2000 Election Update

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Suppose we gave a national election and no one won—or at least, no one political party clearly won the support of the majority of the nation. Suppose we gave an election and no one knew the final outcome for weeks following voting day. Suppose we gave an election, yet the office at the top of the ticket was decided not just on the basis of individual voters trying to register their support for particular candidates, but also on the basis of scores of demonstrators in the streets and in county government buildings, on the basis of legal arguments made by dozens of some of the most brilliant attorneys in the country, on the basis of administrative decisions made by usually obscure state and local election officials, on the basis of decisions made by county and state appellate court judges, and ultimately on the basis of decisions rendered by the U.S. Supreme Court. Suppose we gave an election and the candidate who came in first in the popular vote doesn't win the office. Suppose we gave an election and the final outcome was influenced by butterfly ballots and hanging and dimpled chads. Suppose we gave an election and we had to figure out what a chad was. As a great sports announcer of the past used to say, "Who would have thunk it!"

The first general election of the new millennium—or the last of the old if you hold to the view that the new century doesn't begin until 2001—was truly a unique election for any era, with a final outcome that for both major parties was a bit disappointing and with total results that were notable more for their oddities than for revealing any deep underlying trends in the American system. In the end more Americans voted than had ever voted in any previous election. More than 100 million Americans cast ballots on Tuesday, November 7, but that was still barely one-half of those eligible to vote. The final outcome revealed an electorate so evenly divided between the two political parties that one could fairly say that the result was a tie. In sports, we are accustomed to the winners of running and swimming events eking out victories by hundredths of a second. The results of the 2000 election were the electoral equivalent of hundredths of seconds,

as the two major party presidential candidates were separated by little more than 300,000 votes, or three-tenths of one percent, with some votes still to be counted. The all-important Electoral College vote was the closest in more than a century, dependent on the outcome of disputed votes in Florida; whoever would win Florida would win the presidency. The election results for the 107th Congress were just as close. Several races in both the House and Senate were not officially decided until two weeks after voting day because of the closeness of the totals. In the end, the House of Representatives had a narrow nine vote Republican majority and the Senate became tied, each party holding fifty seats, meaning that the new Vice President of the United States, in his capacity as President of the Senate, would play a prominent role in casting tie-breaking votes.

Consider some of the peculiar aspects of the 2000 elections:

- In several states, such as New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Iowa, Oregon, and New Mexico, the difference between presidential candidates Al Gore and George Bush was less than 10,000 votes. With such a small margin, a change of only one vote in each precinct in those states would have given the victory to the other candidate.
- In three states—Florida, Oregon, and New Mexico—the vote was so close that the counters at first called the winner of the presidential race to be one candidate and then changed later to the other. It took more than a week of counting for the outcome in Oregon and New Mexico to be reasonably certain. And, of course, in Florida, the count and the uncertainty continued for several weeks, provoking law suits and constitutional questions, as well as bitter partisan disputes that are likely to affect the operations of the new Congress and new president.
- There were House and Senate seats in which the voting totals of the Democratic and Republican candidates were so close that it took days to sort out the results. Two winners, incumbent Rush Holt in the New Jersey 12th congressional district, and challenger Maria Cantwell in the Washington Senate seat, were not announced until Thanksgiving week.

- For the first time in American history, the spouse of a president ran for public office. Hillary Rodham Clinton, at the center of many of the policy and political disputes that had surrounded the presidency of her husband Bill Clinton, easily won the Democratic nomination for the seat of retiring New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and went on to defeat her Republican opponent, Rick Lazio, by over 10 percentage points and by more than 700,000 votes. Another unusual aspect to the victory was that Senator-elect Clinton had never lived in New York state prior to the campaign and only established legal residence in the state during the election year.
- An incumbent U.S. Senator, John Ashbrook of Missouri, lost his seat to a dead man, state Governor Mel Carnahan, who was killed in an airplane crash several weeks before election day. The new governor of Missouri, who succeeded to the office upon the death of Governor Carnahan, announced before election day that if the late-governor won the senate race, his widow Jean Carnahan would be appointed to the senate seat until the next general election. Some critics, noting that the U.S. Constitution requires that to be elected to the U.S. Senate one has to be an inhabitant of the state at the time of the election, argued that a dead man was not an inhabitant and therefore could not be elected (Article I, Section 3). Senator Ashbrook declined to challenge the defeat or the appointment.
- An eighteen year-old, just graduated from high school, won election to the Ohio state House of Representatives, and a twenty-five year-old won election in Florida to the U.S. House of Representatives. The new Florida congressman had already served two terms in the Florida state legislature (Reuters, November 9, 2000; Broder, Washington Post, Nov. 26, p. B-7).
- For the first time in more than a century, the basic legitimacy of the process of electing the president was brought into doubt. Serious questions were raised about voting problems—long lines, registration errors, intimidation, faulty ballots—and sloppy counting and securing of the ballots—in both New Mexico and Florida, for example, dozens of ballots were reported lost

