

STALEMATE

The “great” election of 2000



There have been a lot of words used to describe the 2000 election, but one rarely heard is the word “great.”

Yet roughly once every 30 years or so—appearing much like Brigadoon—there have been “great” elections that have defined the political landscape for the next generation. They have been watershed contests, like that of 1860 which first ushered the Republicans into national power; that of 1896 which cemented the ascendancy of urban over rural America; that of 1932 which launched the Democrats’ activist “New Deal;” and that of 1968, which formally saw the arrival of a Republican South.

Rhodes Cook is the author of a number of election-related books, including “America Votes.” He also hosts the political website, www.rhodescook.com.

Calendarwise, it is about time for another “great” election. Yet if this turns out to be one, it will be for a much different reason than those of the past. Rather than providing a sharp partisan redirection, this election will be remembered for the opposite reason: its very closeness—not just in the race for president, but in those for the Senate and the House of Representatives as well. It is an election that may have propelled us into a political era unseen for more than a century, where neither party has more than a tenuous grip on either end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

But dramatic as it is, there has been a dispiriting tone thus far to this new era. Nearly two centuries ago, there was a brief period in American history known as the “Era of Good Feelings,” largely because there was only one political party. What we have now is quite the opposite, an “Era of Ill Feelings,” if you would, where razor-thin margins have heightened partisan anxiety and bitterness.

It is an era that did not arrive overnight. This is the third straight presidential election that has been won without a majority of the popular vote. And it is likely that when all the ballots are counted, this will also be the third straight election in which neither party has won a majority of the votes cast for the House of Representatives.

Whether this will be the state of national politics for the foreseeable future remains to be seen. The upcoming round of congressional redistricting could decisively tip the partisan balance in the House. The health of aging members of the Senate could have a pivotal impact on which party controls the nation’s upper chamber in the immediate future. And the recent candidacies of Ross Perot and Ralph Nader have shown the ability of third parties to affect dramatically the outcome of presidential elections.

But there is no doubt that the election of 2000 has become an instant classic because of its almost impossible-to-resolve closeness.

The popular vote for president is the closest since 1960, when John F. Kennedy defeated Richard M. Nixon by a margin of less than 120,000 votes out of nearly 69 million cast.

The electoral vote for president is the closest since 1876, when Rutherford B. Hayes defeated Samuel J. Tilden by a margin of just one electoral vote. This time, President-elect George W. Bush won by 4 votes, 271 to 267 (assuming there are no “faithless” electors).

And there is little doubt that Bush’s Electoral College victory flies in the face of a popular vote win for Vice President Al Gore, the first time there are different popular and electoral vote winners in a presidential election since 1888.

The bizarre closeness of the results is equally evident at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. The Senate breakdown of 50-50 is the first partisan tie in the Senate since the election of 1880.

And the House breakdown of 221-212 (with two independents) is the closest disparity in Republican and Democratic ranks since the election of 1952.

Why were the results so close?

At the presidential level, there were strongly conflicting tides that, at the end, virtually cancelled each other out. Gore was boosted by the nation’s prosperity and high performance ratings for the Clinton administration, of which he was a part, factors borne out in presidential election models that were virtually unanimous in predicting a comfortable Gore victory.

Propelling Bush were Bill Clinton’s low personal ratings, a sentiment for change that often begins to work against the incumbent party at the eight-year mark, and a liberal third-party candidate in Ralph Nader, who posed a much greater problem for Gore than conservative Patrick J. Buchanan did for Bush.

The presidential race also pitted two conflicting political eras against each other—a short-term Democratic period that twice elected Clinton in the 1990s, and a longer-term Republican era that gave the GOP victory in five of the six previous presidential elections.

In the House, Democrats had been inching back to a position of near parity since their loss of congressional control in 1994. And much of the closeness in this year’s House voting was due to the lack of competition, which kept partisan change to a minimum.

