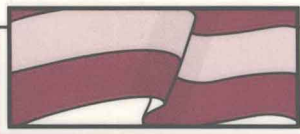


NEW TOPICS IN POLITICS



DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

Morris Fiorina

DIVIDED
GOVERNMENT

MORRIS P. FIORINA

Harvard University

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Behind every book stand many people. The seed for this one was planted by Professors Bruce Cain and Gillian Peele who invited me to prepare the concluding essay for their collection, *Developments in American Politics*. As a younger scholar I viewed the authors of concluding essays as older scholars who, having lost an intellectual step or two, were no longer suited to write the more analytic chapters. Today I realize that concluding essays are the product of mature scholars whose breadth of knowledge enables them to see and assess the big picture.

Bruce Nichols of Macmillan urged me to expand the essay into a short book, arguing that the subject was timely and important, and should be of interest to political science students across the country. My continuing research and the experience of the 1990 state elections—which brought divided government even to Massachusetts—led me to take him up on his suggestion.

Gary Cox and Samuel Kernell encouraged me to work harder on the states, though their efforts were not selfless—they wanted a chapter for their volume, *The Politics of Divided Government*. The material from that chapter has been incorporated into Chapters 3 and 4. A symposium on divided government in comparative perspective, organized by G. Bingham Powell and published in *Governance*, provided an opportunity to think about divided government from a standpoint other than the specifically American one. That article forms the basis of Chapter 7.

Numerous colleagues gave me specific reactions and suggestions. Sandy Maisel was encouraging all along and read the complete manuscript, as did Gary King, Paul Peterson, and Kenneth Shepsle. John Aldrich, Alberto Alesina, David Baron, Walter Dean Burnham,

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C H A P T E R 1

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In 1988 George Bush led the Republicans to an impressive victory. Well, not exactly. While Bush was winning the presidency, carrying forty states with 54 percent of the popular vote, the Democrats were retaining their comfortable majorities in both houses of Congress, winning 260 of 435 House seats and 18 of 33 Senate seats. Politicians and pundits saw nothing unusual in this divided outcome. After all, Dwight Eisenhower's reelection in 1956 produced an identical division of our national institutions, as did Richard Nixon's election in 1968 and reelection in 1972. Moreover, Ronald Reagan's impressive victories in 1980 and 1984 failed to crack the Democratic House, though the Senate went the way of the presidency. Of the past six presidential elections, only one—1976—has given control of the presidency and both houses of Congress to one party. Judged against recent history, the 1988 outcome appeared to be more of the same, divided government as usual.

For political scientists, however, the 1988 outcome seemed to carry more weight. Even while observing year after year of divided government, we persisted in viewing it as something of an aberration, a departure from the "normal" condition of American politics. Of course, the exception seemed to have become the norm, but specific personalities and circumstances allowed us to disregard this continuing state of affairs. In 1956 a revered father figure, Eisenhower, was given a "personal" victory by an electorate still basically Democratic in its allegiance. In 1968 and 1972 Nixon triumphed over a Democratic party hopelessly split by the civil rights and anti-war movements. In 1980 Reagan didn't really win; rather, Jimmy Carter lost. And in 1984 the "great communicator" won a per-

sonal victory reminiscent of Eisenhower's. Meanwhile, the seemingly overwhelming power of incumbency enabled Democratic majorities to control the Congress, or at least the House.

The 1988 outcome clearly exposed the limitations of such facile explanations. Democratic elites were as united as they had been since 1964 and highly optimistic about party prospects. The recent performance of the incumbent administration was not especially impressive. As for the personal appeal of George Bush, well, suffice it to say that the electorate did not see him as another Ronald Reagan or Dwight Eisenhower, or even a Mike Dukakis, for that matter.¹

Against that background the election outcome drove home what academic studies had suggested for years, namely, that absent a truly major recession or costly war, it did not *matter* who won the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations; a generic Republican would defeat a generic Democrat.² Conversely, as scores of congressional elections researchers would testify, barring a national cataclysm the Republicans had no more chance of carrying the House than the proverbial snowball had of surviving the fires of hell.³ Rather than an aberration produced by the accidental combination of particular circumstances and personalities, divided government has become a defining feature of contemporary American politics—it is the normal state of affairs.⁴

This realization produced a noticeable reaction among academics and commentators on public affairs. Sundquist, for example,

¹Bush's leadership qualities were viewed as much inferior to Reagan's, though Bush fared better on dimensions such as integrity and competence. Contrary to the op-ed page consensus, the electorate regarded the personal qualities of Dukakis at least as favorably as those of Bush. See Herbert F. Weisberg, "Some Perspectives on the 1988 Presidential Election: The Roles of Turnout and Ronald Reagan," paper presented at the August, 1989 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA: Table 5.

