

DIVIDED WE STAND

By W. Wayne Shannon

On the eve of the 1990 elections an unpracticed observer might have supposed that the Washington landscape was about to be massively rearranged. Virtually every survey found voters "mad as hell." Story after story reported record levels of dissatisfaction with congressional incumbents. As many as 70% of respondents pronounced themselves in favor of limiting congressional terms. Reacting to the sour denouement of the battle over the federal budget (which dragged on for seemingly endless months), voters were quoted to the effect that "these guys can't lace their own shoes."

Few, if any, practiced observers of American elections expected any such outcome, however, and it turned out they were right. The elections of 1990 changed the composition of Congress hardly at all. In the House 391 of 406 incumbents running for re-election were returned. In these races the victories of 15 challengers yielded a net Democratic gain of 3 seats. (One other incumbent, Donald E. "Buz" Lukens, was earlier defeated in an Ohio Republican primary.) In the 29 open seat races Democrats picked up another 6 seats for an overall gain of 9 in the House. In the Senate races only one incumbent, Rudy Boschwitz (R, MN) met defeat, and none of the three open seats switched parties; the overall result, a Democratic gain of a single seat. As most election experts had anticipated, incumbents did remarkably well.

What happened to all of that anger? Some of it, of course, was no more than media hype, but a good deal of it was undoubtedly genuine. We see it in incumbents' reduced electoral margins. In 1990, House incumbents with major party opponents saw their margin of victory decline about 5% on average. The average Republican incumbent's decline at 8% was more than double that of the average Democrat's at 3%. Roughly a fifth of the House incumbents this year won by less than 60%, making them "marginals" (electorally unsafe) by one common criterion used in the congressional elections literature. But, before too much is made of this, we should understand that their numbers increased only 6% over those elected in 1988, a record year for big electoral margins. We can put this in perspective by remembering that this same group amounted to nearly half of all the House incumbents re-elected in 1960. A handful of Senate incumbents' margins fell sharply (some quite a bit more than Boschwitz's, whose 8% fall was fatal given his "marginal" status in his last election), but the overall drop for Senate incumbents was only 1%. Again, Republican incumbents fared worse than the Democrats. While they dropped off 6% on the average, the Democrats actually

went up by 4%. No reasonable interpretation could summarize all of this as "incumbent slaughter."

Split Party Government: An American Innovation

The reason why that is so is rooted in basic features of our current electoral system. The essence of this system is what we have come to call divided government. The term is problematic because it is easily confused with the basic architectural principles of the American Constitution—separation of powers and checks and balances. Perhaps we would do better to call it partisan duality or split party government. At any rate, the normal condition today is a Republican presidency and a Democratic Congress. The GOP, of course, has won five of the last six presidential elections. Congressional elections, however, have in recent years developed a dynamic of their own—and have produced a normally Democratic Congress. The House of Representatives is, if anything, now more Democratic than the presidency is Republican; it has been continuously controlled by Democratic majorities since the election of 1954. No other country has anything resembling this American innovation.

Governance in Washington under this system has become an odd kind of coalitional affair for which we still lack an adequate theory. Split-partisan government clearly underlay the budget imbroglio of 1990—but at the same time made fixing responsibility for it all but impossible. Voters were surely in a surly mood on November 6, but who were they going to blame? The president for breaking his promise of "no new taxes?" Congressional Democrats for excessive spending? Both, for being so stubborn? It was never to be expected that voters, however "fed up with Washington," would be able to focus their anger in the congressional elections. After all, they had put the warring parties in their respective presidential and congressional camps in the first place. The best they could do was excoriate incumbents in general—oddly enough, a group that they would then proceed to send back to Washington en masse.

Incumbents Regnant

The best reason why close observers of the system knew there would be no slaughter of House incumbents on November 6 is their understanding of incumbents' formidable advantages. Incumbents' re-election rates in House races have been high for many years; only once since 1964 (in 1974, after Watergate) have they fallen below 90%. Since 1984, however, they have reached a new plateau above 95%. This year's rate of 96% clearly continues this pattern. Senate incumbents' rates of return vary much more from election to election, largely as a function of which states have Senate races in a given year, and the ability of strong challengers to make personal and issue-

based attacks on them. Nevertheless, it was clear to those paying attention to this year's races that few incumbents were in trouble. The resulting return rate of 97% in Senate races was the highest since WWII—probably a fluke.

The immense advantage of House incumbents is by contrast a systemic feature of the current electoral order. Congressional specialists disagree on the precise causation of this phenomenon, but all see it deeply rooted. Most of them think it has to do with a combination of what are now huge campaign spending advantages, the use of free mailings, lavish travel budgets and office staffs assigned to casework in the districts, and artful projection by incumbents of the impression that they are effective "district servants." Given such boons, strong challengers are hard to find, and when they come forth seldom succeed.

Divided Judgments and Expectations

A good deal of the House incumbents' insulation from electoral vulnerability seems to have to do with the way voters see them as individuals. It is Congress as a whole or "the Washington system" that is thought to be the problem. Another way to put this is that voters do not see their representatives in the same kind of partisan and issue-oriented perspectives that they bring to bear on presidential (and sometimes senatorial) races. As long as this is so, anger like that expressed in the polls in 1990 cannot be effectively focused on them.