While 435 seats were at stake, the playing field was really barely one-tenth that size. Well-heeled incumbents and the lack of galvanizing issues or presidential coattails all proved to be powerful forces promoting the status quo and deterring significant competition in most districts.

In short, barring an unexpected turn of events, neither party was going to win by much. And in the end, only 18 House seats changed party hands (pending a switch or two through late recounts)—10 going to the Democrats, eight to the Republicans—for a net Democratic gain of two. Most of the switches came in the open seats, as only six incumbents were beaten, producing an incumbent re-election rate that approached 98%.

In the Senate, Republicans had more seats to defend (19, versus 15 Democratic), and that was reflected in the final results. The Democrats registered a net gain of four seats, picking off some of the more vulnerable

members of the large GOP class of 1994—Rod Grams of Minnesota, Spencer Abraham of Michigan and John Ashcroft of Missouri, who, in one of the more bizarre results of a bizarre election, lost to the state’s late governor, Mel Carnahan.

Each party lost at least one veteran incumbent: the Democrats, Virginia’s Charles S. Robb; the Republicans, Delaware’s William V. Roth, Jr. and Washington’s Slade Gorton.

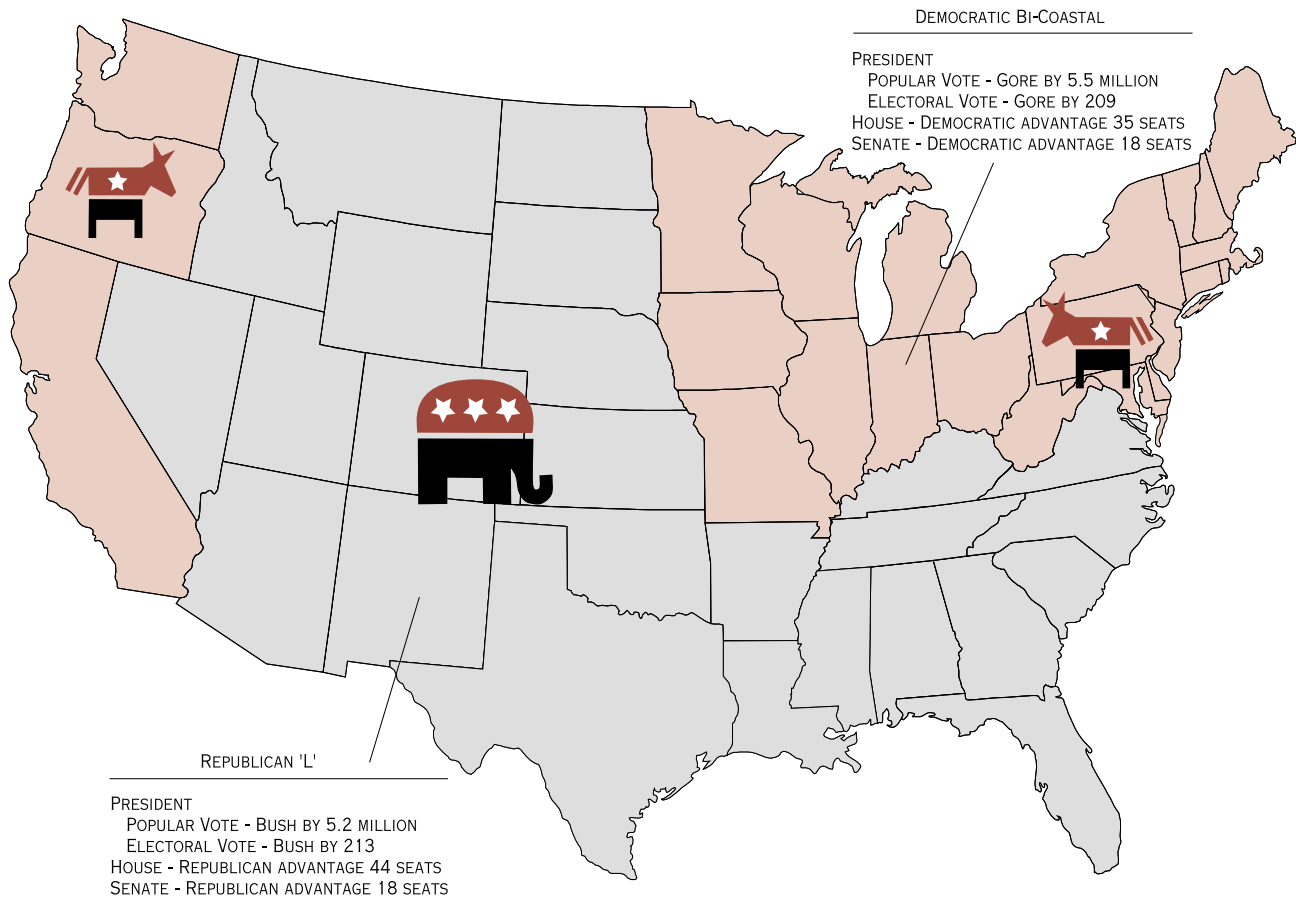
And the parties traded open seats: Democrats gained one in Florida; the Republicans picked up one in Nevada.

