contest

Presidential elections in the United States are partly ritual, reaffirming our democratic values. But they are far more than that. 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 at least some presidential elections have 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 victory, eleven southern states attempted to secede from the Union, the Civil War erupted, and, ultimately, slavery itself was abolished. An antislavery plurality that did not necessarily favor the abolition of slavery (Lincoln received only 40 percent of the popular vote) set in motion a chain of events that freed some 4 million blacks.

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

The twentieth century also has witnessed presidential elections that determined the direction of public policy. In 1936, incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt won 61 percent of the vote and his Republican opponent, Alfred E. Landon, only 37 percent, allowing the Democrats to continue and consolidate the economic policies of the New Deal.

2 *The 1988 Presidential Election Contest*

Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide victory over Republican Barry M. Goldwater probably provided the clearest set of policy alternatives of any election in this century. Johnson, who received 61 percent of the popular vote to Goldwater's 38 percent, saw his triumph as a mandate for his Great Society reforms, 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, but the voters rejected him. Ironically, the election also appeared to offer a choice between escalating American involvement in Vietnam and restraint. As a result of Johnson's subsequent actions, many of Goldwater's policies about the war ultimately were implemented by Johnson himself.

What Did the 1988 Election Mean?

Only the future can determine the ultimate importance of the 1988 election. As an incumbent vice president, George Bush ran largely on the accomplishments of Ronald Reagan. During his eight years as president, Reagan had cut back social programs, slowed down government growth, substantially increased defense spending, and accelerated the government deregulation that had begun under Jimmy Carter. Reagan's 1980 promise to cut federal income taxes by 30 percent was largely implemented by the Economic Recovery Act of 1981, which cut income taxes 25 percent over a three-year period. Although many Democrats argued that Reagan's reforms mainly benefited wealthy Americans, most Americans benefited from relatively low inflation rates. In 1980, when Reagan was elected, the annual inflation rate was 12.5 percent; during the third quarter of 1988, when Bush was seeking to continue the "Reagan-Bush" administration, the annual inflation rate was only 4.7 percent. On the other hand, the national debt had almost tripled during Reagan's presidency, from \$908 billion shortly before he took office to \$2,600 billion in the fall of 1988.

Although Bush proposed several new programs, such as tax benefits for child care and increased government commitment for education, his major appeals stressed the continuation of Reagan's policies. He emphatically promised not to raise taxes. Budget deficits, he claimed, could be reduced by a "flexible freeze," and he even called for lowering the capital gains tax in order to encourage investments. Michael S. Dukakis did not propose major new programs, stressing instead that he was more competent to govern than Bush. Even so, it was clear that Dukakis would revise, if not abandon, many of Reagan's policies. He proposed dropping several weapons systems, and opposed deploying the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"). Dukakis claimed he could increase government revenues by more efficient tax collection, but he made no firm promise not to raise

taxes. He specifically opposed Bush's proposal to lower the capital gains tax, a move that, he argued, would benefit wealthy Americans.

In addition to implementing policies, Reagan had also appointed three new justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, and by the end of his presidency 47 percent of all federal judges were Reagan appointees.¹ The 1988 presidential campaign emphasized such social issues as capital punishment, the legality of abortion, and whether teachers must lead children to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The president has little direct control over these issues, but they are areas in which the U.S. Supreme Court makes major policy decisions. Given that three of the nine justices would be eighty or eighty-one years old by the end of 1988, it seemed likely that the newly elected president would make several Supreme Court appointments.

Clearly, the election offered policy alternatives, and as we shall see, voters saw clear policy differences between Bush and Dukakis. Although voters could not reelect Reagan, they could vote to continue his policies. Electing Dukakis would not overturn Reagan's reforms, but it would clearly lead to major revisions. Americans could also vote to support the traditional values espoused by Bush or the more liberal views advanced by Dukakis. They would also have the opportunity to elect 33 U.S. senators, all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 12 governors, and nearly 6,000 state legislators.

The election yielded a mixed outcome. Bush was elected, although by a far closer margin than Reagan had won by in 1984. But the Republicans lost one Senate seat and three members of the U.S. House of Representatives—the first election since 1960 in which the party winning the presidency lost seats in the House. As the 101st Congress began, the Democrats held fifty-five Senate seats, compared with forty-five for the Republicans. The Republicans fared even worse in the House, for they began the session with only 175 members, compared with the Democrats' 260. The Republican percentage in the House (only 40.2 percent of the seats) was the smallest share ever won by the party winning the presidency.

Republicans were euphoric after the 1980 election, for they won twelve Senate seats, they got control of the Senate for the first time since the 1952 election, and they gained thirty-three House seats. In Reagan's 1984 landslide the Republicans lost two Senate seats, but they won fourteen House seats. Republican optimists saw Reagan's 1984 triumph as evidence that the Republicans were, or were shortly to become, the majority party. In August 1985 Reagan himself proclaimed that "realignment is at hand."

Neither party was euphoric after the 1988 election. The Democrats despaired over their third consecutive presidential defeat, a defeat made more bitter by their high expectations of only three months earlier. They