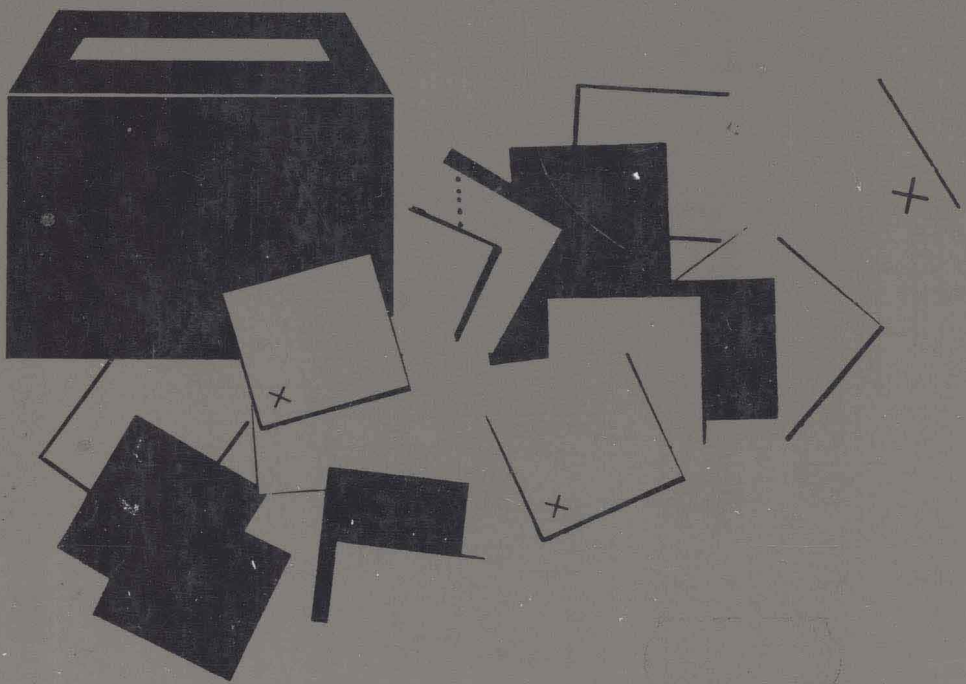
The American Elections of 1984

Edited by Austin Ranney



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Preface

AUSTIN RANNEY

———This book is the third in the American Enterprise Institute's continuing series on America's biennial national elections.[1] It is the first to be published by the Duke University Press in collaboration with AEI.

Its structure is similar to that of the book on the 1980 elections, but there are some differences. It begins, as in 1980, with my summary of main events of the preceding administration, in this case Ronald W. Reagan's first term, as they appeared to have consequences for Reagan's popularity and prospects for reelection. Next comes a chapter by Nelson W. Polsby on the struggle—the most protracted in history in either party—for the Democratic party's presidential nomination, which ended in the selection of Walter F. Mondale and in his choice of Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate, the first woman in history to run on a major party's national ticket. It is followed by Charles O. Jones's chapter, which covers not only President Reagan's decision to run for reelection, but also how the Republicans turned the absence of a contest for their nomination into an asset in preparing for the general election campaign—and how the first moves in the campaign for the Republicans' 1988 presidential nomination took place at the party's national convention in 1984, suggesting that presidential nominating politics in the United States now operates continually, with no time off whatever for good behavior of any kind. Next comes a chapter by Thomas E. Mann on the high expectations some held for the role of the new "superdelegates" at the Democratic national convention and how their actual performance matched up to those expectations.

The next section focuses on the general election campaign. Albert R. Hunt describes the main strategies, issues, and events of the campaign from the conventions to the election. Michael J. Robinson reports the main findings, some quite surprising, from the George Washington University–AEI study of the role of the mass communications media in the campaign.

