

PARTY PURSUITS AND  
THE PRESIDENTIAL-HOUSE  
ELECTION CONNECTION,  
1900–2008



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## Preface

The present is confusing because we do not really understand the past.<sup>1</sup>

Our understandings of politics evolve. At one time – much of the first half of the 1900s – it was widely understood that presidential and House election results were closely tied together. The partisan votes for presidential and House candidates in House districts were very similar, and we presumed that voting was primarily for a party and not individuals. Then in the 1960s the relationship between presidential and House results declined. By the 1970s a new interpretation emerged about what was dominating elections and how the presidential–House connection was being altered. The conclusion was that House elections were becoming dominated by incumbency, elections were candidate-centered, and parties were of less relevance in voting choices. House incumbents were becoming more immune to shifts in partisan presidential electoral support in the nation. The conventional wisdom quickly became that we were witnessing a diminished capability for elections to simultaneously register voter sentiment in the institutions of the presidency and the House.

[The House elections of the 1960s represent] a set of electoral arrangements that is . . . quite unresponsive to shifts in the preferences of voters. (1973)<sup>2</sup>

Incumbents have become quite effectively insulated from the electoral effects, for example, of adverse presidential landslides. As a result, a once-notable phenomenon, the so-called coattails effect, has virtually been eliminated. (1975)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Koger, *Filibustering: A Political History of Obstruction in the House and Senate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Edward T. Tufte, “The Relationship between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (June 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Walter D. Burnham, “Insulation and Responsiveness in Congressional Elections,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (Fall 1975a), 411–413.

The incumbency advantage in House races has increased to such a level during the last decade that the electoral outcomes for president and Congress have become virtually independent. (1983)<sup>4</sup>

Voting in congressional elections has become detached from broad national currents reflecting reactions to the president and national issues and problems. (1985)<sup>5</sup>

No matter which party wins the White House each four years, presidential elections seem to have little impact on the partisan balance in Congress. The discrepancy between presidential and congressional election results is frequently attributed . . . to a decline in presidential coattails. (1995)<sup>6</sup>

Then evidence began to emerge that created doubts about the consensus. In the elections of 1996 and after, presidential and House election results were once more highly associated. The 2008 presidential and House election results appeared to be dominated by reactions to parties, not candidates. This renewed relationship is puzzling if we rely on an interpretation of the past – the 1950s–1980s – that presumes House incumbents have become independent of presidential voting. That interpretation does not explain how these two election results might once again be *consistently* closely associated. Was it just chance? Or was something much more systematic occurring? If the latter, had we perhaps misinterpreted the past, missed some intended and coherent source of change, and developed an understanding that was erroneous? Do we need to reinterpret the past to provide an explanation of the present?

This analysis argues that the answer to these last questions is yes. The argument presented here is that the separation of presidential and House results that occurred in the 1960s–1980s was not because candidates had suddenly figured out how to create personal constituencies. Rather, a lengthy and sometimes uncoordinated secular realignment was under way. Parties were not peripheral to the process but central. The process was party-driven. Parties were developing differing interpretations of what were the most important problems in American society. They were seeking constituencies compatible with these changing views. In the pursuit of change the wings of each party sometimes acted independently and sometimes together. As the process unfolded over decades, presidential and House results came apart and then gradually came back together. Incumbents lost or retired. Party control and partisan voting percentages in districts changed. By the mid-1990s most of the changes for both wings of each party had worked themselves out and results across districts were once again very similar.

<sup>4</sup> Randall L. Calvert and John A. Ferejohn, "Coattail Voting in Recent Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (June 1983), 408.

<sup>5</sup> John A. Ferejohn and Morris P. Fiorina, "Incumbency and Realignment in Congressional Elections," in John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson, Editors, *New Directions in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory N. Fleming, "Presidential Coattails in Open-Seat Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May 1995), 197–211.



At issue here is our understanding of the past. Reinterpreting the past as party-driven and not candidate-centered explains the present. The current situation of highly associated presidential–House results is not a puzzle but the logical conclusion to a lengthy party-engineered process in response to social, economic, and ultimately political concerns.

