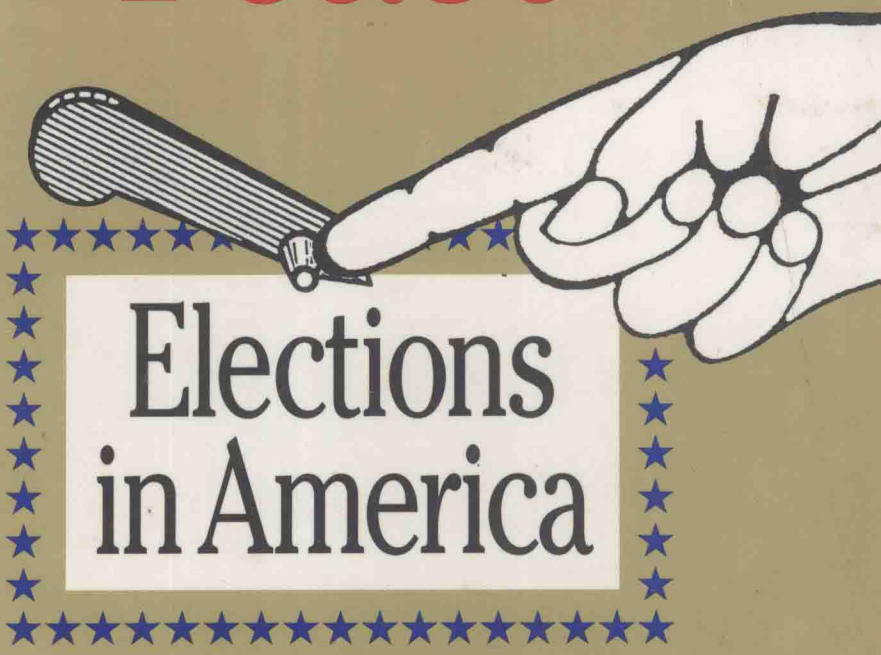
Democracy's Feast



Elections in America

Edited by

Herbert F. Weisberg

DEMOCRACY'S FEAST

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Preface

Many books have already been written about the 1992 U.S. election, including journalistic accounts and several edited volumes. This book is distinctive in terms of pulling together the views of several election analysts based primarily on the National Election Study (NES) 1992 surveys. The books written immediately after the election have to rely on quick analyses of media polls and exit polls, both of which are much more limited in the questions they can ask about popular attitudes. Some voting behavior textbooks come out with new editions after each presidential election, incorporating the results of the latest election along with analysis of the NES surveys. But the texts tend to revisit the same topics in each edition, without being able to adapt fully to election-specific topics such as the Perot candidacy or the first lady competition in election 1992. By focusing on the NES survey in this book without needing to maintain continuity with earlier editions, we attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the forces influencing the voting decisions of 1992.

Books are always collective activities. This book certainly is. As editor, I owe a considerable debt to the authors of the several chapters who responded with considerable speed to many urgings and deadlines, and to Barry Burden and Mark Kemper, who gave me assistance while working on this book. Special appreciation is to be given to Ed Artinian, the publisher of Chatham House, for suggesting this project. I also want to give the standard acknowledgment to the National Election Studies for continuing to pursue an important electoral data collection, to Warren E. Miller, Donald R. Kinder, and Steven J. Rosenstone, who directed the 1992 NES surveys, to the National Science Foundation for

funding those surveys, and to the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research for making these data available to the larger community of election scholars; these studies are a valuable resource, and we are fortunate that these individuals and organizations continue to put so much effort into these surveys.

