

Chapter 7

Postscript: The Postindustrial Party System at Middle Age

By Everett Carl Ladd

In 1998, the President of the United States, holding office at a time of unprecedented prosperity, his country ascendant globally as never before, enjoyed high job approval scores. But more than three-fifths of voters on election day said they

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disapproved of him as a person, and wanted him severely sanctioned. His presidency was crippled. Calls for his resignation or impeachment had reverberated across much of the mainstream press, and his *defenders* were left urging that Congress *censure him* for conduct unbecoming his high office. On December 19 the House of Representatives in fact returned votes in favor of two articles of impeachment. In one sense 1998 was an election year dominated by the novel, even the bizarre. Only two other presidents had been comparably indicted—Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Richard Nixon in 1974—and both of them were attempting to govern a country beset by grave crises.

Despite this, the President’s party held its own in the governorships and Senate contests in the November 3 vote, and actually gained five seats in the US House. Almost every pundit had predicted at least modest GOP gains. And while a large majority of the public condemned Clinton’s behavior, a large majority opposed his forced removal. The case could be made that many of the old rules or verities of American politics were overturned in 1998—that it was a wild, confounding year.

At the same time, though, the 1998 election setting and result were remarkably predictable and stable. All of the established features of the political realignment that had begun in the late 1960s—that I’ve called the postindustrial realignment—remained decisively in place. And the institutional structure that has shaped modern-day electioneering was not at all ruffled in the 1998 competition.

For example, whatever their missteps, the Republicans found their electoral standing after the November 3 vote strong—vastly stronger than during the New Deal and Great Society eras. It’s at least a bit ironic that the 1998 balloting was seen by Republicans and Democrats alike as a big setback for the GOP. After all, the Republicans came out of the election with a House of Representatives majority of 223

to 211, a Senate majority of 55-45, and 31 to 17 in the governorships (with one independent and one elected on the Reform party line). It was the third straight election that had given them such margins. Dan Lungren lost in California, but Republican gubernatorial candidates won all the other big states—Florida, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York—in most cases by landslide proportions. Democrats won governorships in what are now generally solid-Republican South Carolina and Alabama, but Republicans carried the day in generally solid-Democratic Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. If it’s news that Democratic incumbent Paris Glendening won by 12 percentage points in heavily Democratic Maryland, it should be even bigger news that Republican George Pataki was re-elected by a 22-point margin in heavily Democratic New York.

•Divided government, or more precisely divided-party control of government, continued to distinguish political competition. Since 1955 the two major parties have shared control of the national government in all but 7 of the 23 election cycles. The Democrats controlled at least one house of Congress during all eight of Ronald Reagan’s presidential years, and with the 1998 result the Republicans will have controlled both houses of Congress for all but two years of Bill Clinton’s presidency. (See pp. 24-25 for data on the contemporary reach of divided government.)

•In underlying loyalties, the contemporary electorate has remained evenly

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split between the two parties. No trend in party identification was, again, evident last year. Party identification distributions have fluctuated in a very narrow range over the 1990s (pp. 60-61)—and in fact since the middle of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

Social group voting patterns last year were ones entirely familiar. They have persisted over the past quarter-century and set the postindustrial party system off from its predecessors.

- In regional terms the South looks pretty solid, and increasingly so, but its solidity partakes of Republican rather than Democratic support. The Northeast, long the Republican heartland, is now the Democrats’ best region (pp. 14-18, 76-79). Labor union members have remained strongly Democratic, but in the postindustrial era they are a steadily declining share of the electorate—a political evolution that even vigorous efforts by contemporary union leadership has not slowed or reversed. In 1978, the year the first off-year exit poll was conducted, 32% of voters came from households where at least one member was a union member. In 1998, a short two decades later, only 22% of voters came from union households (p. 75). In 1998, voters split on educational background lines much as they have over the last quarter-century, but in a way vastly different from previous eras. The Democrats did best among people with the least formal education—and among those with the most.

- The postindustrial era can’t be satisfactorily described as conservative, but it has clearly seen a shift away from New Deal and Great Society liberalism. Over the last two decades, many more Americans have called themselves conservatives than liberals, and, as with party identification, the distributions have changed little in this span (p. 60). “Growing government”—using it more extensively in attempts to solve national

problems—was strongly supported in the political era preceding our own. But in 1998, as over the last two decades generally, a majority said “no” to more state involvement (pp. 48-49).