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PART I

ELECTION PATTERNS AND INTERPRETIVE  
FRAMEWORKS





## Disconnecting and Reconnecting Presidential–House Election Results

In the early 1900s presidential and House election results were highly correlated. When a Republican presidential candidate did well within a district, the Republican House candidate also did well. When a presidential candidate did poorly, the House candidate of the same party also did poorly. There was a consistency of partisan electoral expressions across House districts. The result was that a president generally came into office with his party holding a majority in the House.<sup>1</sup> The presumption was that the electorate was reacting primarily to parties.<sup>2</sup> Divided partisan control of institutions was not the norm.<sup>3</sup> If the electorate shifted significantly toward one party, it carried that party to power in the presidency and the House.

That connection persisted even when the critical realignment of 1932 occurred. That election is viewed as one that fundamentally changed electoral alignments;<sup>4</sup> however, the major change involved relatively uniform movements to the Democrats in districts where the party had been weak. A shift toward Democrat Franklin Roosevelt for president was accompanied by a shift toward the Democratic House candidate, regardless if it was an incumbent or a

<sup>1</sup> The Senate, with only one-third of seats up for election every two years, was less sensitive to shifts in voter sentiment because most of its membership was not up for election in any given year.

<sup>2</sup> There is also the argument that the way the voting and districting processes were structured played a significant role in creating these outcomes. See Erik J. Engstrom and Samuel Kernell, "Manufactured Responsiveness: The Impact of State Electoral Laws on Unified Party Control of the Presidency and House of Representatives, 1840–1940," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (July 2005), 531–549.

<sup>3</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, *Divided Government*, Second Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, Revised Edition (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983), 198–239.

candidate for an open seat. The shift in voter sentiment in the presidential race also occurred in House elections, and the association between the two sets of results remained high. For the first half of the century the correlation between presidential and House election results was consistently .8 or higher.<sup>5</sup> The percentage of House districts with split-outcomes (different parties winning the presidential and House vote within a district) rarely reached 20 percent.

Then this political relationship began to disconnect. The change was at first gradual and then dramatic. In the 1948 presidential campaign there were three major presidential candidates, and the association between presidential and House results declined. The 1952, 1956, and 1960 elections lowered the relationship somewhat more. Divided control of government was more prevalent. Then the association declined even more between 1964 and 1976. The relationship between presidential and House results appeared to unravel, to become disconnected. The correlation between presidential and House results dropped to .10 and .25 in some of those years. Split-outcomes were becoming much more common. By 1984, 46 percent of all House districts had split-outcomes.

### Concerns about Political Responsiveness

These changes prompted considerable concern about the ability of American elections to register the sentiments of voters in political institutions. Presidential campaigns are times when candidates make arguments for the policies and direction the country should take. If the public supports a party candidate and the policy proposals presented, we hold some hope that a shift in voter reaction to a party moves both presidential and House election results so that the president has a House majority with the same electoral base and policy concerns. That commonality may provide a basis for overcoming the separation of powers built into American politics and make it possible for electoral sentiments to result in policy changes.<sup>6</sup>

For electoral sentiments to be registered in both institutions, presidential and House results must move somewhat together. Such shifts must change partisan control of many House seats. The concern was that an array of evidence was emerging suggesting that the conditions necessary for elections to register changing sentiments were declining, resulting in a disconnection of presidential and House election results. The primary changes appeared to involve House incumbents and their ability to control their own destiny, separate from presidential results. Incumbents were increasingly successful in winning reelection, warding off partisan swings in the vote. As Figure 1.1 indicates, among incumbents choosing to run for reelection, their success rate has been steadily increasing since the late 1800s. It is now common for 95 percent of incumbents

<sup>5</sup> The exception was 1912 when Teddy Roosevelt ran as a third-party candidate for president.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of this issue, see David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Law-making, and Investigations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).