and then were found. More fundamentally, there were repeated claims that efforts were being made by both parties to get members of the Electoral College to change their pledged vote, and there were questions raised over the wisdom of keeping the Electoral College. Senator-elect Clinton stated that she would back a proposed constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College, for example. Adding to the legitimacy questions was the involvement of state and federal courts in bitter electoral disputes that the usual administrative officials and political parties could not solve to everyone's agreement. The courts were brought in to answer questions such as: what is the authority of state and local election officials, has blatant partisanship shaped the actions and decisions of those officials, how should ballots be recounted (should only clearly noted votes be counted or can ambiguous marks, such as a *dimpled chad*, be counted). Finally, there were calls for state legislative involvement in the selection of Electors and calls for Congress to accept or reject certain slates of Electors if those Electors were chosen in ways to which some in Congress object. Not since the disputed election of 1876, involving claims of fraud that were not settled until just before presidential inauguration day in 1877, had such serious issues about the process and implementation of elections in our country been raised.

At stake in the 2000 elections were the U.S. presidency, all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, one-third of the membership of the U.S. Senate (34 Senate seats, to be exact), 11 governorships, numerous other state executive positions in those same states (such as lieutenant governor and attorney general), and most state legislative posts. In addition, many states had special ballot initiatives and referenda, calling on voters to approve or disapprove of proposed state constitutional amendments or changes to state law.

Table 1 below displays the overall partisan results for the major non-presidential offices in the 2000 elections and compares them to the state of partisan affairs existing just prior to the election.

Table 1
Overall Results, 2000 Elections, by Party

	2000 pre-election			2000 post-election		
	Dem	Rep	Ind	Dem	Rep	Ind
U.S. Senate	46	54	0	50	50	0
U.S. House of Representatives	211	222	2	212	221	2
Governorships	18	30	2	19	29	2
State Legislative Chambers	51	47	1*	49	49	1*

*Nebraska has a single chamber, non-partisan state legislature.

(Source: Election data from CNN Election 2000 website; and from National Conference of State Legislatures, November 15, 2000)

The Congress

Party and Incumbency

In studying congressional elections, political scientists usually start with the importance of constituency. A first principle is the division of the Congress into the House and the Senate, each with distinct constituencies and each with a different set of factors that shape electoral politics.

Senators represent whole states, have six-year terms, and with greater prestige being attached to their office, tend to be well-known politicians whose actions are extensively covered by the news media. Senate candidates are expected to show command of a great range of issues and to appear at least a bit statesmanlike and independent, rather than being totally linked to public opinion or to political party. Only one-third of all the Senate seats are up for re-election in a particular election cycle. Senate seats tend to be highly sought after by a large number of political hopefuls. The cost of running for a Senate seat is typically expensive, in larger states commonly exceeding $20 million. For example, John Corzine, the Democratic candidate for the open Senate seat in New Jersey, spent more than $60 million, more than doubling the previous record for Senate campaigns, and nearly all of his expenditures came from his personal fortune.

In the New York Senate race, the two candidates combined (Clinton and Lazio) spent more than $60 million (Marcus, Washington Post, Nov. 6, 2000, p. A-1; Dunham, Reuters, Nov. 8)

The House of Representatives is divided into 435 different constituencies, each with its own unique set of social, economic, and political characteristics. House districts, outside of the states with the smallest populations (e.g., the Dakotas, Wyoming, Alaska), are subdivisions of states, including only parts of a particular state's population. Many districts are fairly homogeneous, containing voters who largely share major economic and social characteristics. With a two-year term, the House member is expected to be closely tied to public opinion back in the district. Due to the large size of the House, members are encouraged to pay attention also to their chamber's party conferences and leaders, rather than to take pride in their independence. Because of the small constituency size (averaging about 600,000 people per district in 2000), campaign costs for House seats have been smaller than for Senate seats; most House seats still can be won with expenditures of less than $1 million. There are exceptions, however. One House race in 2000, the California 27th, between Democrat Adam Schiff and Republican incumbent James Rogan, one of the leaders in the impeachment process against President Clinton in 1998-99, had expenditures of more than $10 million. (Marcus, Washington Post, Nov. 6, p. A-01)