(Even with a 50-50 tie, though, Republicans are guaranteed control of the Senate after January 20. Bush’s vice president, Richard B. Cheney, will cast the chamber’s tie-breaking vote.)

When the chad from the ballots had finally settled, the national vote was razor-close but highly fractured.

Exit polls showed that men favored Bush, women favored Gore; whites preferred Bush, non-whites preferred Gore; the more affluent voted strongly for Bush, the less affluent heavily favored Gore; rural and small-town America went for Bush, urban America for Gore.

The geographical diversity of the presidential vote was colorfully evident in a map published in *USA Today* two days after the November 7 election. Counties carried by Bush were colored in red. Those carried by Gore were colored in blue. And while Gore’s counties were clustered in several parts of the country, the bulk of the map was a sea of red. On quick inspection, it was not difficult to plot a cross-country trip from the outskirts of Washington, DC, to the outskirts of Los Angeles without passing through a single county carried by Gore.



But a more intriguing aspect of the election was how it essentially divided the nation into distinct halves—a Republican-oriented “L-shaped” sector that includes the South, the Plains and the Mountain states plus Alaska; and a Democratic-oriented, bicoastal-industrial heartland sector that includes the Northeast and the industrial Midwest and skips westward across the “L” to encompass the Pacific Coast states plus Hawaii.

The “L” is much more rural and geographically expansive, though it does include the heart of the fast-growing Sun Belt. It comprises 26 states with 223 electoral votes. The bicoastal-industrial midland sector is more urban. It includes 24 states and the District of Columbia, with 315 electoral votes.

This alignment has been in the making in presidential elections for several decades. From 1968 through 1988, Republicans frequently

won the White House by dominating the “L” so conclusively that they were free to roam at will for votes in the Democrats’ domain. But in the 1990s, Clinton reversed the equation, showing such strong appeal in the bicoastal-industrial midlands that he was free to make forays into the “L,” ultimately making the Republican base look like a piece of Swiss cheese.

For many years, the disparity between the two sectors was merely a phenomenon of presidential elections, since Democrats dominated congressional voting across the country. That changed, though, in 1994, when the tidal wave that swept the GOP into control on Capitol Hill came rolling out of the “L.”

In 1996, Republicans won the presidential and congressional voting within the “L” (albeit the former quite narrowly), while Democrats had the edge

in presidential and congressional voting outside the “L” (with the advantage quite large in the balloting for the White House).

But it was the 2000 election that marked a full coming of age for this “tale of two nations.” The “L” was decisively Republican; the rest of the country decisively Democratic:

- Giving Florida to Bush, the Texas governor swept all but one state in the “L” (trailing only in New Mexico). Gore won 19 of 24 states in the bicoastal-industrial midlands.
- Bush enjoyed a huge 218 to 5 electoral-vote lead in the Republican sector of the country. Gore posted a 262 to 53 advantage in the Democratic sector.
- Bush won the South, Plains states and Mountain West by 5.2 million votes in the nearly complete tally of the

popular vote. Gore won the Northeast, industrial Midwest and Pacific West by 5.5 million votes.

