Explaining the Vote: 1968-1996

by Patrick Reddy

Since the Eisenhower victory in 1952, writers have been looking for a partisan realignment that would finally end the Democratic era begun in 1932. However, even after big Republican wins in 1956, 1972, 1980, and 1984, the Democrats always held onto the House of Representatives and bounced back to win the White House. And Democratic presidential victories in 1976 and 1992, coupled with the party's long dominance of Congress, seemed to end any such talk of a GOP realignment. Political scientists are always looking for patterns in our elections, especially after a big victory like 1994's Republican sweep in which not a single GOP incumbent member of Congress or governor lost, but they seemed to lack a coherent theory about the politics of the last generation.

"Analysts were puzzled by the pattern that arose in the 1968 election and afterwards. Voters usually chose a Republican president along with a Democratic Congress (unlike previous realigning elections, following which the party controlling the White House also dominated Congress). In the mid-1980s, pundits began calling this pattern the 'split-level' realignment."

After the 1968 election, several political scientists collaborated on a volume entitled *Explaining the Vote*.[1] These scholars analyzed the results of that election, which turned out to be the second most important contest of this century (after 1932). What follows is an attempt at explaining elections since 1968. We find that there actually *is* a rational pattern to voting over the last 30 years; it is just something we've never quite seen before. The key to this pattern lies in the voters' desire for moderation and balance—and in the nature of our constitutional system.

The GOP Realignment

The concept of realignment was defined by V.O. Key in a classic 1955 *Journal of Politics* article entitled "A Theory of Critical Election."[2] Professor Key showed that some elections are more important than others, and that occasionally an election is produced "in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the preexisting cleavage within the electorate." Basically, in a realigning era, there is a short period of vast partisan shifts followed by a much longer period of partisan stability. These large, significant and lasting voting shifts have sometimes been called "electoral revolutions." Most observers agree that realignments happened in 1800 (Jefferson), 1828 (Jackson), 1860 (Lincoln), 1896 (McKinley and later Theodore Roosevelt), and 1932 (Franklin Roosevelt), at intervals of between 28 and 36 years. According to this sequence, the country was due for another realignment sometime in the 1960s. In 1967, Republican analyst Kevin P. Phillips prophesied an "emerging Republican majority" based in the South, the West and northern suburbia. Richard Nixon won in 1968 with heavy support in the West and suburbia, while splitting the South (once the Democrats' strongest region) with reactionary independent candidate George Wallace. Since the same areas won by Nixon and Wallace were also the fastest growing, Phillips theorized that Republicans could combine their traditional base in the northern suburbs and rural areas with Wallace's (white) conservative breakaway Democrats and Independents to form a lasting and effective national majority. This is essentially what happened at the presidential level as Republicans won five of six national elections from 1968 to 1988.

But the Republicans never completed their realignment. Until 1994, they never won more than 44% of House seats, and they never came close to winning four, five or six consecutive national elections, like the Republicans during the Civil War era or the Democrats from 1932 to 1950. Analysts were puzzled by the pattern that arose in the 1968 election and afterwards. Voters usually chose a Republican president along with a Democratic Congress (unlike previous realigning elections, following which the party controlling the White House also dominated Congress). In the mid-1980s, pundits began calling this pattern the "split-level" realignment.

With divided control of Washington came policy gridlock and much analytical confusion. If the Democrats were the majority party (after all, they held two-thirds of all local offices from 1968 to 1993), why did they have so much trouble winning the presidency? If the Republicans could win national landslides, why couldn't they translate their strength to the local level? The answers lie in the quick, sharp realignment of presidential politics in the late 1960s (particularly in the South), which slowly but eventually trickled down to the local level.

First the Presidency

There can be no doubt that Democratic presidential majorities are a thing of the past. From 1968 to 1992, Democrats lost five of seven presidential elections and averaged 43% of the national vote, with only Jimmy Carter cracking 50%. (Bill Clinton's 43% in 1992 and 49% in 1996 average out to 46%, about the same as Michael Dukakis polled in 1988. So the President has not really revived the New Deal Coalition; he has quite skillfully taken advantage of the Perot/GOP split). After Lyndon Johnson's landslide the only two times Democrats have won the White House was when they nominated previously obscure Southern "outsiders" who went out of their way to tell voters they were not

typical "liberal" Democrats. And even when these "outsider" Southern Democrats broke through, Republicans made huge Congressional gains in response, particularly in the most conservative part of the nation—the South.