On behalf of the authors of these chapters, I want to thank those who reviewed parts of this book other than their own chapters, including Herb Asher, Paul Beck, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Barry Burden, Elizabeth Adell Cook, Donald Green, Audrey Haynes, John Kessel, David Kimball, Anthony Mughan, Stephen Nichols, Samuel Patterson, Charles Smith, Harold Stanley, Katherine Tate, and Clyde Wilcox. Finally, a very heartfelt debt is to Randall Ripley, the long-time chair of the Department of Political Science at The Ohio State University and now Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Ohio State. Most of the authors of this book have or have had associations with the department, largely because Rip Ripley helped attract us to Columbus, Ohio, and helped create the collegial and congenial atmosphere that led to the writing of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Democracy's Feast: The 1992 U.S. Election

HERBERT F. WEISBERG

H. G. Wells in 1927 wrote that "democracy's ceremonial, its feast, its great function, is the election." The idea of the election as "democracy's feast" is engaging, especially because "feast" has so many meanings at once. The most obvious is that of a banquet, and elections are reminiscent of banquets, with their many separate races corresponding to the many courses served at such an event. But the other important meaning of the term is a celebration, and elections are indeed the celebrations of democracy.

Celebrations have many facets: they can be part ceremony and part carnival. Elections are both of these: they are the rites of democracy, and they are accompanied by the revelry and diversion associated with carnivals. Speaking of elections as carnival is unusual, in that they are generally viewed more seriously. But an election is not merely a solemn occasion bereft of enjoyment; it is also the stuff of entertainment, providing enjoyable activities and new friends for campaign workers, as well as an occasion for the public to turn its attention from normal activities to the hoopla and excitement of a campaign.

Every election provides some combination of these different characteristics. Some seem so predictable in their outcomes that it is difficult to imagine them as occasions for carnival, though campaign workers generally find elements of enjoyment in even the most cut-and-dried elections. Other election campaigns possess so much color, so many un-

expected twists and turns, and so much drama and melodrama that they capture the public's attention and imagination. This book is about such an election, the 1992 U.S. election.

The 1992 Election

One could debate whether it was a feast or a famine, but few would view the 1992 campaign as boring. There was George Bush at the highest point of popularity a president had ever achieved after the decisive victory of the Alliance forces in Desert Storm in early 1991 and then losing that popularity in record speed to become vulnerable by 1992. There were David Duke and Pat Buchanan trying to humiliate Bush in the Republican primaries, with Buchanan succeeding in drawing some blood. There was the wide-open race for the Democratic nomination, populated mainly by political unknowns when leading Democrats prematurely decided that 1992 was not the year to run against a popular Republican incumbent. There were Paul Tsongas and Jerry Brown, railing against politics as usual, catching public attention with such unlikely issues as deficit reduction and a flat-rate income tax. There was Bill Clinton, always on the defensive against charges both of marital infidelity and of draft evasion. There was Ross Perot, threatening to run a third-party race for the presidency and at times leading the public opinion polls, then dramatically dropping out of the race during the Democratic convention, and then returning to the race just in time to attract public attention in the presidential debates. Toss in Dan Quayle's focus on the family values issue as personified by television character Murphy Brown, Al Gore's attempt to make the environment into a sexy issue, and Admiral Stockdale's turning up his hearing aid during the vice-presidential debate, and 1992 could not be considered a boring election year.

The 1992 elections provided many diversions for the American public. Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton offered two very different models for the nation's first lady. It was the "year of the woman" political candidate, after the Senate hearings on confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas turned to the allegation that he sexually harassed Anita Hill and then to how fairly she was treated by the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee. It was a year of Congress bashing, after the House of Representatives was caught in scandal because many of its members had bounced checks at the House bank. It was perhaps predictable that the campaign would be fought out on television, but it was surprising when the specific venue turned out to be alternative tele-

vision, such as *Larry King Live,* Ross Perot's infomercials, and Bill Clinton's town hall meetings. If elections are democracy's feast, then the 1992 election was reminiscent of eating to excess.

The 1992 election reminds one of the importance of the rituals of democracy. It showed again how even the most popular of presidents can be turned out of office by an electorate that becomes dissatisfied with unresolved national problems. It demonstrated how peaceful exchanges of power between competing political elites are the distinguishing features of democracies. It emphasized how new political leaders can emerge both within and outside the existing political party structure when the public feels there is need for change.