- The institutional structure in which elections and party competition are conducted has changed more drastically over the last several decades than in any previous era in the nation’s history. Television is the great engine of this change. It now provides the institutional setting in which most state and national campaigning is conducted. The need to reach the massive audiences television makes possible has created an unprecedented demand for campaign funds and forced even those aspirants reluctant to do so to hit the money trail unceasingly. Television has, moreover, sired a new political elite—those who are the doorkeepers to this domineering resource. A vast industry of media consultants, spin doctors, network pundits, and assorted TV talking heads now pretend to determine candidates’ worth and prospects, the cut of political issues, even the meaning of elections themselves. To some extent, unfortunately, these groups have in fact realized their pretense. Nothing happened in the 1998 campaign to shake the obdurate hold of television on the most vital of democratic practices, the conduct of free elections.

Again, A Vote For Continuity

So, while 1998 was a year of political sensationalism and turbulence, its underlying structure evinced great stability. Oral sex in the Oval Office distressed many Americans and discombobulated even more. But the public changed far less in its views and expectations of the office than is often assumed these days. Americans plainly did not rush to evict their president from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—but then they have never rushed to break the continuity that so distinguishes this great democratic executive.

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The buzz right after the election had it that the President’s affair with Monica Lewinsky didn’t weigh heavily on voters. The 1998 vote wasn’t a referendum on the President. We have been told that issues such as education and Social Security were what the voting public really cared about, or that, as CNN analyst William Schneider put it, “It [was] the economy, stupid.” In my assessment, though, the Clinton factor loomed large in the end, and through a curious, complex, and partially unforeseen string of circumstances wound up perhaps helping the Democrats a bit rather than demolishing them. With the benefit of perfect 20-20 hindsight, let’s reconstruct what occurred as the Clinton scandals were played out.

- Republicans were not wrong in believing that much of the public was troubled by Mr. Clinton’s conduct. According to the Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll, an extraordinarily high 61% of voters had an *unfavorable* opinion “of Bill Clinton as a person” (p. 55). One-third (53% of those backing Republican congressional candidates and 13% of

those who supported Democrats) said that the Clinton/Lewinsky matter had hurt “Bill Clinton’s ability to lead the country effectively.” Another 30% (29% of Republicans, 30% of Democrats) thought it had hurt somewhat. One-third said Congress should impeach Mr. Clinton and remove him from office (p. 55). Forty percent answered another question that he should resign from office. In all, 63% of voters last November 3 wanted the President impeached and removed from office, or his resignation, or at least his formal censure (p. 59). These exit poll findings parallel those of pre-election surveys. For example, when responses to the three questions asked in Gallup surveys about impeachment, resignation, and censure are combined, 67% favored at least one of these three actions (p. 58).

- Yet, if Clinton’s conduct gave Republicans a clear opening to move swing voters their way, they handled it poorly. For months what they said, and didn’t say, made it too easy for their opponents to portray them as intent on bringing the President down largely on the basis of his affair with a White House intern. It’s hardly surprising, then, that the public tired of hearing about the scandal and wanted to move on. Clinton’s standing and capacity for moral leadership had been badly eroded. But the Republicans failed to make the case on why they should be further entrusted to lead the country.

- The White House and Democratic congressional leadership moved quickly to seize the opportunity thus given them. “They want to investigate, we want to legislate,” became the leitmotif of the Democrats’ campaign. They didn’t diminish public distress over Clinton’s conduct, but they counter-balanced it with Republicans’ seeming vindictiveness.

- It’s easy to criticize GOP leadership for political maladroitness on the issue and to credit Democrats’ skill, but other factors were involved. The Starr Report made it hard for congressional Republicans to get the public to focus on the real

basis for a charge of constitutionally-serious presidential misconduct—which, along with perjury, includes actions in Filegate and the China connection. It was the persistence of this pattern. If the case for impeachment rested primarily on the Lewinsky affair—which is the way the Independent Counsel framed it in the report he gave the House Judiciary Committee—impeachment could fairly have been labeled an excessive and narrowly partisan response. And, House Republicans certainly would not have proceeded to vote two articles of impeachment after the election, were the Lewinsky conduct the only issue.