William Schneider follows with his analysis of the voting in the November 6 presidential election, with special attention to the question of whether Reagan's big victory was mainly a tribute to his personal popularity, an endorsement of his policies, a simple response to peace and prosperity, another milestone in a basic realignment of American politics—or some mixture of all four. Norman J. Ornstein describes the Republicans' striking failure to match the presidential landslide with comparable gains in elections for the Senate, the House, and state governors and legislatures.

Although they focus mainly on other topics, the book's first eight chapters frequently touch on what the 1984 results tell us about the question of whether the United States is in the midst of a fundamental party realignment comparable to those that took place in the 1830s, 1850s, and 1930s. The final two chapters concentrate on that question. Raymond E. Wolfinger argues that, contrary to the views of many commentators, there has not been a major weakening of party identification in recent years; and he adds that the South is the only part of the country in which a significant long-term shift of loyalties from the Democrats to the Republicans is taking place. James Q. Wilson argues that there has been and continues to be a significant realignment of ideologies and loyalties among political elites accompanied by an equally significant weakening of party loyalties and party-influenced voting among the mass electorate.

The appendixes update for 1984 all the items of information provided for 1980 and 1982 by the preceding volumes. Our hope continues to be that future students of American elections will find in this book all of the most important facts about *what* happened in 1984 and some illuminating explanations of *why* they happened that way and what it means for the future.

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July 1985

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Reagan's First Term

AUSTIN RANNEY

In the American presidential election of 1984 the Republican incumbent, Ronald W. Reagan, defeated the Democratic challenger, Walter F. Mondale, with 54,455,074 popular votes (58.8 percent) to Mondale's 37,577,137 votes (40.6 percent). The remaining 620,582 votes (0.6 percent) were divided among fourteen other candidates.[1] The total of 92,652,793 votes constituted a turnout of 53.3 percent of the voting-age population, which was 0.7 points higher than the 52.6 percent who voted in 1980. It was a modest increase, but nevertheless the first uptick in presidential voting turnout since 1960.

Mondale carried only his home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia, for a total of 13 electoral votes. Reagan carried the other forty-nine states, for a total of 525 electoral votes.

Depending on the measure used, it was either the second, fifth, or seventh greatest landslide in an American presidential election since the Civil War.[2] Moreover, it was the first election since 1972 in which an incumbent president was reelected.

The results in the congressional elections, however, were disappointing for the Republicans. In the Senate the preelection party division was fifty-five Republicans and forty-five Democrats; the Democrats made a net gain of two seats, but the Republicans retained control. In the House of Representatives the preelection party division was 266 Democrats, 167 Republicans, and 2 vacancies. In the elections the Republicans made a net gain of 14 seats, but the Democrats continued to control the House, as they have ever since the election of 1954.[3]

Some observers saw these mixed results as a phenomenon unique to 1984—a magnificent personal triumph for Ronald Reagan that established him as the most popular and successful president since Franklin Roosevelt. That may be an accurate appraisal of Reagan's place in history, but the 1984 results do not

prove it. Rather they continued one of the most striking patterns in American politics since the end of World War II: Republican strength in presidential elections paralleled by Democratic strength in congressional elections. The record is clear: Ten presidential elections have been held from 1948 to 1984, the Republicans have won six, and their candidates have accumulated 369 million votes (53 percent) to the Democratic candidates' 329 million. Moreover, the last *northern* Democratic presidential candidate to win as much as 50 percent of the popular votes was Franklin Roosevelt in 1944!

In contrast, there have been twenty elections for Congress since 1946 and thus forty chances for each party to win control of a chamber. The Democrats have won thirty-three times and the Republicans seven—a rate of success even greater than that of the Republicans in presidential politics.

To say there was nothing unusual about the mixed results of the 1984 elections, however, is not to say there was nothing unusual about Reagan's first term. Quite the contrary. In some respects it was as radical a departure from the presidencies since Franklin Roosevelt's as Roosevelt's presidency was from those of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Thus it seems appropriate to begin this book with a review of Reagan's first term from his inauguration in 1981 to the formal declaration of his candidacy for a second term in early 1984.