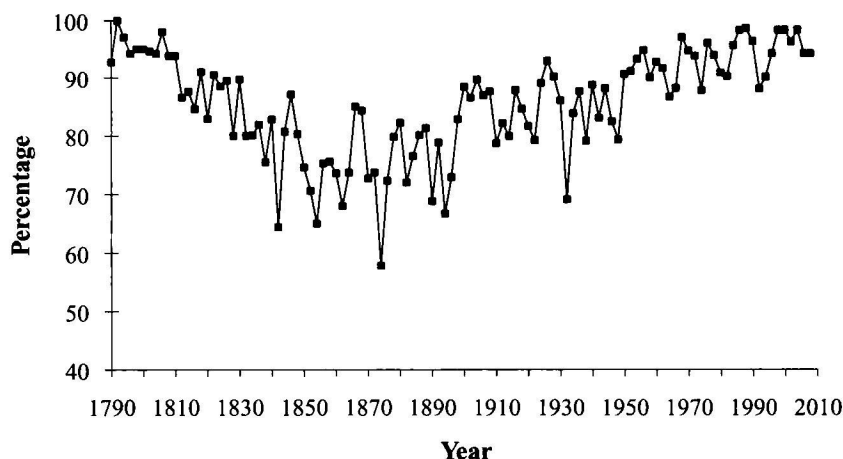


FIGURE 1.1. Reelection Rates for House of Representatives, 1790–2008

to win. Even in 2006, 2008, and 2010, when more incumbents than usual lost, at least 88 percent won. If incumbents were less and less susceptible to losing, the concern was that they might be less responsive to shifting public opinion. Members presumably have set opinions and are unlikely to change them, particularly if the members are safe.<sup>7</sup> If voters wish different policies, the solution is to replace the members with ones with different opinions.

Shifts in voter sentiment are more likely to change party control of House seats if there are many close elections. The evidence indicated that the percentage of close elections was declining.<sup>8</sup> In the post–World War II era, incumbents

<sup>7</sup> The idea that members of Congress do not change was presented in Aage R. Clausen, *How Congressmen Decide: A Policy Focus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 70–84. The idea that members of Congress have ideal points was later represented in scores measuring positions for members: Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "The Polarization of American Politics," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (November 1984), 1061–1079; Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "A Spatial Model for Legislative Roll Call Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May 1985), 357–384; and Keith Krehbiel, "Where's the Party?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 1993), 235–266. For a more recent review of this issue, see Thomas Stratmann, "Congressional Voting over Legislative Careers: Shifting Positions and Changing Constraints," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (September 2000), 665–676. For challenges to the idea that members have set views that do not change, see Kenny J. Whitby and Frank D. Gilliam, Jr., "A Longitudinal Analysis of Competing Explanations for the Transformation of Southern Congressional Politics," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (May 1991), 504–518; and Gary C. Jacobson, "Explaining the Ideological Polarization of the Congressional Parties since the 1970s," in David W. Brady and Mathew D. McCubbins, Editors, *Party, Process, and Political Change in Congress*, Volume 2 (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 91–101.

<sup>8</sup> David R. Mayhew, "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring 1974a), 295–317; David R. Mayhew, *The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974b). There is some disagreement about the impact of