In congressional races, the effects of partisanship and incumbency are pervasive and reinforcing. Most constituencies are won by the same party repeatedly, and large majorities of incumbents win re-election. Since the 1970s, incumbent success rates in the House have averaged well over 90 percent, ranging from a low of 92.09 percent in 1980 to a high of 98.5 percent in 1988. The Senate has had a somewhat lower incumbent success rate, averaging 80.5 percent in presidential election years between 1976 and 1996 (Keefe, 1998, p. 54). Table 2 below shows the incumbent success rates for presidential election years since 1976. Obviously, 2000 was no

exception to the power of incumbency. In fact, the House incumbency success rate in 2000 was 98.2 percent, slightly above the average for the past twenty years.

Table 2
Congress incumbency success rates in presidential election years

Year		*Running in general el.*	*Defeated in general el.*	*Elected in general el.*	*Success Rate*
Avg	House	387	19	368	95.2 %
'76-96	Senate	21	4	17	80.5 %
2000	House	399	7	392	98.3 %
	Senate	29	6	23	79.3%

(Source: 1976-96 data from Keefe, p. 54. 2000 data from CNN Election 2000 website.)

Only seven House incumbents were defeated in 2000, four Republican and three Democrat. In the Senate, with six incumbents defeated (Republicans Roth of Delaware, Abraham of Michigan, Ashcroft of Missouri, Grams of Minnesota, and Gorton of Washington, and Democrat Robb of Virginia), the incumbent success rate was a bit lower than that for the House, reflecting the greater competition that typically exists in Senate races. Still, the Senate incumbency success rate in 2000 was just one point below the twenty-year average. With the small partisan change in the House, one would be hard pressed to see the effects of presidential coattails—i.e., there is little indication in the data that the strength or weakness of a party's presidential candidate hurt or helped congressional candidates. In most constituencies one could conclude that voters were reasonably satisfied with the current state of affairs and with the performance of their congressional representatives.

The reasons for incumbency success rates are well known and well documented in the political science literature. The sizable staff devoted to constituency services ("casework," as it is known), the franking privilege, the availability of free-to-the-incumbent campaign services within the Congress (the parties within each chamber have broadcast facilities that candidates can use, for example), the large number of trips home, being able to take credit for positive federal action within constituencies, the media coverage, the access to Washington campaign money, all add up

to substantial advantages to the incumbent (Keefe, 1998, pp. 52, 219; Burns, 2000, p. 282). The old truism, that everyone dislikes Congress but thinks their own congressperson is the exception, is certainly valid.

Marginal Seats

One indication of party competition is the number of marginal seats that exist. A marginal seat is one in which the victor wins by a small margin, meaning that there could easily be partisan turnover in that constituency if the circumstances were right--such as high levels of presidential approval or disapproval. Through the 1990's, about 25 percent of all House seats (roughly 100 of the 435 House seats) were considered marginal, such that the winning candidate received less than 55 percent of the vote. In 2000, only 8 percent of House seats (36 seats) were won by less than 55 percent of the vote. In fact, more than 330 seats (76 percent of the total) were won by victory margins of 60 percent or higher; the average in the 1990's was for about 60 percent of House seats to be won by such large margins. In 62 House campaigns, the winner did not even have opposition from the other major party, compared to an average of about 50 in recent congressional campaigns. What all of this means is that the battle for control of the House between Democrats and Republicans is waged among a comparatively small number of House seats; most House seats are won very easily and consistently by one or the other of the major parties (Keefe, 1998, p. 52).

In the Senate, partisan competition is a bit tighter. Ten of the 34 Senate races in 2000 were close, with the victor getting less than 55 percent of the vote. No Senate seats were unopposed, another sign of the Senate's enhanced competitive balance. In all, only 17 House seats and 8 Senate seats changed party hands in 2000. In the House, 9 seats previously held by Republicans were won by Democrats, and 8 seats previously held by Democrats were won by Republicans. Only seven of these were defeats of incumbents; the other ten were open seats. In the Senate, six of the eight party changes involved incumbents losing their seats.

What are the reasons for the decline in marginal seats and the general decline in the level of partisan competition within most congressional seats? At least two factors may be important. First, within the states, the skill of the various parties in drawing district lines has had its effects--i.e., drawing safe districts for incumbents and to protect dominant parties. The next two years will be critical if there are to be any changes in partisan competition, for after the 2000 census results are reported back to the states, each state must redraw its U.S. House and state legislative district lines. A second factor is a form of cost-benefit analysis performed by parties and prospective candidates. Before every campaign season, parties and candidates have to consider whether spending the time and money to run in a particular constituency is worthwhile. In a safe seat, challengers from the opposing party have often concluded that the costs of running and almost surely losing are far greater than the slim benefits offered.