Reaganism: History and Ideas

Let us begin our review of Ronald Reagan's first term by remembering who he was when he took office on January 20, 1981, and why he had defeated Jimmy Carter. The first thing to note is that he had won the Republican nomination in 1980 not so much as a successful political entrepreneur in the mold of John Kennedy or Jimmy Carter, or as a veteran Washington insider like Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford, but as the longtime leader of a political *movement*. As Hugh Heclo and Rudolph Penner point out, "Reagan's candidacy [in 1980] represented the culmination of almost fifteen years of grassroots political agitation and organization across the nation."[4]

In 1980, then, Reagan was Mr. Conservative more than Mr. Republican, but that is not why he defeated Carter. In the study of the 1980 election by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), William Schneider concluded that the election was essentially a referendum on the Carter administration, not on conservatism, and the verdict was thumbs down. Schneider added, however, that if the election outcome did not constitute a ringing mandate for conservatism it certainly gave Reagan full power and justification to adopt conservative policies if he thought they would do the job:

> The voters were voting for a *change*, and they were certainly aware that the type of change Reagan was offering was going to take the country in a

> more conservative direction. They were willing to go along with that, not because they were convinced of the essential merits of the conservative program, but because they were willing to give conservatism a chance. It is as if, having got nowhere for the past four years with Jimmy Carter at the wheel, the voters turned to Ronald Reagan and said, "O.K.—you drive."[5]

And drive he did, right from the start. In its first term the Reagan administration attempted a more thoroughgoing change in the direction of public policy than any administration since Franklin Roosevelt's first term (1933–37). And, in its determined effort to design and implement its measures according to an explicit and controversial political philosophy, the "Reagan revolution" was an even more radical departure from the prevailing ways than the "Roosevelt revolution" had been forty-eight years earlier.

The Rise of Conservatism and Reagan

In its early years Roosevelt's New Deal was not informed by any particular guiding philosophy, except perhaps good old American pragmatism. Roosevelt's approach was simplicity itself: The house is collapsing about our ears, and any action is better than no action; so let's try a lot of new policies, stick with what works, and replace what doesn't with something else. In later years, to be sure, some analysts have teased out of Roosevelt's actions and speeches a kind of implicit public philosophy with these main principles: (1) All Americans are equally entitled to at least the minimum conditions of the good life; (2) It is the obligation of government to provide those conditions for people who cannot provide them for themselves; and (3) The basic responsibility for honoring that obligation lies with the federal government, not with the state and local governments. From the late 1930s on this philosophy was called, loosely but widely, "liberalism."[6]

Since the 1930s every administration has, explicitly or implicitly, proceeded on the basis of that philosophy, without thinking or talking about it very much. There were, to be sure, variations of interpretation and emphasis. The Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford emphasized encouraging business and balancing the federal budget, while the Democratic administrations of Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter emphasized raising the level of the federal government's guarantees and extending them to more people. But the general direction of policy changed only a little from one administration to the next, even when Republicans succeeded Democrats in the White House.

New Deal liberalism did not go entirely unchallenged, of course. From its earliest days a few politicians like Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater, and a few

intellectuals like Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, and William F. Buckley, Jr., kept alive a counterphilosophy, which they called "conservatism," in their unceasing attacks on the liberal Democrats and their "me-too" fellow travelers among the liberal/moderate Republicans. They had one brief shining moment in 1964 when Goldwater won the Republican presidential nomination over the liberal/moderates Nelson Rockefeller and William Scranton. But Goldwater's overwhelming loss to Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society programs led most observers to conclude that New Deal liberalism had become America's mainstream political philosophy and could not be successfully challenged by an "extremist" like Goldwater or a reversionary philosophy like conservatism.

