PART I

ELECTION PATTERNS AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS
I

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.\(^1\) The presumption was that the electorate was reacting primarily to parties.\(^2\) Divided partisan control of institutions was not the norm.\(^3\) 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;\(^4\) 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

\(^1\) 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.

\(^2\) 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.


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. 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. 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

5 The exception was 1912 when Teddy Roosevelt ran as a third-party candidate for president.
6 For discussions of this issue, see David R. Mayhew, Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
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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. 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.


8 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
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. They had more resources in the form of staff, government-funded trips to the district, and access to mailings to constituents. 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.


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. 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. Shifts in partisan sentiment affected a substantial number of House outcomes. A relatively high percentage of seats changed party from one election to another. 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. 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. There was less and less turnover. Fewer House members were feeling the threat of a competitive race. 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).


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.


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” for a set of districts, or a consistent level of partisan support. 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


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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
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.\(^{21}\)

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, 1932, 1936, 1940, 1948, 1952, 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.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{22}\) 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.