Presidential and House races in the current electoral order are literally about different things. There is every reason to believe that members understand this—in fact, that they have created this level of electoral disaggregation and do everything they can to perpetuate it. My own congressman is typical. His mailings seldom identify his party (Democratic). We learn from them that he is "one of us," a local boy who still lives on the "family farm" and that he always puts "our community first" in his activities in Washington. There is little about his ideological orientation or his views on presidential policy positions. This year he sent out various-sized magnetic name stickers for attachment to anything from automobiles to refrigerator doors. He is, like most current House incumbents, personally well liked.

One Third of the Districts Split Their Votes

The end product of divided government may be seen in Table 1, which shows "split" and "straight party" congressional districts in the last presidential election. In all, voters in more than a third of the nation's congressional districts split their ballots—producing majorities for a president of one party and a representative of the other. Most of this was Republican Bush/Democratic House candidate splitting—in 27% of the northern dis-

tricts and an extraordinary 53% in the South. Here we see what frustrates both parties in the current electoral order. The presidency is hard for Democrats to win. Dukakis carried only 138 congressional districts of the 435, and only 17 in the South! But Congress is hard for Republican to win. George Bush would enjoy a better than a two-to-one majority in the House if Republican candidates had managed to carry the districts he carried in 1988.

The reasons why the split partisan system endures are still not wholly evident. We know that the weakening of political parties at all levels is the general underlying cause of this condition. There were only 10 split districts in the whole country in 1900, and 11 in 1920. There were only 50 in 1932. The current incidence is the result of ticket splitting by roughly a third of the voters who choose to vote for presidential, senatorial and House candidates in districts where all are on the ticket in a presidential year. But here, disagreement on the precise causation of divided government begins.

Many analysts have sought to explain the phenomenon entirely in terms of incumbent advantage. That is the current Republican line. In this understanding, the answer is term limitation and, as we have seen, it has considerable popular appeal. Another theory—"cognitive Madisonianism"—holds that voters (at least somewhat) consciously split their presidential and congressional choices so as to produce divided government. According to this explanation, American voters like checked and balanced government so much that they want to have both parties in office at once. A third explanation is that Republicans seem to voters to be better at managing the nation, but that Democrats do a better job of promising particularistic benefits and thus run better congressional campaigns. Unfortunately, survey evidence is not sufficient to decide among these arguments. We have not yet succeeded in understanding just what goes on in voters' minds when they choose to vote, say, in Georgia for Ronald Reagan, Wyche Fowler (Senate), and Ed Jenkins (House) at the same time.

The incumbent argument alone, as Gary Jacobson and others have pointed out, is not sufficient to explain why Republicans cannot carry the Bush/Democratic districts shown in Table 1. Before they rush to the term limitation panacea with all of its possible unintended consequences, Republicans ought to note that they could have gained majorities by now in both Houses, if they had done better in open seat races. Their failure to do so was again apparent in 1990. While the Democrats picked up 6 of their open seats in the House, the Republicans could not take a single Democratic open seat! In fact, they did better against Democratic incumbents, six of whom they actually defeated. Since substantial majorities of both Houses now consist of people elected since Ronald

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Reagan won the presidency, common sense alone ought to make anyone suspicious that term limitation will accomplish a congressional realignment for the Republicans. Voters could limit incumbents' terms in the flick of a lever—but they don't.

The "cognitive Madisonian" explanation is also suspect on many grounds. True, as long as they have been asked by pollsters what they think of having divided government (the questions go back as far as 1944), they tend to say it will work out or that they actually think it is a good idea. But that does not mean that they consciously create it in the voting booth. To do so would require levels of information and abstract cognition that few voters manifest. We ought also to ask why voters suddenly decided to create split partisan government in 1968, and why they so consistently chose unified partisan government before that time.

The third explanation—that voters want the GOP to manage the country and the Democrats to provide ser-

vices—also seems suspect. Before we accept it, as Gary Jacobson does at the end of his recent book, *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government*, we ought to find some direct survey evidence that it is a real objective in voters' minds. So far the evidence is entirely circumstantial.

Do voters really want divided government? They produce it, to be sure, but do they really want it? Why is it, then, that they profess disgust with the partisan wrangling that it creates? This is one of the most interesting questions facing students of American government.

My own worry is that the 1990 congressional elections have shown again how hopelessly boxed in by the current electoral order the electorate has become. What could be more silly than blaming incumbents in general, and sending them all back with a mandate to pass a term limitation amendment? But that's where we are. The present system simply does not provide an effective link between citizens and the Washington community. It produces more partisan conflict than we want—and no way of resolving it.

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Table 1
"SPLIT" AND "STRAIGHT PARTY" CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS
1988 ELECTIONS

116 Southern Districts				319 Non-Southern Districts			
Split		Straight		Split		Straight	
62 (53%)		54 (47%)		86 (27%)		233 (73%)	
Bush/Dem.	Dukakis/Rep.	Rep.	Dem.	Bush/Dem.	Dukakis/Rep.	Rep.	Dem.
61	1	38	16	74	12	124	109

Note: A district is classified as "split" if it votes for the presidential candidate of one party and the House of Representatives candidate of the other party; "straight" if it votes for both candidates of the same party.