In hindsight, it is clear that one of the most significant events of 1964 was Reagan's emergence as the most popular and successful political leader of the conservative movement. We cannot retell his history in detail here,[7] but we should note that as a second-banana movie actor in the 1930s and 1940s Reagan was an ardent New Deal Democrat and the president of a labor union, the Screen Actors Guild. As late as 1948 he enthusiastically supported Harry Truman and Hubert Humphrey, but in the 1950s he grew increasingly disillusioned with New Deal liberalism, and, as touring spokesman and television host for General Electric from 1954 to 1962, he made hundreds of speeches expounding his new conservative views. In 1962 he reregistered as a Republican, and on October 27, 1964, he gave a nationally televised speech for Goldwater officially called "A Time for Choosing," but afterward better known to Reagan-watchers as "The Speech." With minor variations he delivered it hundreds of times over the next twenty years—during his two terms as governor of California (1967–73), in his nearly successful attempt to take the Republican presidential nomination away from moderate incumbent Gerald Ford in 1976, in his successful effort to win the nomination over moderate George Bush in 1980, in his campaign against Jimmy Carter, and throughout his first term as president.

The Main Principles of Reagan's Conservatism

Whether or not Ronald Reagan's conservatism qualifies as a full-fledged ideology or philosophy, it certainly contains principles that Reagan and his colleagues constantly relied on in deciding what to do and what not to do. In that sense, at least, his first term was the most ideological administration in this century, and its underlying principles must be borne in mind by anyone who seeks to understand what his administration attempted.

1. Government Nonintervention in the Economy The core principle in Reagan's conservativism holds that the most creative and dynamic force in the

American (or in any) economy is the desire of talented and energetic people for material gain. When that force is allowed to work freely, such people will design, produce, and sell more and better goods and services because they know they will make money; and in the process they will create jobs and prosperity for others. But when they are constricted by government regulations, and when high, progressive tax rates keep economic achievers from enjoying the full rewards of their achievements, investment dwindles, production drops, jobs vanish, and the economy slumps. Accordingly, the first goal of a conservative administration must be to "get the government off the people's backs"—to reduce government intervention in the economy to a minimum and let economic decisions be made by business operators in free markets rather than by bureaucrats in government agencies.

Reagan expounded this view in many speeches from the mid-1950s on, but at the beginning of his first term in 1981 its newest version was the "supply side" school of economics pressed by, among others, economist Arthur Laffer, journalist Jude Wanniski, and New York Republican Congressman Jack Kemp. Their view was that the key to low inflation, high economic growth, high employment, and a balanced federal budget is cutting personal and corporate income taxes. If we do that, they argued, the economy will boom and many more people and businesses will pay taxes; hence, even at lower marginal rates, revenues will grow sufficiently to both support increased military spending and permit a balanced budget. Of all the policies Reagan pressed in his first term, he gave the highest priority to cutting taxes and keeping them cut.

2. *Reducing the Size of Government* For decades before he took office Reagan argued that many domestic spending programs, especially the sort installed by Johnson's Great Society, should be drastically reduced or eliminated altogether. These programs, he said, are expensive and lead to high taxes and unbalanced budgets. Even worse, they swell the size of government; make government the master, not the servant, of the people; and make large numbers of people wards of society rather than contributors to it.

From the 1950s on Reagan made an important distinction between types of social welfare programs, and this distinction became fundamental to his budget-cutting strategy as president. We must, he said, maintain an adequate "safety net" for the "truly needy"—people who really cannot support themselves at all. But we must stop coddling the "working poor"—people who *can* support themselves and their families if they want to but see no reason to make the effort as long as the government supports them with income-maintenance and life-style-enhancement programs. Government has an obligation to see that no one starves, Reagan said; but it has no obligation to guarantee that an able-bodied but lazy "welfare cheat" has a car and a TV.