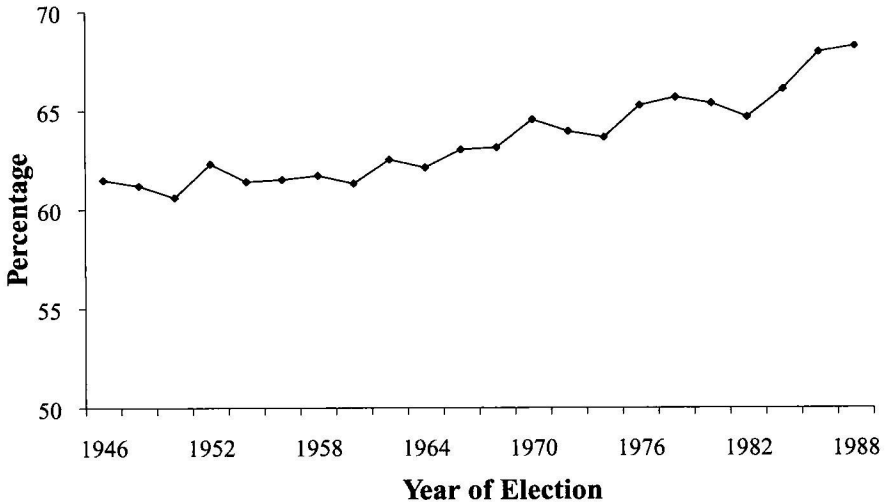


FIGURE 1.2. Vote Percentages for Contested House Incumbents, 1946–1988

appeared to be winning with higher percentages of the vote. Studies found that in the years between 1946 and 1950 incumbents averaged about 60 percent of the two-party vote. By the late 1980s, as shown in Figure 1.2, studies indicated incumbents were averaging 68 percent. Incumbents were more likely to want to stay in office and run for reelection.<sup>9</sup> They had more resources in the form of staff, government-funded trips to the district, and access to mailings to constituents.<sup>10</sup> House members were seen as more successful in creating a “personal vote” base of support that was separate from some base partisan vote in districts.<sup>11</sup>

marginality on voting. See Morris P. Fiorina, “Electoral Margins, Constituency Influence, and Policy Moderation: A Critical Assessment,” *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (October 1973), 479–498; and John D. Griffin, “Electoral Competition and Democratic Responsiveness: A Defense of the Marginality Hypothesis,” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (November 2006), 911–921.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson W. Polsby, “The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (March 1968), 144–168. As noted by some, the trend toward wanting to stay in office had started increasing in the 1800s. See Samuel Samuel Kernell, “Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition, and Rotation,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (November 1977), 669–693; and Robert Struble, Jr., “House Turnover and the Principle of Rotation,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979–1980), 649–667.

<sup>10</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, Seventh Edition (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2009), 31–32.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce E. Cain, John A. Ferejohn, and Morris P. Fiorina, “The Constituency Basis of the Personal Vote for U.S. Representatives and British Members of Parliament,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (March 1984), 110–125; and Bruce E. Cain, John A. Ferejohn,

The result of higher vote percentages for incumbents was fewer close elections and declining susceptibility of incumbents to the periodic shifts in public opinion that occur.<sup>12</sup> From the 1870s through the first half of the twentieth century, the percentage of competitive House elections was relatively high, and there was considerable turnover in who held House seats.<sup>13</sup> Shifts in partisan sentiment affected a substantial number of House outcomes. A relatively high percentage of seats changed party from one election to another.<sup>14</sup> The swing ratio, or the change in party control of House seats in response to a shift in presidential voting, was higher in the past.<sup>15</sup> As Figure 1.3 indicates, the percentage of seats in which party control changed following elections was declining. The percentage of incumbents losing was also steadily declining.<sup>16</sup> There was less and less turnover.<sup>17</sup> Fewer House members were feeling the threat of a competitive race.<sup>18</sup> Fewer lived with the anxiety of possible defeat, and presumably these members were less likely to worry about knowing and representing their constituents.

The concern was that incumbents were acquiring the ability to systematically increase their average vote above the normal partisan vote, thus creating a

and Morris P. Fiorina, *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). There was also the argument that this personal vote could make members more vulnerable because it could create a less predictable vote. See Thomas E. Mann, *Unsafe at Any Margin* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Albert D. Cover and David R. Mayhew, "Congressional Dynamics and the Decline of Competitive Congressional Elections," in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, Editors, *Congress Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1977), 62–82; Albert D. Cover, "One Good Term Deserves Another: The Advantage of Incumbency in Congressional Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (August 1977), 523–541; James A. Stimson, Michael B. MacKuen, and Robert S. Erikson, "Dynamic Representation," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (September 1995), 543–565.

<sup>13</sup> Kernell, "Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers"; Erik Engstrom, "The Partisan Impact of Malapportionment on the 19th Century and Early 20th Century House of Representatives." Presented at the 2005 Midwestern Political Science Association Meetings, Chicago, Illinois, April; and, Erik Engstrom, "Stacking the States, Stacking the House: The Partisan Consequences of Congressional Redistricting in the 19th Century," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 100, No. 3 (August 2006), 419–427.

<sup>14</sup> Charles O. Jones, "Inter-Party Competition in Congressional Seats," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 1964), 465.

<sup>15</sup> For a review of that literature, see Jeffrey M. Stonecash, "The Declining Swing Ratio: Incumbent Insulation or Realignment?" Paper presented at the 2010 American Political Science Association Meetings, Washington, DC, September.