But the 1992 election was also a celebratory feast, marked by diversion and carnival. This was exemplified by the Clinton-Gore bus trip on the road through Middle America back to the land of nostalgia. The level of unreality was increased by the television character Murphy Brown's rebuttal to real-life vice-president Dan Quayle. The carnival element was highlighted by Ross Perot's entertaining the public with televised rallies in which he danced with his wife to his campaign theme, "Crazy." The campaign moved toward soap opera when the Clintons appeared on television on *60 Minutes* after the Super Bowl to deal with the marital infidelity issue.

Feasts sometimes mark the ending of a long preparation process; at other times they presage the beginning of a new cycle. In viewing an election as a feast, it is important not to view the election as an ending. It is not an ending as much as it is a turning point—whether as reaffirmation or as a point of change. Even the reelection of a president is often marked by large changes in his cabinet and/or staff, as was the Reagan reelection of 1984. Bush's election as president in 1988 was an instance of the White House staying in the control of one party, but it, too, was marked by changes, as epitomized by Bush's "kinder, gentler America." Ronald Reagan's 1980 defeat of incumbent president Jimmy Carter was certainly a case of change, a move toward the political right on economic and social issues; Bill Clinton's 1992 defeat of incumbent president George Bush was similarly a case of change, a move toward the political left, especially on social issues. Furthermore, politics continues after the election, though with newly reconstructed issues and themes. Thus, on the night that George Bush was going down to his electoral defeat, Bob Dole appeared on television to take over the mantle of Republican leadership in Washington in a manner that suggested that he was going to be a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination of 1996.

Every presidential election is a transition in some sense. The 1992

election was a transition in many ways. It was the first post–Cold War presidential election for the United States, with worries about the Communist threat and the resulting possibility of nuclear war lessened. Yet regardless of U.S. victories in the Cold War and in Desert Storm, the 1992 election was largely focused on domestic issues, particularly the economy. As the legendary sign in Bill Clinton's campaign headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas, reminded his forces, "It's the economy, stupid!" The economy was the Democrats' issue, with unemployment relatively high and the country unable fully to shake off the recession that had started in 1990.

The 1992 election also marked a generational transition, as the candidate who fought in World War II lost to the candidate who avoided military service in Vietnam. More important, it was a transition in campaign technology, as many of the key campaign events were fought out on cable television rather than on network TV. The new information technology permitted users of computer networks to read campaign news on-line and to communicate with the candidates' campaign staffs. And the Clinton candidacy became the first "postmodern" candidacy. Bill Clinton epitomized the contradictions of postmodern society, as he was both a Rhodes Scholar and the running target of tabloid journalism trying to uncover scandal about his supposed affairs with Gennifer Flowers and others.

Feasts are often large gatherings, pulling together many different groups. The 1992 election involved the activity of many groups, several of which were new to presidential campaigns. Women's groups participated actively, especially EMILY'S List, which helped channel early campaign money to promising female candidates. Homosexual groups participated more actively in the campaigns, especially when Clinton promised to permit gays to serve in the military. The Perot forces developed a new campaign group, United We Stand, throughout the fifty states.

Describing an election as a feast has an extra normative connotation, implying that the citizens viewed the election in a favorable manner. Without carrying this metaphor too far, one has to admit that the American public did not necessarily find the 1992 election so very delectable. Indeed, many citizens and commentators viewed the election (and most recent elections) as more famine than feast. They did not consider the choices available in the election to be the best possible choices for the nation's highest office.

There was also a general distrust of politicians in 1992. Such distrust was certainly nothing new in American politics, but it had intensified as a result of the scandal over checks bounced by members of Con-

gress at the House bank. Add to that questions about whether Bill Clinton could be trusted, based on rumors of marital infidelity plus his inability to put aside questions about his past. Meanwhile, President Bush remained dogged by questions about his truthfulness in the Iran-*contra* affair of the mid-1980s. These questions intensified in the last week of the campaign when Special Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh indicted Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger on the basis of Weinberger's diaries. Those diaries cast doubt on Bush's denial of his involvement as vice-president in the decision-making loop on the arms sales to Iran.