3. The New Federalism First as governor and then as president, Reagan believed that the federal government has grabbed far too much power from the states and that it is time to return a sizable chunk of that power to the states, where it belongs and where it will be better used. Note that Reagan regarded the states, not the cities or the counties, as the proper units to take back powers usurped by Washington.

4. Government Intervention in Moral and Religious Matters Reagan-style conservatives do not, like Libertarians, oppose all forms of government intervention in all aspects of people's lives. They believe that government has an obligation to promote morality and religion even if that entails considerable government intervention in private affairs. For instance, they see abortion as something close to murder, and they do not agree with Libertarians that government should leave the choice of abortion to the consciences of individual women. They believe that government should prohibit abortion, or allow the states to prohibit it, by a constitutional amendment if need be. They also believe that religious values, enhanced by the habit of prayer, are important for the nation's moral health and that government has an obligation to ensure that those values are inculcated in children even if their parents don't believe in them or don't want to bother. Hence they favor a constitutional amendment allowing state and local school systems to hold prayers as part of the educational process, and they are not impressed by arguments that religion is a private matter and that only parents should be responsible for their children's religious education.

5. Anti-Communism as the Key to Foreign Policy Reagan has long believed that the basic cleavage in world affairs is the gulf between the "evil empire" of Soviet communism and the countries who resist it. In his view the leaders of the Soviet Union have a master plan to impose communism everywhere in the world. They foment subversion and revolution wherever they can. And where, as in Central America, there is a serious challenge to the stability and legitimacy of a noncommunist government, the root cause is seldom poverty, ignorance, or the authoritarian traditions of the country (as Democrats are prone to believe); it is the machinations of the Soviet Union and its vassal states, such as Cuba and Nicaragua. Because of its strength and its dedication to democracy and free enterprise, the United States has a responsibility to help noncommunist governments resist Soviet aggression wherever it can. And the closer to home that aggression comes, as in Central America, the more urgent is the need to take whatever measures are required to stop it in its tracks.

6. Military Strength as the Basis for Effective Foreign Policy In its relations with other countries, Reagan has often said, America should always stand

openly and proudly for American interests first. It should never apologize to its friends or enemies for doing so. And it should aim not at being liked but at being respected. Candor, firmness, and consistency in our statements and actions will help to achieve that respect; but the foundation of a strong and effective foreign policy is a defense second to none. If all nations, friends and foes alike, know that we have great military strength and that we can and will back up the commitments we make, our friends will trust us and our enemies will negotiate seriously with us. Thus the indispensable prerequisite for any fruitful arms control discussion with the Soviets is a military capability at least equal to theirs.

Those six principles have been strongly held and forcefully advocated by Ronald Reagan ever since the 1950s. But philosophical principles are one thing and running a government is quite another. What policies did he actually pursue in his first term?

The Game Plan

Every new American administration begins with its version of what football coaches call "the game plan"—a general strategy of action based upon a conception of what the nation needs and wants, and a set of tactical notions about the people and policies that will meet those needs and wants. Even the Carter administration in 1977 began with such a plan; but, by comparison, in its depth and reach the Reagan administration's 1981 game plan was a master strategy worthy of Knute Rockne and the Gipper themselves. It was explicitly rooted in the conservative philosophy outlined above, and the new team was determined that all major decisions—appointments, legislative proposals, administrative actions—would be made in accordance with that philosophy.

Personnel

For some time now each new administration has taken longer than its predecessors to fill the 2,500 or so "political" positions readily available to it. The Reagan administration took even longer, in part because of the more demanding preappointment investigations required by the new ethics-in-government laws. The main cause of delays, though, were the administration's special efforts to make sure that every appointee at every level was "on board"—that is, committed to Reagan's philosophy.

For such an ideological administration, however, many of the cabinet appointments were surprisingly pragmatic. For example, Alexander Haig at State, Richard Schweiker at Health and Human Services, Drew Lewis at Transportation, and William Brock as U.S. Trade Representative were not longtime "Reaganauts." On the other hand, James Watt at Interior, William