Voter Ambivalence and the Partisan Split

Meanwhile, conservatives and Republicans were consistent losers in races for Congress and state legislative offices in the 1968-92 period. Even in the heyday of Ronald Reagan's popularity, Democrats controlled over 60% of all local offices. The reason for this GOP frustration in down-ballot races was the electorate's use of Democratic legislators' power as a check on Republican presidents attempting to cut popular universal programs such as Social Security and Medicare. Conversely, voters also used Republican presidents as a bulwark against too much taxing and spending by the Democratic Congress. For whatever reason, voters are ambivalent about government. They seem to want many social services but hate to pay for them. The end result of this partisan split between the executive and legislative branches has been to freeze policy for much of the last generation (Reagan's first term was an exception). Pundits may find this stalemate dull, but evidently the voters don't mind. As if to prove that voters like divided control of the federal government, immediately after those two moderate Southern Democratic Presidents took office, Republicans made huge gains in Congress. Under Carter, the Democrats lost 50 seats in the House and control of the Senate within two years. Somewhat surprisingly, but in line with this theory, Clinton almost immediately recovered his balance in 1995 when the Republicans went too far by shutting down the government over the Medicare funding dispute.

"A Multiplicity of Factions"

If all this sounds like a coincidence or an accident, it is not. In fact, the Constitution's Framers planned it almost exactly this way. James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers* that the best way to avoid tyranny was to have "a multiplicity of factions blocking each others' ambitions."[3] The "gridlock" so long decried by pundits is actually an essential function of the Constitution. In short, we have had incremental political change in this country because the Founding Fathers wanted it that way and the voters haven't seen fit to change things greatly except in times of crisis, such as war or depression. Indeed, in every mid-term election in this century except 1934, the president's party has lost seats in the House. The ironic fact is that the longer a party holds the White House, the more severe its losses in mid-term elections are.

In the 1996 election it was the voters' desire for balance and moderation that was President Clinton's best re-election plank. He ran as the brake against conservative excess, personified by House Speaker Newt Gingrich. If Bob Dole had somehow managed to spring an upset, Democrats would have won back Congress very soon because voters would have wanted to moderate the more extreme tendencies of the GOP (and these tendencies would have come out if Republicans controlled all branches of government).

Despite Dole's loss, Republicans still narrowly held the House and gained two seats in the Senate. The data indicate that the Republicans held onto the House in order to check President Clinton. A late October poll showed that by a 48%-41% margin, voters wanted a Republican Congress to "limit President Clinton's power in his second term." Fully 10% of the voters in the same poll said they were splitting their tickets for this exact reason, a share of the vote easily big enough to tip the House with this year's 51%-49% GOP margin. In fact, the Voter News Service exit poll indicated that 15% of Clinton supporters also voted Republican for Congress.

"*The 'gridlock' so long decried by pundits is actually an essential function of the Constitution. In short, we have had incremental political change in this country because the Founding Fathers wanted it that way.*"

The Foreseeable Future

Since President Clinton was re-elected, we should expect heavy GOP gains in 1998, thus strengthening the Republican opposition in Congress. Republicans will likely have veto-proof majorities in both houses, with their best chance to tilt policy sharply in their direction since the 1920s. Under this "balance of power" theory, this should augur well for Al Gore's presidential hopes in 2000. Barring a crisis that provokes another realignment, neither party will dominate all branches of government for the foreseeable future.

Endnotes:

[1] David Kovenock and James Prothro (eds.), *Explaining the Vote: Presidential Choices in the Nation and the States, 1968* (Chapel Hill, NC: Institute for Research and Social Science, 1973).

[2] V.O. Key, "A Theory of Critical Election," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1955).

[3] James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, Vol. 10.

Patrick Reddy is executive director, Golden State Research, Inc. and consultant to CNN