²Steven J. Rosenstone, *Forecasting Presidential Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

³Gary Jacobson, *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

⁴In the early 1970s some political scientists viewed divided government as a temporary condition marking the transition between the New Deal party system and an emerging Republican majority. By the 1980s most analysts had come to doubt this view.

condemned divided government, decrying its apparent inefficiency and irresponsibility.⁵ The Committee on the Constitutional System (CCS), a blue-ribbon committee that had proposed constitutional changes designed to lessen the likelihood of divided government (among other things), was not ignored, as is the normal fate of blue-ribbon committees. Instead the CCS proposals provoked considerable debate that continues today.⁶ Although most political scientists have not entered into such normatively charged arguments, more disinterested discussions of divided government are appearing in newer treatments of American government and politics.⁷ With the realignment theme pretty much played out, divided government has the potential to become the new organizing principle of American politics research in the 1990s.⁸

This book is an extended essay on divided government. Though it ranges rather broadly, three general concerns underlie the discussion. Reformers are most interested in the *consequences* of divided government for governing and policy-making, and this might *seem* to be the question of most significance to citizens. Unfortunately, it is a question that has not received a great deal of academic attention, so the answers must be tentative. If that is so, why write this essay now, before more work is done? The answer is simply

⁵James L. Sundquist, "Needed: A Political Theory for the New Era of Coalition Government in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 103 (1988): 613–35.

⁶See *A Bicentennial Analysis of the American Political Structure* (Washington, DC: Committee on the Constitutional System, 1987). Cf. Philip C. Bobbitt, "The Committee on the Constitutional System Proposals: Coherence and Dominance," *William and Mary Law Review* 30 (1989): 403–9; Erwin Chemerinsky, "The Question's Not Clear, but Party Government Is Not the Answer," *William and Mary Law Review* 30 (1989): 411–23; Mark A. Petracca, Lonce Bailey, and Pamela Smith, "Proposals for Constitutional Reform: An Evaluation of the Committee on the Constitutional System," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20 (1990): 503–32.

⁷See, for example, James A. Thurber, *Divided Democracy* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1991); Gary Cox and Samuel Kernell, eds., *The Politics of Divided Government* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

⁸On the growing skepticism about the realignment concept, see Everett Carl Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of *Realignment* for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics," *Polity* 22 (1990): 511–25. On a suggested substitute for the realignment concept, see Byron E. Shafer, "The Notion of an Electoral Order: The Structure of Electoral Politics at the Accession of George Bush," in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

that some academics, commentators, and public figures already are sufficiently convinced of the harmful consequences of divided government that they seriously propose constitutional revision. To what extent does existing research—however incomplete—support such a strong recommendation?

The second underlying concern of this essay is more philosophical: whatever the actual consequences of divided government for governing and policy-making, a measured *evaluation* of those consequences requires that we consider what would happen if divided government were artificially ended via institutional reforms. Reformers are prone to compare an existing, imperfect state of affairs with some abstract, ideal standard. That is an important comparison; as a polity we should be cognizant of how far our politics falls short of the ideal. But the comparison that has more relevance for *actually* improving our politics is the comparison of what *is* to what would *likely be* if we changed it. It is simply not enough to identify negative consequences of divided government; it is necessary to show that those consequences are worse than those that would accompany proposed changes. With the best of intentions, we can “reform” one imperfect state into another even more imperfect.⁹

To evaluate the status quo we must compare it with the likely status quo after we intervene to “reform” it. That task brings us squarely to the third underlying question of this essay: why has the present status quo come to be? At this time in our history the American electorate typically chooses to split control of our governing institutions between the parties. Why? This is the question that has been of most concern to academics, if not reformers, but it is anything but an “academic” question. *Only if we understand how we have gotten to where we are can we predict where we will go if we tinker*

⁹“Today’s students typically are surprised to learn that the present PAC (political action committee) problem is largely a consequence of the campaign finance reform acts of the early 1970s. See Edwin Epstein, “Business and Labor Under the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971,” in Michael J. Malbin, ed., *Parties, Interest Groups, and Campaign Finance Laws* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), 107–51. Similarly, many prominent critics of today’s presidential nomination process trace their complaints back to repeated attempts to “reform” the process. For a discussion see Nelson Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

with our institutions and political processes. To put it more colloquially, if we fail to understand why divided government has come to be, we will have no one to blame if well-meaning reforms throw us out of the divided government frying pan into the unified government fire.