- Many observers criticized Republican congressional leadership for not doing a better job showing why the party should be supported electorally—based on such issues as taxes, limiting government’s reach, school choice, and Administration foreign policy failures. The criticism was well-placed. But framing the matter of impeachment largely in terms of the Lewinsky affair put a tremendous burden on the Republican congressional campaign, one that would have been hard for anyone to throw off. Lots of Republicans—running for state houses and Congress alike—in fact talked about important issues. But impeachment advanced on seemingly narrow grounds took form in voters’ minds as the centerpiece of Republican efforts. Through much of the campaign Democrats worried that a preoccupation with Clinton’s misbehavior was making it hard for them to get their “message” out. Actually, it wound up making it hard for Republicans to develop theirs.

- In the end, the Lewinsky affair focus reinforced a stereotype which the Republicans have long struggled with—that they are at least a bit mean-spirited. Nothing of the kind is suggested, of course, by focusing on such actions as permitting the Chinese to buy advanced computer technologies with military applications, or on the misuse of the FBI by bringing into the West Wing its dossiers compiled for the Bush Administration’s screening of Republican appointees.

For all the talk of negative ads and their use in campaigns, Americans for the most part want their politicians to be sunny. Ronald Reagan showed the way on this far better than any other politician of the last half-century. He exuded goodwill; he was unfailingly confident and optimistic. Republican politicians who followed this course in the past campaign—such as George Pataki in New York, John Rowland in Connecticut, and the Bush brothers in Florida and Texas, had no trouble striking a responsive chord with voters.

- The way the Clinton factor played out in the 1998 election may well have contributed more to the Democrats’ success in holding the line than did the robust US economy. It’s true that many more Americans describe their financial situation as better now than it was in the recent past. Forty-one percent of persons interviewed in the VNS exit poll said they are better off today than two years ago, only 13% that they are worse off (p. 47). Those reporting improved finances voted for House Democrats 58-40%; *while those calling their financial position worse went Republican by 57-30%*. This sounds like “It’s the economy.” But such answers in fact don’t tell us much about the impact on voting of personal economic experience. When a Democrat occupies the White House, Democratic voters are inclined to express their support by saying that their economic position has improved during his tenure. The same is true of Republicans when a member of their party is president. Voters’ professed assessment of the national economy and their own financial positions in it were dictated primarily by a desire to praise, or criticize, the incumbent Administration.

What Were Voters Thinking?

Every election year politicians and pundits try to define the mix of mood and issues that’s likely to be decisive. In Campaign ’98, though, they had a harder time than usual with this task. The country’s strong economy was obviously part of the story, and so in some

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sense was the deepening scandal surrounding President Clinton. But a dominant mood was elusive.

Looking to the position of the United States in the world, and its domestic economy, Americans were enjoying for the first time since the 1920s a prolonged period without the hint of a great crisis. The 1930s saw the Great Depression, the first half of the 1940s World War II. Then, following the war, we faced a prolonged series of conflicts and potential nuclear confrontation with the Soviet bloc. The collapse of the Soviet system nearly a decade ago left the US for the first time in history without challenge on the international scene in major power terms. There's been no indication that the public, as a result, is retreating into a kind of neo-isolationism—but we clearly welcome the break from decades of international crisis.

While it has confronted many problems since the Depression, the US economy has, overall, evinced vitality. Curiously, though, while the record is strong, the public has rarely been en-

couraged to enjoy it. In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a widespread sense, certainly in intellectual circles, that planned economies—ranging from moderate socialist varieties to the massively centralized “command economies” of communist states—held long-term advantages over America’s decentralized market system. When Nikita Krushchev boasted that “we will bury you” (under his gross national product), few Americans laughed. In the 1970s, we were bombarded by unsettling events, from oil shocks to hyperinflation. The late 1970s and 1980s saw a new version of the claim that the US economy was going down the tubes, this time focusing on the “Japanese challenge.” Harvard sociologist Ezra Vogel’s 1979 book, *Japan As Number One: Lessons for America*, gave economic alarmism wide currency here, and encouraged the view that Japan’s version of industrial policy was superior to America’s “unguided” markets.