The distrust of politicians boiled over to fuel H. Ross Perot's campaign for the presidency. Promising a "government you can trust" and telling voters that they are the "owners" of the country for whom the politicians merely work, Perot managed to keep the election year in perpetual ferment. Perot dominated the political headlines of 1992 so that the major-party candidates had to keep responding to his initiatives. Perot's withdrawal from the campaign in mid-July gave Clinton his opportunity to speak directly to the American public and zoom ahead in the polls, just as Perot's return to the campaign in October muddied the waters of the presidential debates and took away Bush's sole remaining opportunity to capture the attention of the public. Yet the Perot candidacy raised at least as many questions as it answered. He was the billionaire running as outsider, although he had gained considerable money over the years from government contracts for his firm. Many people viewed him as a quitter after his initial withdrawal, while others were bemused by his later explanation that the withdrawal was intended to frustrate GOP attempts to wreck his daughter's wedding. As a result, most citizens did not find Perot to be an acceptable solution to the perceived lack of quality presidential candidates.

While it is fun to think of the 1992 election in terms of the "feast" metaphor, it is important to go further in order to understand the results of the election. Why did voter turnout increase in 1992? Were party ties stable during the election? What explains Clinton's victory over Bush? Did the first ladies affect the result? How is the Perot vote to be understood? Were gender voting differences important in the "Year of the Woman"? What motivated the black vote? Did the Clinton victory represent a return to power of the old New Deal coalition that had long been the basis of Democratic support? What was the effect of Congress bashing in the end in the congressional election? And how should the Senate elections of 1992 be understood? These are important questions that can best be answered through a careful analysis of surveys of the 1992 voting public.

The 1992 National Election Study

The analysis in this book relies very heavily on the American National Election Study (NES) of 1992, a survey conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center with funding by the National Science Foundation. Scholars based at the University of Michigan started taking surveys of the electorate on a regular basis in the 1950s. Responsibility for the surveys was turned over to the "National Election Studies" (NES) in the 1970s when the National Science Foundation assumed responsibility for regular funding.

The main elements of the presidential election studies in this series are a preelection survey in September–October of the election year followed by a postelection interview with the same respondents in November–December. The 1992 study consisted of interviews with 2,462 respondents in their homes.[1] The sampling frame for the study was all U.S. citizens who were age eighteen by election day and who lived in housing units. Residents of Hawaii and Alaska were excluded, as were people who lived on military reservations. The pre- and postelection surveys were both lengthy interviews, typically lasting an hour.

In some presidential election years the NES surveys have been "panel studies" with the same respondents being interviewed across a series of elections (such as 1956–58–60 and 1972–74–76). The 1992 NES survey was partly of this type. Half of the respondents were new, while the other half were the third wave of a panel study that had first been conducted after the 1990 congressional election and continued with reinterviews in summer 1991 after the Alliance victory in Desert Storm.

Additionally, the NES has conducted several important studies of legislative elections. The number of questions on voting for the House of Representatives was increased considerably starting in 1978, and has remained high since. Further, in 1988 NES started a special Senate election study, interviewing a sample of respondents in every state. Only a third of the Senate is up for election in any election year, so it takes three election years for every Senate seat to be up for election. Therefore, the NES Senate study continued in 1990, and it ended with another survey in 1992. Taken together, these three studies permit an analysis of changing attitudes toward senators across a full election cycle. Chapter 12 of this book, by Janet Box-Steffensmeier and Charles Franklin, takes advantage of this unique study design to discuss voting in Senate elections.

Returning to the main NES presidential election surveys, there has been considerable continuity over time in the questions asked in these