<sup>16</sup> The percentages are calculated only for pairs of years for which the districts were the same: 1902 is compared to 1904, 1904 with 1906, 1906 with 1908, 1908 with 1910, 1912 with 1914, and so forth.

<sup>17</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, David W. Rhode, and Peter Wissell, "Historical Change in House Turnover," in Norman J. Ornstein, Editor, *Congress in Change* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 24–46.

<sup>18</sup> Jamie L. Carson and Carrie P. Eaves, "Congressional Elections: Why Some Incumbent Candidates Lose," in Stephen K. Medvic, Editor, *New Directions in Campaigns and Elections* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 184–185.

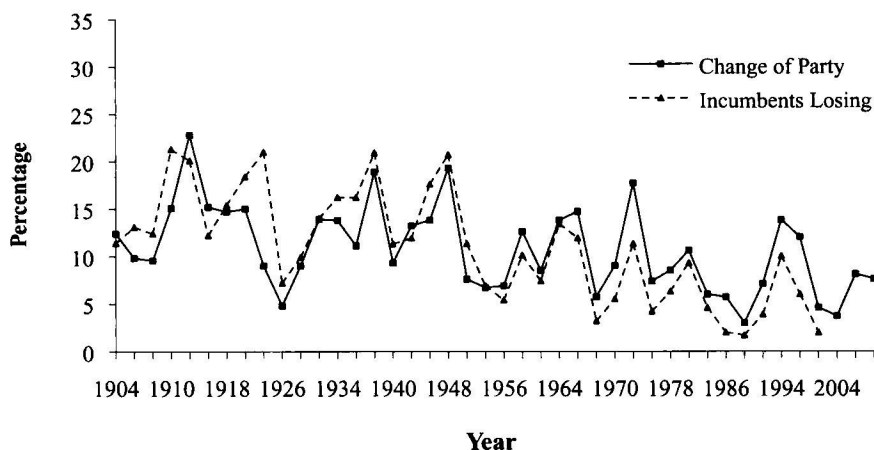


FIGURE 1.3. Percentage of House Seats Changing Party Control and Incumbents Losing, 1900–2008

greater deviation from the presidential vote. They could disconnect themselves from presidential voting. The effect presumed to be occurring is illustrated in Figure 1.4. Assume that there is some “normal vote”<sup>19</sup> for a set of districts, or a consistent level of partisan support.<sup>20</sup> In this case assume that the district is politically divided and has a consistent or normal vote of 50 percent Democratic. For this set of districts, Democratic incumbents might be able to gradually raise their vote above the normal vote and create positive deviations from that base partisan sentiment in the district. Republican incumbents would

<sup>19</sup> Philip E. Converse, “The Concept of a Normal Vote,” in Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: John Wiley, 1966), 6–39.

<sup>20</sup> This normal vote need not be a fixed percentage. Some define it as largely stable: Matthew S. Levendusky, Jeremy C. Pope, and Simon Jackman, “Measuring District-Level Partisanship with Implications for the Analysis of U.S. Elections,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (July 2008), 736–753.

Some see it as changeable as conditions change: Arthur H. Miller, “Normal Vote Analysis: Sensitivity to Change over Time,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May 1979), 406–425. Others treat it more as a moving average of results over a number of elections: Peter F. Nardulli, “A Normal Vote Approach to the Study of Electoral Change: Presidential Elections, 1828–1984,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (December 1994), 467–503; and Peter F. Nardulli, *Popular Efficacy in the Democratic Era: A Reexamination of Electoral Accountability in the United States, 1828–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). It is important to note that in using presidential vote percentages in House districts, the focus is on the vote percentage as a reflection of the party’s support within that district. Some use this vote as an indicator of the ideological position of the median voter. For difficulties with the latter use, see Georgia Kernell, “Giving Order to Districts: Estimating Voter Distributions with National Election Returns,” *Political Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 2009), 215–235.