Geography and Demography

The results of the 2000 congressional elections reinforce more than challenge the recent geographic trends of partisanship, as Table 3 below indicates. (See also Appendices 1 and 2 for the partisan composition of each state's House and Senate delegations.) In the past two decades the congressional delegations of states in the South have become heavily Republican, while the delegations of Northeastern states have become heavily Democratic. The West and Midwest have been fairly evenly divided between the two parties.

Table 3
Regional Breakdown of the U.S. Congress, by Party, after 2000 Election

	East		South		Midwest		West		Total*	
	D	R	D	R	D	R	D	R	D	R
House '00	57	39	57	82	48	57	50	43	212	221
Change	-2	+2	0	0	-3	+3	+6	-6	+1	-1
Senate '00	14	8	11	17	17	7	10	16	50	50
Change	+1	-1	0	0	+3	-3	0	+0	+4	-4

*Total does not include two independent House members, from Vermont and Virginia.
(Source: 2000 election data from CNN Election 2000 website)

With one set of exceptions, none of the seats that changed partisanship in 2000 alter that basic geographic pattern. The only exception would be the Pacific states, normally considered part of the West region. If the Pacific states (California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii) were to be considered their own region rather than part of the West, we would see a heavily Democratic Pacific region and an equally Republican Rocky Mountain West region. For example, in California four House seats previously held by Republicans were won by Democrats, giving that state a House delegation of 32 Democrats and 20 Republicans, along with two Democratic Senators. Washington state now has six Democrats in its nine member House delegation and two Democratic senators. Four of Oregon's five House members and one of its Senators are Democrats. Hawaii's congressional delegation is totally Democratic. The rest of the West region (i.e., the Rocky Mountain states) is heavily Republican; the combination of Rocky Mountain and Pacific states into the West region makes it appear to be evenly balanced on partisan lines.

At the time of this writing, complete data on demographic traits for the new Congress were not yet available. Relative to race and ethnicity, the preliminary data show no change between the 107th Congress elected in 2000 and the 106th elected in 1998. The outgoing Congress had 39 African Americans and 20 Hispanic Americans, all in the House of Representatives. The new Congress will have an increase in women members, with the number of female House members rising from 56 to 59, and the number of female Senators increasing from 9 to 14. At least one Native American was elected to the House, Brad Carson of Oklahoma, joining Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado. (Center for American Women and Politics, www.cawp.rutgers.edu; Broder, Washington Post, Nov. 26, p. B-07) Overall, the demographic characteristics of the new Congress will be similar to that of the outgoing Congress.

State Results

Also at stake in 2000 were 11 state governorships, other state executive positions, and most of the nation's state legislative seats. (Most of the governorships and other state executive positions are chosen in non-presidential election years, such as 1998 and 2002.) Table 4 shows the number of governorships in partisan hands as a result of elections in the past decade, while Table 5 shows the state legislative results for the same period. Appendix 3 shows the partisan breakdown of governors and the year of most recent election for each incumbent. The tables allow us to see the politically earth-shaking results of the 1994 elections and the rather anti-climactic results from the following years.

Table 4
State Governorships and Party Control, 1990-2000

Election	*Dem*	*Rep*	*Indep*	*Change in Party Control*
1990	28	20	2	12
1992	30	18	2	6
1994	19	30	1	15
1998	17	31	2	9
2000	19	29	2	1

(Source: CNN Election 2000 website for 2000 results. World Almanac, 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1999 for other years)

Table 5
State Legislatures and Party Control, 1990-2000

Election	*Dem. Control*	*Rep. Control*	*Split Control**
1990	30	6	13
1992	25	8	16
1994	18	19	12
1996	20	18	11
1998	20	17	12
2000	17	17	15

*States in which Democrats control one chamber and Republicans the other. (Source: Data from NCSL)

The Republican victory in 1994 brought on a net partisan change of eleven governorships and eleven state legislatures. Very few elections have come close to this sort of partisan turnover. The elections since 1994 have shown only modest change in control of statehouses. In 2000, only one state, West Virginia, had a change in the party of the governorship. Republican Cecil Underwood, the incumbent, lost to Democrat Bob Wise, making him the only incumbent governor to be defeated in 2000.