It wasn’t until the Tokyo stock exchange crashed in 1989 that the picture of Japan as an irresistible economic force

finally began fading. Americans now find themselves for the first time in modern times with the sense that their economy’s performance is unrivaled. Industrial planning has few advocates. The shrinkage of the federal deficit has proven greatly reassuring. Inflation is nowhere to be seen, etc.

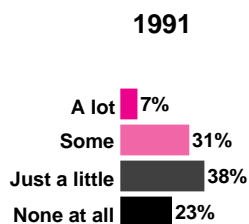
Little wonder that Americans reflect high economic satisfaction. Never mind the fact that the US economy grew faster in real terms between 1979 and 1987 (23.5%) than it did between 1989 and 1997 (18.6%). We feel better about our economy now because we are constantly told how well it’s doing.

Wanted: Relative Political Inaction

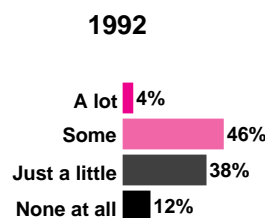
In Campaign '98, then, many Americans didn't really want to rock the boat. Relatedly, they didn't want a lot of new federal initiatives—certainly not large ones—and so were comfortable with divided government that discourages them. The modest reach of new proposals coming out of both parties accords with the public's widespread

Chart 1 Low Grades for the Feds as Problem Solvers

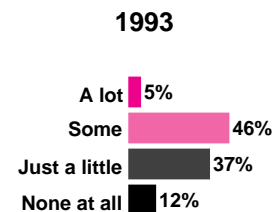
Question: When the government in Washington decides to solve a problem, how much confidence do you have that the problem actually will be solved?



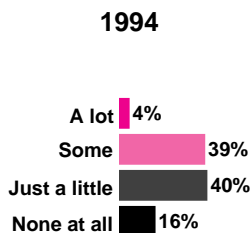
Source: Survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, October 25-29, 1991.



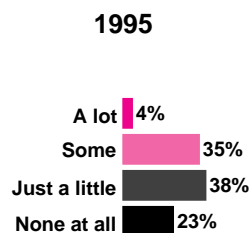
Source: Survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, April 8-9, 1992.



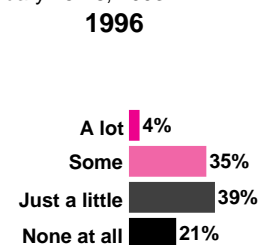
Source: Survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, February 25-28, 1993.



Source: Survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, January 20-23, 1994.



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Kaiser/Harvard/*Washington Post*, November 28-December 4, 1995.



Source: Survey by the Center for Survey Research, University of Virginia, January 27-April 14, 1996.

doubts about national government performance (Chart 1). On several different fronts much of the public thought we could now better afford to “escape politics”—which has always been America’s distinctive impulse.

Wallowing in Complacency?

Yet while we were happy to get a breather from international crises and to learn that the economy was really holding up pretty well, and relatedly content with a period of inactivity in new federal initiatives, Americans were far from satisfied in 1998. For many years now, pollsters have relied on one question measuring national mood more heavily than any other: With slight variations in the introduction, it asks respondents whether they “feel that things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or... [that] things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track.” Against the economic and foreign affairs backdrop I’ve been describing, current surveys are getting larger “right direction” responses than have been the norm in the recent past. Even so, the shift has only served to make the distributions between the two responses about even. In a study done by ABC News and the *Washington Post* January 15-19, 1998, 44% saw us moving in the right direction, 50% on the wrong track. A *Los Angeles Times* survey of January 1998 got basically the same answers: 45% thought that things in the country were generally moving well, but 44% that they were still heading the wrong way.

Most of the time polling organizations don’t follow up this question by asking respondents on what they base their judgment. But in a 1995 survey, the *Los Angeles Times* did ask those who said things are seriously off on the wrong track (55% of the total) why they thought so. Just 19% mentioned economic problems, while 50% talked about crime, family breakdown, and a weakening of religious commitments and standards. Another 29% referred to various political conduct problems, from Clinton’s personal conduct to a perceived general

absence of political leadership and vision, excessive partisanship, and ego-centric elected officials. Americans have repeatedly signaled that their principal anxieties involve the moral health and fabric of the country, not its material position.

