Party Pursuits and the Presidential–House Election Connection, 1900–2008

This study proposes and assesses an alternative explanation of the changes in the relationship between presidential and House of Representatives election results during the last century. Jeffrey M. Stonecash argues that the separation of presidential and House election results that occurred from the 1960s to 1980 was a party-driven process, with both parties seeking to change their electoral base. Republicans sought a more conservative electoral base to counter what they saw as disturbing liberal trends in the nation. Democrats sought to reduce their reliance on the South and its conservativism. Presidential and House election results changed at different rates, creating an appearance that they were unconnected, but they eventually came together. Although many saw these changes in election results as evidence of parties' decline, this study reaffirms the position of the parties as central actors in bringing about change.

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Preface

The present is confusing because we do not really understand the past.[1]

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)[2]

> 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)[3]

[1] Gregory Koger, *Filibustering: A Political History of Obstruction in the House and Senate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.
[2] Edward T. Tufte, "The Relationship between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (June 1973).
[3] 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)[4]

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

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)[6]

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.

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

[5] 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.

[6] 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.