Both parties waged strong campaigns for control of state legislatures in the 2000 elections because the legislatures that will convene in 2001 will be in charge of redrawing congressional and state legislative district lines. Whatever party is in control of a particular state legislature will obviously draw those lines to favor its chances in the election campaigns to follow, a process long followed in American politics and called *gerrymandering* (Burns, 2000, pp. 328-29). Nationally, the two parties after the 2000 elections are completely even in control of numbers of state legislatures, a situation that is considerably better for the Republican party, and worse for the Democratic party, than was true after the 1990 elections.

The Presidency

The Nomination Campaign

During the summer of 2000, the Republican and Democratic parties held their national conventions to nominate their presidential and vice presidential candidates. The Republicans in July nominated George W. Bush for president and Richard Cheney for vice president. In August, Albert Gore and Joseph Lieberman received the Democratic party nominations for president and vice president. When the nomination campaign started the preceding January, however, it was not a sure thing for either Bush or Gore that he would win his party's presidential nomination. Both had to overcome serious competition from potentially strong opponents.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties have established roughly similar procedures for winning their presidential nominations. Each party holds a national convention in the summer of the presidential election year. At the convention, delegates from each of the states gather to cast their votes for the presidential candidate of their choice and also to participate in other convention business such as the setting of party rules and the writing of a party platform. In a particular party, each state is apportioned a certain number of delegates, based on population and previous support for that party (i.e., states that have voted in previous elections for that party's

presidential candidates usually receive a bonus of delegates). To win the presidential nomination, a candidate must receive the majority of his party's convention delegates. Those delegates are won by the candidates competing in a long series of presidential preference primaries and special presidential caucuses, stretching from January to June of the election year. (While a primary is essentially a party election with secret voting, a caucus is more like a meeting that can last for hours, concluding with open voting for the candidates.) A candidate's percentage of the vote in a particular state's presidential primary or caucus will roughly correspond to his percentage of the delegates won from that state. Candidates move from state contest to state contest, beginning with the Iowa caucus in late January and the New Hampshire primary in February and moving on through many states in March and April. In the primary and caucus season, the candidates from one party are running against each other as they vie for votes and thus delegates.

On the Democratic party side, Vice President Al Gore had serious competition from former Senator Bill Bradley. A former professional basketball player and Rhodes Scholar, Bradley had the reputation of being a thoughtful senator, almost an intellectual, who could work with people of many different persuasions. Liberal Democrats who thought that the Clinton-Gore administration was too conservative and too tarnished by scandal and impeachment were attracted to the Bradley candidacy. Gore responded by moving more to the liberal side of the ideological spectrum than he had previously portrayed himself and by trying to strike a delicate balance of claiming some credit for the Clinton-era economic prosperity while separating himself from the Clinton scandals. Gore especially tried to appeal to traditional Democratic voting constituencies, such as organized labor, teachers unions, and minorities.

The Bradley candidacy in the end proved not to be as serious as it had promised to be early in the nomination contest. Gore won decisively in Iowa and New Hampshire and then swept to significant victories in the March primaries. By the beginning of April, he had easily accumulated

a majority of delegates to the Democratic convention. Gore won more than 75 percent of the votes cast in the Democratic primaries and caucuses and won over 90 percent of the delegates.

On the Republican side, Texas Governor George W. Bush had a more complicated competitive environment. Also contending for the Republican nomination were Steve Forbes, the publisher of a major business newsmagazine and a candidate for the 1996 Republican contest; Gary Bauer, a former executive with a Christian Right family organization; Alan Keyes, an African American talk show host and former ambassador; Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee; and Senator John McCain of Arizona. Forbes, Hatch, and Bauer proved not to have much voter appeal and were out of the campaign shortly after the New Hampshire primary. Keyes continued to campaign all the way to the end, and while he was an impressive speaker and formidable debater he was not a significant contender for voters.

John McCain, however, was a very serious candidate with considerable public appeal. A Vietnam war hero and former prisoner of war, McCain ran as an independent thinker who could appeal to many voting groups that were not traditionally Republican by emphasizing his opposition to vested interest groups and to the influence of "big money" in the electoral process. McCain received glowing media coverage and did well in several primaries, winning New Hampshire and Michigan, for example. Bush, who had hoped to win the nomination by appealing to all Republican voting groups with his call for a compassionate conservatism, found himself moving to the right ideologically in order to cut off McCain's support. In the end, Bush was able to prevail in the March primaries with the strong support of most Republican office-holders, especially his fellow governors. By April, he too had won the majority of his party's delegates, and eventually received the somewhat tepid backing of McCain, who had received more than 35 percent of the primary votes (Newsweek, Nov. 20, 2000).