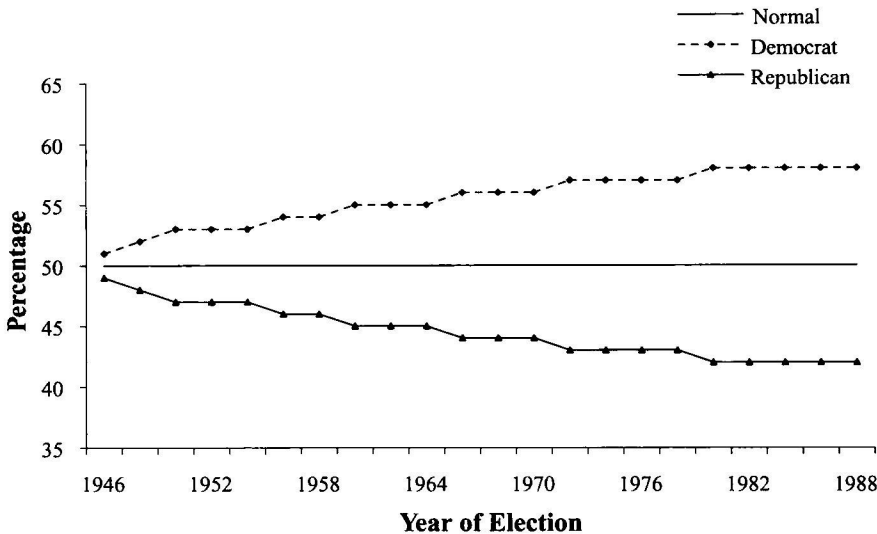


FIGURE 1.4. Incumbent Vote Deviations from the Normal Democratic Vote

achieve greater safety by creating partisan votes for Democratic challengers less than the normal 50 percent Democratic vote.

In fact, the differences of House vote from the presidential vote within districts were steadily increasing. Figure 1.5 indicates the average difference of House votes from the presidential vote from 1900 to 1988. The figure uses the average absolute difference (with the sign of whether the difference is

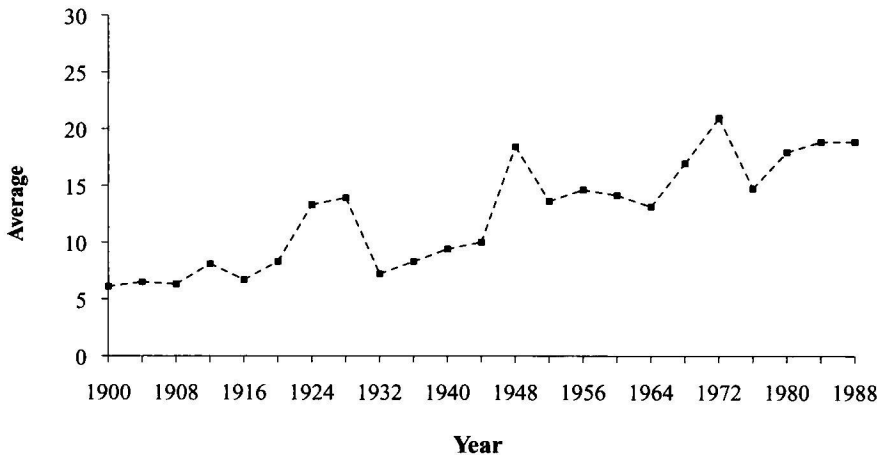


FIGURE 1.5. Average Absolute Difference of House Vote from Presidential Vote, 1900–1984

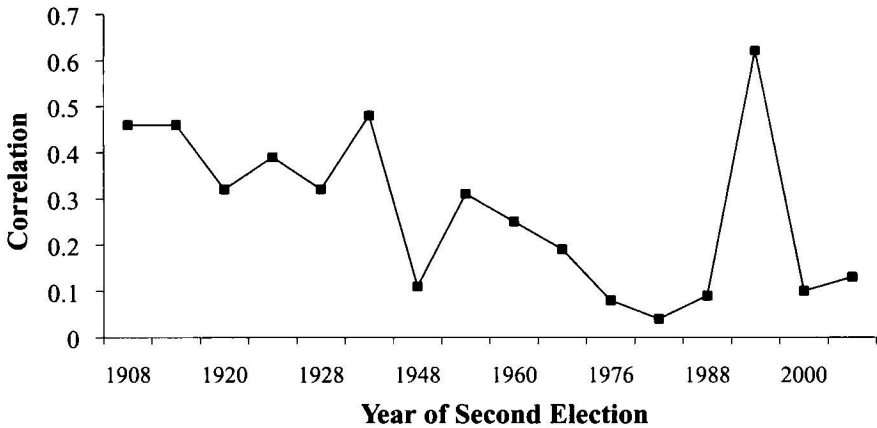


FIGURE 1.6. Correlation of Changes in Presidential–House Percentages from Prior Presidential Election, 1900–2008