Thus, I will begin by putting the contemporary era into historical perspective; divided government is not new to our experience as a nation, but there are some respects in which the contemporary era is unique. Then I will augment the national perspective by considering developments in the American states; while largely unnoticed, their experience has paralleled the national experience. These discussions raise serious questions about two popular explanations of divided government; other explanations that appear more promising will be given further attention. With a better appreciation of how we have gotten to our present state, I then take up the question of the consequences of divided government and their implications for reform. Previewing that discussion, the bottom line of this essay is conservative, with a small *c*. To some degree, divided government in the United States probably reflects a lack of popular consensus about important issues, and a consequent unwillingness to trust either party with the full power to govern. If such sentiments were artificially restricted so as to force a choice between alternative unified governments, we would not necessarily benefit from a significantly more efficient and responsible government, and we might very well suffer other consequences that have not been sufficiently discussed. As I will argue, most of the world's democracies are governed by coalitions, a form of divided government; they are not obviously less well governed than we are.

C H A P T E R 2

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Historical Perspective

Divided government is nothing new in American history. Indeed, it might have appeared immediately after the Founding: Young and Riley argue that even during the one-party “Era of Good Feeling,” when presidential candidates were nominated by the congressional caucus, government was effectively divided.¹ Leaving aside this ambiguous period, by 1832 the convention system of nominating presidential candidates had been established and two-party competition had been revived. Since that time national elections have created or continued a condition of divided government for 62 of 160 years, about 40 percent of our history (Table 2-1). The contemporary era (1952–92) stands out, with a majority (13/20) of presidential and mid-term elections producing divided governments, but other periods are unique in their own ways.² Consider the period encompassing the first half of the twentieth century. In those fifty-two years, twenty-two of twenty-six national elections resulted in *unified* control, something not matched either before or after. There is some irony here in that historical accounts contrast the highly organized nineteenth-century parties and their fiercely

¹James Sterling Young and Russell L. Riley, “Party Government and Political Culture,” paper presented at the September, 1990 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco (in press).

²For purposes of this essay, we will date the contemporary era as having begun in 1952. Although two years of unified Republican control followed that election, in retrospect, it was the end of New Deal Democratic hegemony.

Table 2-1 Control of National
Institutions, 1832-1992

	Unified	Divided
1832-1992	49 ^a	31
1832-1900	20	14
1900-1952	22	4
1952-1992	7	13

^a Number of elections.

Source: Tabulated from *Members of Congress Since 1789* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1985), 182-83.

partisan members with the less well organized and militant twentieth-century parties.³ The regional realignment of the 1890s, the Progressive movement, and the rapid social and economic transformation of the country all combined to weaken the parties' capacity to structure the electoral process—to control nominations, to deliver the vote, and to organize office-holders.⁴ All of this suggests a general decline in party influence in American politics. And yet, a macro-level indicator of the parties' ability to structure American politics—unified control—shows the opposite movement. Progressive reforms might have weakened the parties at the turn of the century, but that weakening did not translate into divided control. Rather, the Republicans dominated the first quarter of the century (with a Wilsonian interregnum), while the second quarter saw the Democrats dominate. In neither case was there much in the way of

³For a wide-ranging account of partisan politics in the North after the Civil War, and its decline after the turn of the century, see Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

⁴For overviews see Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., *American Political Parties* (New York: Norton, 1970), chap. 4; James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1983), chaps. 7-8; and Joel H. Silbey, "The Rise and Fall of American Political Parties, 1790-1990," in L. Sandy Maisel, ed., *The Parties Respond* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 3-17.

divided control.⁵ All in all, the contemporary period is more of a departure from the earlier twentieth-century pattern than it is from American history in general.

This background makes it easy to understand the frustration with contemporary divided government expressed by Sundquist's generation of scholars. As he observes, the textbook account of the operation of modern American politics is a version of responsible party theory that posits strong presidential leadership of a cohesive majority party. A generation whose formative experiences lay in the first half of the twentieth century might understandably regard such an account as not only factually accurate but also normatively good—the period included forty-four years of unified control, and the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt covered twenty-eight of those forty-four years. During this period the country successfully fought two world wars and weathered the greatest economic crisis in our history, all of which would seem to provide a *prima facie* case for taking seriously the argument that American institutions function best under unified control.

Yet a closer look at the historical record provides another, more conditional, perspective. Divided government clearly tends to characterize those times identified by political historians as periods of chronic societal strain (Table 2-2). All of the divided government that occurred in the nineteenth century occurred in the periods 1840–60 and 1874–96. In the first period, abolitionism and nativism cross-cut the parties. The period ended with the elections of 1860, which brought unified Republican control and civil war. Fourteen years of unified Republican control came to an end when the Southern Democrats returned to Congress in 1874. The next two decades rank with the contemporary period in their frequency of divided control. The rapid pace of economic development thrust what had heretofore been local issues into state and national arenas,

⁵The four elections that divided control were all mid-terms. The administration lost Congress at the conclusion of each of the world wars—1918 and 1946. The Republicans lost the House in 1910 (concurrently with the party split that led to the three-way election of 1912 that put Wilson in the White House). They lost the House again in 1930 following the Great Crash.