Character Does Matter

It would have been surprising indeed if a public that sees the nation’s most pressing problems in the moral dimension intended to send a signal on the presidential scandals that “character really doesn’t matter that much.” In fact it intended no such thing. The President’s approval scores on the standard question have reflected a public happy to have a break from economic and foreign policy crises and wanting it to continue, and content with the substantive consequences of political gridlock (though not with the partisan bickering). In various regards, Americans want politics less salient, off the front burner. That’s one big reason why the duration and centrality of the president’s scandals have evoked such distress.

Still, a host of other questions show Clinton having paid a huge price for the string of charges and revelations that eroded his claim to moral leadership. We have shown many of them in this volume (pp. 55-59). A number of polling organizations have asked respondents to rate Clinton compared to his predecessors—on leadership qualities, who has done “the best job,” on ethical criteria, in terms of being viewed favorably or unfavorably as a person. With few exceptions, Clinton is ranked low if not last by these varied standards.

In April 1997, for example, respondents by better than two-to-one called Clinton’s ethical standards as president lower than those of George Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter. A plurality, though not so large a one, gave him the edge only over Richard Nixon. In a late 1995 survey, the *Washington Post* asked its national sample to rate the leadership abilities of a number of presidents—George Washington, and then most presi-

dents since FDR. At the top of the list were Washington and Roosevelt, called “outstanding” or “above average” by 78 and 71% respectively. At the bottom were Richard Nixon (30% saying outstanding or above average) and Bill Clinton, 26% (Chart 2).

A Most Peculiar Office

The American president has great visibility and practical importance in the country’s scheme of government—but also great limitations on his authority. Given separation of powers, he occupies a relatively weak institutional position, one thoroughly checked and balanced. He needs moral authority to overcome this institutional weakness and lead effectively.

Some factors that govern acquiring such authority derive from the country’s founding. Unlike most other nations that have evolved over time from shared ethnicity, the United States rests on an ideological base. The great English writer and philosopher, G. K. Chesterton, wrote of America that it “is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed... set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence....”³ When he represents these founding ideals and links them persuasively to a current course of action, the president is able to draw upon an enormous resource for leadership. The most successful presidents have been those who understood this keenly.

Pontifex Maximus

In a thoughtful essay on “The Reagan Heritage,” published in 1989, political scientist Walter Dean Burnham saw that the American system required of a president that he become the chief spokesman for the belief system on which the country is constituted. “Nor does reference to a president as ‘national cheerleader,’ or something of the sort, do more than trivialize it. The Constitution’s fusion of head-of-state and head-of-government functions in the same person creates not only an elective monarchy but a *pontifex maxi-*

Chart 2 Rating the Presidents

Question: ...[R]ate the leadership abilities of the following past present political figures... [Do] you think their leadership qualities are or were, outstanding, above average, below average, or poor...?

	Outstanding/ Above Average	Average	Below Average/ Poor
George Washington	78%	17%	2%
Franklin Roosevelt	71%	22%	3%
Harry Truman	56%	36%	3%
Dwight Eisenhower	59%	29%	6%
John F. Kennedy	71%	23%	4%
Richard Nixon	30%	32%	36%
Jimmy Carter	32%	42%	25%
Ronald Reagan	44%	37%	20%
George Bush	39%	45%	15%
Bill Clinton	26%	45%	30%

Source: Survey by *Washington Post*, October 27-30, 1995.

mus, a chief priest of the American civil religion.... When Franklin [Roosevelt]’s cousin Theodore observed that the presidency was a ‘bully pulpit,’ he perhaps spoke more precisely than he realized.” Burnham went on to describe the “exercise of the civil-religion function” as “an exceedingly important dimension of presidential power generally. “...The civil religion is linked closely to the key values of traditional American political culture: generalized but intense commitment to property, liberty, equality, and religion.”⁴

Honesty is Still the Best Policy

Integrity has long been the personal characteristic Americans most look for and value in public officials—and now seen in short supply, it is doubly valued. Integrity means not lying, of course, and respecting the rules that should govern conduct in office. But it also stipulates a kind of candor—saying what you mean and meaning what you say—that often seems absent from contemporary politics. It means taking stands that are

firmly founded, observing real limits on what one will do to win.