- Republicans won 44 more House seats within the “L” than the Democrats (107 to 63, with one independent). Democrats won 35 more House seats than the Republicans in the rest of the country (149 to 114, with one independent).
- Republicans hold 18 more Senate seats than the Democrats (35 to 17) in the “L.” Elsewhere, Democrats hold 18 more Senate seats than the Republicans (33 to 15).

Add the two sectors together, and you get roughly a dead heat in balloting for the federal executive and legislative branches.

In this first election of the new millennium, each party essentially dug in and milked its base. For Republicans, the cornerstone of the “L” is the South, followed by the Mountain West.

The South—the 11 states of the old Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma—is now the epicenter of the national Republican Party, much as it was once for the Democrats. Bush carried the region by more than 3.6 million votes on November 7 and swept every state, including Gore’s home state of Tennessee and Clinton’s home state of Arkansas.

The GOP holds 26 more House seats across the South than the Democrats and eight more Senate seats. Many of the Republicans’ top leaders on Capitol Hill are from Dixie, including Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi and House Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas.

While much smaller in population, the Mountain West is every bit as

Republican as the South. Bush’s three top states percentage-wise were in the Rocky Mountain region—Wyoming (where he drew 69% of the vote), Idaho (68%) and Utah (67%)—and he outpolled Gore by one million votes in the region as a whole.

At the congressional level, GOP hegemony in the Mountain states (including Alaska) is almost monolithic. Republicans hold 13 more House seats in this region than the Democrats and a dozen more Senate seats.

Meanwhile, the two basic building blocks of the Democrats’ bicoastal-industrial midlands sector are roughly 2,500 miles apart—the states of the “Amtrak Corridor” and the Pacific West.

The “Amtrak Corridor” runs from Washington, DC, to Boston, and encompasses eight states and the District of Columbia. Gore not only swept them all by a combined margin of 3.7 million votes, but the “Corridor” was also the site of his top three states nationally—Rhode Island (where he polled 61% of the vote), New York and Massachusetts (each won by Gore with 60%), plus the District of Columbia (which he won with 85%).

The “Corridor” has also been vital to Democrats at the congressional level, providing them with 18 more House seats and 10 more Senate seats than the Republicans, including the one in New York just won by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Yet it was returns from the Pacific West late on election night that enabled Gore to pull ahead in the popular vote count and the Democrats to pull closer to parity in the House. Gore swept the quartet of Pacific Coast states (California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii) by 1.5 million votes, while the Democratic advantage in House seats

in this part of the country grew to 20, with a gain of a half-dozen seats in this election alone. In the Senate, the Democratic edge stands at six seats in the Pacific West.

But even as closely divided as the nation was in this election, the political map is constantly evolving. Although socially conservative, West Virginia went for Bush—the first time since the New Deal that the state voted Republican for president other than in GOP landslide years. On the other hand, the presidential vote in Florida was nip and tuck, even though Republicans had carried the state in nine of the 12 previous elections since 1952, including the two in which Bush’s father headed the GOP ticket.

There is no doubt that the election of 2000 was one of a kind. Whether it will be remembered as “great” will be for history to judge. The length of the current “Era of Ill Feelings,” however, should be quicker to ascertain.

The original “Era of Good Feelings” was quickly followed by a brand of politics that was entirely different—a highly partisan era dominated by Andrew Jackson, whose encouragement of grass-roots participation made it a Democratic era with both a large and a small “d.”

With Republicans winning the White House, in spite of a loss in the popular vote, they can hope that this is the start of a Republican era, with both a large and a small “r.”

But if history does repeat itself, this “Era of Ill Feelings” will be followed by a period of less partisanship, with a more civil, bipartisan mode of governing. At this point, though, one can only hope that will happen. ●