

Gary C. Jacobson

The Electoral Origins of Divided Government



Competition in
U.S. House Elections,
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Westview Press

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University of California–San Diego

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Transforming American Politics

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*The Electoral Origins
of Divided Government*

TRANSFORMING AMERICAN POLITICS

Lawrence C. Dodd, Series Editor

Dramatic changes in political institutions and behavior over the past two decades have underscored the dynamic nature of American politics, confronting political scientists with a new and pressing intellectual agenda. The pioneering work of early postwar scholars, while laying a firm empirical foundation for contemporary scholarship, failed to consider how American politics might change or to recognize the forces that would make fundamental change inevitable. In reassessing the static interpretations fostered by these classic studies, political scientists are now examining the underlying dynamics that generate transformational change.

Transforming American Politics will bring together texts and monographs that address four closely related aspects of change. A first concern is documenting and explaining recent changes in American politics—in institutions, processes, behavior, and policymaking. A second is reinterpreting classic studies and theories to provide a more accurate perspective on postwar politics. The series will look at historical change to identify recurring patterns of political transformation within and across the distinctive eras of American politics. Last and perhaps most importantly, the series will present new theories and interpretations that explain the dynamic processes at work and thus clarify the direction of contemporary politics. All of the books will focus on the central theme of transformation—transformation in both the conduct of American politics and in the way we study and understand its many aspects.

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Preface

My initial purpose in writing this book was to examine and explain the evolution of competition in postwar elections to the U.S. House of Representatives. As the work progressed, what I had expected to be a subsidiary issue, the electoral origins of divided party control of the federal government, emerged as the thematic core. The 1988 elections posed the question in starkest terms: How did the Democrats maintain—indeed, increase—their solid House majority despite yet another comfortable victory for the Republican presidential candidate? More generally, Why do Americans now habitually elect Republican presidents and Democratic congresses?

Explanations for the Democrats' continued dominance of Congress fall into two basic categories: structural and political. My analysis ultimately leads me to conclude that all of the structural explanations are either wrong or inadequate and that all of the political explanations are at least partially right. Divided party control reflects, rather than thwarts, popular preferences and so is likely to continue.

The evidence I offer for these views comes from a variety of sources. Like virtually everyone who studies Congress, I made extensive use of data initially gathered and published by the people at Congressional Quarterly, Inc. (CQ). CQ's *Guide to U.S. Elections* was my principal source for electoral data, and the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* was the source for a great deal more, including much of my information about congressional candidates and some district-level presidential election results. I also extensively used CQ's biennial *Politics in America* and Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa's biennial *Almanac of American Politics*. It is difficult to overstate the value of these sources to students of congressional elections and politics.

I am grateful to Adam Clymer of the *New York Times*, who put me on the distribution list for the *New York Times*/CBS News Poll. I found these polls extraordinarily useful for exploring the political roots of divided government, and they form the heart of Chapter 6. I also made use of data from the 1986 American National Election Study, which was supplied by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social

Research. The data were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, under a grant from the National Science Foundation. Of course, neither the original collectors of the data nor the consortium bear any responsibility for my analyses and interpretations.

Other data sources are cited in due course. I collected some of the original data with the support of a grant from the National Science Foundation (SES-80-77) and, later, with research funds provided by the University of California–San Diego (UCSD).

I performed all of the data analyses with Jeffrey Dubin and Douglas Rivers's Statistical Software Tools (SST), which I found ideally fast and flexible for my purposes. Only scholars who remember the days of punched cards and counter-sorters can fully appreciate the contribution that modern software and hardware make to empirical analysis. I am obliged to Douglas Rivers for making sure I always had the latest version of SST to play with.

Because this book grows out of several lines of research that I have conducted over more than a decade, it is impossible to acknowledge everyone who has contributed to it in some way. But I especially thank my colleagues at UCSD—Nathaniel Beck, Amy Bridges, Gary Cox, Samuel Kernell, Mathew McCubbins, and Samuel Popkin—for sharing their knowledge, insights, and, in Amy Bridges's case, editorial skills. I also thank Douglas Rivers and Gary King for uncovering some errors in the data, Morris Fiorina for helpful comments and suggestions, Donald Green and Michael MacKuen for sharing unpublished results, and Markus Crepaz for his research assistance.