Americans are frustrated by the increasingly manipulative cast being given our elections. We want less vacuous sloganeering and finger-to-the-wind posturing, greater emphasis on the deep substance of leadership and policy. We understand that what matters in a candidate isn’t the image he projects but the life he lives and the moral judgments he makes; not how facilely his “handlers” craft a “message” but how clearly he sees the actions needed to fulfill the promise of American life.

In a survey taken nationally in January 1984, Yankelovich, Skelly and White presented respondents with a long list of “characteristics that might be used to describe a presidential candidate,” and asked them to rate their relative importance. Many more people named “a man you can trust” than anything else. Similarly, many more said that the candidate’s honesty is very important to them than so described any other characteristic, in

a Roper Organization survey of June 1986. Forty-three percent of registered voters in a CBS News/*New York Times* poll of April 1992 said that honesty and integrity was the single most important personal quality the next president should have; no other attribute was even close. Every time it has been asked the public has said it wants strong moral leadership from the president and that such leadership is rooted in personal integrity.

People are fooled sometimes, of course, but Americans usually make discerning judgments about their presidents. It’s not just blue smoke and mirrors. Bill Clinton has been seen as able, hardworking, and politically skilled, buttressing his presidency; but also as lacking integrity, eroding it. Back in 1988, Louis Harris and Associates conducted a poll in which people were asked to assess the last nine presidents [back to FDR] on a number of different dimensions. Respondents answered that Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan were best on domestic matters, that FDR, Kennedy, and Reagan most inspired

Chart 3
Americans Rate Their Presidents
in percent

	FDR	HST	DDE	JFK	LBJ	RMN	GRF	JEC	RWR
Best on domestic affairs	22	6	4	24	6	3	2	7	17
Best in foreign affairs	8	4	5	16	1	26	2	4	23
Least able to get things done	1	2	3	2	6	13	15	46	6
Most inspired confidence	19	7	7	34	1	2	1	2	21
Set the lowest moral standards	1	2	1	9	6	48	2	13	8
Likely to be viewed by history as best overall	27	11	5	28	1	2	1	1	17

Question: I'd like to ask you about the last nine presidents of the United States. Please keep in mind Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan. If you had to choose one, which president do you think... was best on domestic affairs... was best in foreign affairs... was least able to get things done... most inspired confidence in the White House... Sample size was 1,252.

Source: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, November 11-24, 1988.

confidence, and that Nixon and Reagan had the best records on foreign affairs (Chart 3). I wouldn't argue with any of these judgments. That Richard Nixon, so much in disgrace, would get the highest percentage calling him "best in foreign affairs" shows a public able to make complex judgments about presidents, rather than assigning them to two bins labeled good and bad.

Americans have said plainly that they want their political leaders—their presidents in particular—to honor established national values and represent them effectively, and to conduct themselves with integrity. Candidates for president in election 2000 can't be sure that a campaign thus designed and directed will bring them victory, of course,

but they have reason to be confident about its soundness. The old verities are still likely to be the best politics going into the new century.

Endnotes

¹ I've discussed many of the distinguishing features of the social group alignment of the postindustrial party system in preceding books and articles. See, for example, *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s*, Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978); *Where Have All the Voters Gone? The Fracturing of America's Political Parties*, Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982); "The Brittle Mandate: Electoral Dealignment and the 1980 Presidential Election," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1981, pp. 1-25; "On Mandates, Realignments, and the 1984 Presidential Election,"

Political Science Quarterly, Spring 1985, pp. 1-25; "The 1988 Elections: Continuation of the Post-New Deal System," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1989, pp. 1-18; "The 1992 Vote for President Clinton: Another Brittle Mandate?," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1993, pp. 1-28; "The 1994 Congressional Elections: The Realignment Continues," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1995, pp. 1-23; and "1996 Vote: The 'No Majority' Realignment Continues," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1997, pp. 1-28.

² Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan As Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

³ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1968; first published 1922), p. 7.

⁴ Walter Dean Burnham, "The Reagan heritage," in Gerald M. Pomper, ed., *The Election of 1988* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1989), pp. 6-7.