positive or negative removed). If a simple average was used, it would measure the average net difference (positives offset by negatives), which would conceal the extent of deviations. Over time the average absolute difference of House results from presidential results gradually increased, moving from about 5 points in 1900 to almost 20 in 1988. There was also concern that differences in House percentages from one election to the next were changing less uniformly, reflecting the ability of members to create unique changes. That is, the national partisan vote might shift five percentage points but the changes for individual members might vary remarkably.<sup>21</sup>

The result would be a decline in the association between changes in presidential and House results from one presidential election to another. From the election in 1904 to the one in 1908, both presidential and House results within each district change, and the issue is how much those changes are correlated. These changes can be calculated only for election pairs in which the same set of districts existed, so the results shown in Figure 1.6 are for the pairs of elections ending in the years 1908, 1912, 1916, 1920, 1924, 1928, 1936, 1940, 1948, 1956, 1960, 1968, 1976, 1980, 1988, 1996, 2000, and 2008. Except for the year 1996, the trend is toward a declining association of changes from one presidential election to the next.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “The Marginals Never Vanished: Incumbency and Competition in Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, 1952–1982,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 1987), 126–141.

<sup>22</sup> This is for all districts and not just those with an incumbent present because the general concern is the overall relationship between presidential and House results.



## The Consequences for Democratic Responsiveness

The accumulated evidence seemed to establish that House members were reducing their tie to presidential results. House members were creating a personally based vote that diverged from the normal vote within the district. This was reducing the closeness of elections, and shifts in voter sentiment from prior elections were less likely to register across House districts.<sup>23</sup> The relationship between presidential and House elections was declining because House members were pushing House district election results away from being competitive. The concern was that the ability of presidential elections to serve as a means to register shifting political opinions was declining. Members were becoming more insulated from the threat of defeat and less responsive to shifting political views.<sup>24</sup>

The changes developing in House elections were particularly evident by the 1960s.<sup>25</sup> The electorate might shift its support from one party to another in the presidential election, but swings in presidential elections were having less effect on the net shift in partisan success in House elections. As Tufte expressed it, by the 1960s we had “a set of electoral arrangements that is . . . quite unresponsive to shifts in the preferences of voters.”<sup>26</sup> Shifts in the national partisan vote were producing less change in partisan seat distributions.<sup>27</sup> Responsiveness to changing voter sentiments was declining.<sup>28</sup> The sense was that “we are witnesses to the blunting of a blunt instrument,”<sup>29</sup> and “Congress has become increasingly isolated from electoral tides.”<sup>30</sup> By the 1980s and 1990s, divided control of government was more common than unified party control, and scholars offered theories that voters were voting for divided government to

<sup>23</sup> Burnham, “Insulation and Responsiveness in Congressional Elections.”

<sup>24</sup> For relevant studies, see Kathryn Harmon and Marsha L. Brauen, “Joint Electoral Outcomes as Cues for Congressional Support of U.S. Presidents,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May 1979), 281–299; Ferejohn and Fiorina, “Incumbency and Realignment in Congressional Elections”; Suzanna De Boef and James A. Stimson, “The Dynamic Structure of Congressional Election,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (August 1995), 630–648.

<sup>25</sup> Tufte, “The Relationship between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems,” 548.

<sup>26</sup> Tufte, “The Relationship between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems,” 550.

<sup>27</sup> Edward R. Tufte, “Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (September 1975), 812–826; David W. Brady and Bernard Grofman, “Sectional Differences in Partisan Bias and Electoral Responsiveness in US House Elections, 1850–1980,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April 1991), 247–256.

<sup>28</sup> Gary King and Andrew Gelman, “Systematic Consequences of Incumbency in U.S. House Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (February 1991), 126–127.

<sup>29</sup> Mayhew, “Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals,” 314.

<sup>30</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “Presidential Coattails in 1972,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 1976), 194–200.