Gary C. Jacobson

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xv
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: ELECTORAL DISINTEGRATION IN THE POSTWAR ERA	5
The Emergence of Divided Government, 5	
Divided Voters, 7	
Split Results Among Other Offices, 12	
The Growing Heterogeneity of House Election Results, 15	
Surge and Decline, 19	
Sources of Disaggregation, 20	
Notes, 22	
3 AFTER THE PRIMAL SCREAM: THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE REVISITED	25
Measuring the House Incumbency Advantage, 26	
Competition for Open House Seats, 32	
Winning and Losing, 37	
Notes, 42	
4 YOU CAN'T BEAT SOMEBODY WITH NOBODY: TRENDS IN PARTISAN OPPOSITION	45
Unopposed Candidates, 46	
The Challengers, 50	
The Growing Impact of the Challenger, 55	
Changes in the Quality of Challengers, 57	
Partisan Trends in the Quality of Challengers, 62	
The Collapse of Competition, 1984–1988, 63	

	Quality Candidates in Open Seats, 65	
	The Concentration of Competition, 67	
	Conclusion, 72	
	Notes, 72	
5	DEMOCRATIC HEGEMONY IN THE HOUSE: STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS	75
	National Tides in House Elections, 75	
	Presidential Coattails Revisited, 80	
	Translating Votes into Seats, 82	
	Estimating the Swing Ratio, 83	
	Changes in the Swing Ratio, 86	
	The Bias of the Electoral System, 93	
	Gerrymandering, 94	
	Campaign Finance, 96	
	Conclusion, 102	
	Notes, 102	
6	DEMOCRATIC HEGEMONY IN THE HOUSE: POLITICAL EXPLANATIONS	105
	What Do Voters Want? 105	
	Expectations of Parties and Institutions, 112	
	Ideology and the Quality of Candidates, 120	
	Timing, 122	
	National Forces in the 1980s, 123	
	Party Identification, 126	
	The Southern Strategy Revisited, 129	
	Thriving on Disunity, 130	
	An Ossified Congress? 133	
	The Future of Divided Government, 134	
	Notes, 136	
	<i>References</i>	139
	<i>About the Book and Author</i>	145
	<i>Index</i>	147

Tables and Figures

TABLES

2.1	Districts with split results for president and House, 1948–1988	11
2.2	Probit estimates of the relationship between House and state legislative elections, 1946–1988	14
2.3	Incidence of surge and decline, 1946–1966 and 1968–1988	19
3.1	Change in percentage of marginal House seats, 1946–1988	29
3.2	Open seats changing party control, 1946–1988	36
3.3	Change in expected party vote when a House seat becomes open, 1946–1988	36
3.4	Change in percentage of winning House incumbents, 1946–1988	39
3.5	Widening bounds of marginality in House elections, 1940s–1980s	41
3.6	National tides and safety of House incumbents, 1946–1980 (selected years)	41
3.7	Vote shift to House challengers of party favored by national swing, 1946–1988	41
4.1	Political experience and frequency of victory in House elections, 1946–1988	51
4.2	Probability of victory and quality of nonincumbent candidates for the House, 1946–1988	53
4.3	Elective office experience and challenger's success in House elections, 1946–1988 and 1972–1988	53
4.4	Growing impact of quality of challengers in House elections, 1946–1988	56
4.5	Estimates of probability that House challenger has held elective office, 1946–1988	59

4.6	Determinants of percentage of experienced House challengers, 1946–1988	61
4.7	Decline in quality of Republican challengers, 1966–1988	64
4.8	Impact of quality of challengers in House elections for open seats, 1946–1988	66
4.9	Increase in quality of candidates for open House seats, 1946–1988	68
5.1	Aggregate state legislative results and aggregate House election results, 1946–1988	78
5.2	Effects of national conditions on House elections, 1946–1988	79
5.3	Decline of presidential coattails, 1948–1988	81
5.4	Models of swing ratio in House elections, 1946–1988	84
5.5	Change in swing ratio for House elections, 1946–1988	86
5.6	Democratic House seats predicted by models of swing ratio, 1966–1988	88
5.7	Vote swing to candidates of party gaining votes, 1946–1988	89
5.8	Swing ratio for challengers of party gaining votes, 1946–1988	91
5.9	Actual and predicted House seat switches to party gaining votes, 1966–1988	91
5.10	Probit estimates of effects of redistricting on partisan outcomes of House elections, 1946–1988 and 1968–1988	95
5.11	Effects of party and political experience on campaign spending by House challengers, 1972–1988	101
6.1	Public opinion on balancing the budget, 1978–1988 (selected years)	107
6.2	Public opinion on strategies for reducing the deficit, 1982–1987 (selected years)	108
6.3	Public opinion on spending for government programs, 1986 and 1988	109
6.4	Public opinion on government activities, 1981–1988 (selected years)	110
6.5	Public opinion on parties' ability to handle problems, 1981–1988 (selected years)	113
6.6	Public opinion on parties' concerns, 1985	115

6.7	Public opinion on role of members of Congress, 1978, 1986, and 1987	116
6.8	Public opinion on criteria for voting in presidential and congressional elections, 1982, 1986, and 1987	117
6.9	Public opinion on institutional responsibility for the budget, 1982, 1985, and 1986	118
6.10	Public opinion on divided control of federal government, 1981 and 1989	119
6.11	Voluntary retirements from the House, 1981–1989	121
6.12	House seat swings between presidential elections, 1932–1988	124
6.13	Change in macropartisanship as function of election results for president and House, 1952–1988	128
6.14	Presidential politics and House elections, 1946–1988	135

FIGURES

2.1	Presidential votes and House seats won by Democrats, 1876–1988	6
2.2	Democrats' share of House and Senate seats, 1946–1988	8
2.3	Party loyalty among voters in House, Senate, and presidential elections, 1952–1988	8
2.4	Ticket splitting in federal elections, 1952–1988	10
2.5	District-level split results of House and presidential elections, 1932–1988	11
2.6	Congruency of election outcomes for House, Senate, and governor, 1946–1988	13
2.7	Growing heterogeneity of House election results, 1946–1988	17
2.8	Heterogeneity of House election results for open seats and senior incumbents, 1946–1988	18
3.1	House incumbents' share of the major-party vote, 1946–1988	27
3.2	Marginal House incumbents, 1946–1988	28
3.3	Incumbency advantage, 1946–1988	31
3.4	Partisan advantage in House elections, 1946–1988	31
3.5	Mean vote for party holding open House seat, 1946–1988	34
3.6	Marginal open House seats, 1946–1988	34
3.7	Open seats switching party control, 1946–1988	35
3.8	Electoral success of House incumbents, 1946–1988	38

4.1	Unopposed House candidates, 1946–1988	47
4.2	Uncontested Southern and non-Southern House seats, 1946–1988	47
4.3	Unopposed House incumbents, 1946–1988	49
4.4	Unopposed non-Southern incumbents, 1946–1988	50
4.5	Quality of House challengers, 1946–1988	59
4.6	Quality of Democratic and Republican House challengers, 1946–1988	62
4.7	Campaign spending in House elections, 1972–1988	64
4.8	Quality of candidates for open House seats, 1946–1988	68
4.9	Growing concentration of campaign money spent by nonincumbent House candidates, 1972–1988	70
4.10	Growing concentration of campaign money spent by House challengers, 1972–1988	71
5.1	House seats and state legislative seats, 1946–1988	78
5.2	Campaign spending by House incumbents, 1972–1988	97
5.3	Campaign spending for open House seats, 1972–1988	98
5.4	Campaign spending by House challengers, 1972–1988	99
5.5	Bias in PAC contributions to House candidates, 1978–1988	100
6.1	Republican party identification, 1952–1988	127
6.2	Percentage of House seats won by Democrats, 1946–1988	130
6.3	Number of House seats won by Democrats, 1946–1988	131

Introduction

The 1988 House elections produced the smallest turnover in American electoral history. A mere 9 seats switched party control, the fewest ever; 402 of the 408 incumbents seeking reelection were returned to office. Only 7.6% of representatives elected to the 101st Congress were newcomers, the lowest proportion on record.

The chief beneficiaries of stasis were the House Democrats. Despite George Bush's comfortable victory over the Democratic presidential candidate, Michael Dukakis, the Democrats lost only 3 House seats while taking 6 from the Republicans to reach a 260-175 majority.

The election left House Republicans frustrated and angry. Their party has won five of the last six presidential elections, twice by landslides. It controlled the Senate for most of the 1980s and has a reasonable hope of retaking it in the 1990s. Its national campaign committees have outstripped the Democrats' committees in fundraising and organization. The Democrats' lead in party identification, which exceeded twenty points at the time Richard Nixon was first elected president, has been narrowed so far that, in 1988, the parties were in a virtual dead heat among people who reported voting (Wattenberg 1990). Yet Republicans have made no headway in the House, where they have not won a majority since 1952 and have not won more than 192 seats—26 short of a majority—since 1956.

In the aftermath of the 1988 elections, Republican leaders settled on structural explanations for their failure to advance in the House. Democrats continue to win, they argue, because of gerrymandered districts, abuse of the franking privilege and other perquisites of office, and a campaign finance system strongly biased against challengers. With characteristic understatement, Republican Whip Newt Gingrich summed up the charge: "the left-wing in the House is engaged in a conspiracy to avoid fair elections" (Cook 1989:1060).

The Republican view reflects much of the recent scholarly literature on congressional elections. It echoes arguments first offered in the early 1970s, when a similar period of electoral stasis inspired path-breaking work to document and explain an apparent increase in the electoral

value of incumbency in House elections. The most important systemic implication of this research was that the enhanced incumbency advantage would insulate the House against changes in national sentiments. With wider margins of safety, House incumbents could ride out contrary electoral trends that in earlier times would have delivered their seats to the other party. The growing incumbency advantage would thus inhibit the translation of vote swings into seat swings in House elections.

Republican leaders claim that this is exactly what has happened; House Democrats have exploited the advantages of incumbency to retain control despite the growing popular preference for Republican candidates and policies. A principal theme of this book is that this view, however comforting to Republicans, is mistaken. Although the advantages conferred by incumbency have grown, this phenomenon falls far short of explaining why the Democrats still dominate the House of Representatives. The House Republicans' fundamental problems are political, not structural.

Furthermore, growth in the electoral value of House incumbency is neither the only nor, arguably, the most important change in competition for House seats during the postwar period. It is part of a more general pattern of change engendered by the loosening of electoral constraints once maintained by party loyalty. Among other things, this development has increased both parties' opportunities to take territory once held exclusively by the opposition. In House elections, Democrats have exploited their expanded opportunities more effectively than have Republicans. How and why they have done so is another focus of this book.

More generally, I examine a variety of changes in competition for House seats in postwar elections with an eye to showing how these changes have contributed to divided party control of the federal government. My assumption is that a more precise view of postwar electoral patterns will lead to a clearer understanding of what has happened. It will also help to set recent electoral trends in wider perspective, providing a counterweight to the pervasive handwringing about the "end of electoral competition" that the 1988 elections seem to have inspired (Rovner 1988).

I begin in the next chapter by documenting the thorough partisan disintegration of electoral politics over the past forty years. Divided control of the federal government is only one manifestation of a more general phenomenon: the progressive dissociation of electoral outcomes across offices with overlapping constituencies and for the same offices across elections. This change reflects a substantial decline in the importance of party cues to voters. The decay of partisanship has made

it easier for House incumbents to build personal, rather than impersonally partisan, electoral coalitions and so has enhanced their ability to hold out against contrary partisan tides. But it has also introduced greater electoral volatility and opened the way for parties to win seats that loyally partisan electorates had once denied them.

In Chapter 3 I reexamine changes in the House incumbency advantage over the postwar period. I argue that growth in the incumbency advantage has been, in important respects, overstated and that insufficient attention has been paid to a complementary change: the parties' diminishing ability to retain seats when the incumbent dies or retires. That Republican House candidates have taken no net advantage of expanded competition for open seats argues strongly against the view that Democratic incumbency is responsible for divided government.

Chapter 4 examines changes in opposition to incumbents in House elections. The growth of candidate-centered electoral politics has increased the electoral importance of individual challengers and campaigns. In recent years, the quality of Republican challengers has not varied systematically with the party's national prospects, and in the 1980s, Republicans suffered from a notable dearth of experienced challengers. The aggregate weakness of Republican challengers thus stands as one source of the party's inability to take House seats from Democrats. Both parties have been concentrating campaign money and experienced candidates in fewer contests, especially those for open seats. The dearth of serious competition in the late 1980s derives far more from the weakness of challengers than from an increase in the electoral strength of incumbents.

In the fifth chapter, I search for the structural underpinnings of divided government. I find that none of the common structural explanations for continued Democratic hegemony in the House—including, in addition to the incumbency advantage, a declining swing-ratio, gerrymandering, and campaign finance regulation—withstands serious scrutiny. The roots of divided government are not structural, but political, or so I argue in the sixth, and final, chapter. Republicans have failed to advance in the House because they have fielded inferior candidates on the wrong side of issues that are important to voters in House elections and because voters find it difficult to assign blame or credit when control of government is divided between the parties.

I conclude that the low turnover of House seats in the late 1980s does not mean that the distribution of House seats is insensitive to changes in voters' preferences (or that voters' preferences are immune to national forces), though the connections have become more contingent,