

The American Electorate Is Discriminating, Not Disengaged

By Rhodes Cook

A former White House intern named Monica Lewinsky has done what President Clinton and congressional Republicans in recent years have had trouble doing: rivet attention on the national political stage.

Through the 1990s, voter interest in Washington has been erratic, certainly as measured by voter participation in federal elections. The presidential election of 1992 that sent Democrat Bill Clinton to the White House produced the highest turnout rate in 20 years (55% of the voting-age population). The election two years later that gave Republicans control of Congress had the second-highest turnout rate for any midterm contest in nearly a quarter-century (37%). But bracketing them were the congressional elections of 1990 and the presidential election of 1996, which were largely status quo events that registered the lowest turnout rates for elections of their type in a generation.

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Explaining Low Turnout

Reasons for low turnouts are not hard to find. Much has been written about the declining relevance of the federal government in an era when there is the sense of peace and prosperity, and when calls for government downsizing almost always carry the day. There is also plenty of evidence that voter distrust, even disdain, for their political leaders in Washington is as widespread as ever.

Yet the upturns in voter participation in 1992, and again in 1994, belie the image of an electorate that is consistently turned off and tuned out. It might be more accurate to say that voters have been engaged when they have felt there is something to be engaged about. And they have shown a level of independent-mindedness that has produced a series of elections in the 1990s that have been downright historic.

In 1992, voters elected the first Democratic president since the 1970s. In 1994, they elected the first Republican Congress since the 1950s. In 1996, they re-elected the combination of a Democratic president and a Republican Congress for the first time ever. The combination—unusual in the nation’s history—had existed only four times previously and then at isolated intervals.

But voters in recent years have also given hints that they have put both major parties on probation. The 1996 elections left neither with much of a mandate. President Clinton was re-elected with just 49% of the popular vote, which after his victorious 43% showing in 1992, made him the first president since Woodrow Wilson (1913-21) to win two terms without ever achieving a majority of the popular vote. Yet at the same time, Republicans captured only 49% of the nationwide vote for the House of Representatives as they reclaimed both chambers of Congress.

Meanwhile, voters have shown an increased willingness to consider alternatives outside the two-party system. Already in the 1990s, Alaska, Connecticut, and Maine have elected governors who ran as independent or third-party candidates. And in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996, the aggregate vote for independent/third-party candidates reached 10% for the first time in back-to-back elections since the eve of the Civil War—a volatile political era when one major party was dying (the Whigs) and another was coming into being (the Republicans).

No one is predicting that so dramatic an upheaval is under way these days. But it is clear that the 1990s is drawing to a close with the political landscape looking far different than it did a decade ago. Then, the country was deep into an era of Republican presidents and Democratic Congresses. Each dominated their own level, to the extent that in 1988, GOP presidential candidate George Bush swept both the popular and electoral vote in every region of the country at the same time that Democrats were winning a majority of the House vote and congressional seats in every region.

A Tale of Two Countries

But the 1988 election marked an end to, or at least an interruption in, America’s “golden age of ticket splitting.” By 1996, presidential and congressional voting had dovetailed in a distinctive manner that produced what might be described as a “tale of two countries.”

Voting one way was a sprawling, 26-state sector (including Alaska) that on a map resembles the letter “L.” It is the Republican heartland, a combina-

tion of the party's new stronghold in the South with its more traditional bastions in the Plains (Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas) and Rocky Mountain states. In 1996, this half of the country favored GOP presidential candidate Bob Dole by a little and Republican congressional candidates by a lot.

Voting strongly the other way, though, was the other half of the country, a bicoastal-industrial midlands combination of the Northeast, Midwest and Pacific coast states that went decisively in 1996 for both President Clinton and Democratic congressional candidates.

How stark was the difference in the voting behavior between these two parts of the country?

Dole won the Republican "L" by a popular-vote plurality of roughly 650,000 votes and a ratio of nearly 2 to 1 in electoral votes (147 to 76), while Clinton won the rest of the country by nearly 9 million votes and a nearly unanimous 303 to 12 tally in the Electoral College. In congressional voting, Republicans won 51 more House seats than Democrats in the "L" (111 to 60). Democrats won 31 more House seats than Republicans elsewhere (147 to 116), with the last seat going to Independent Bernard Sanders of Vermont.

Not only were the results from these two sectors sharply at odds, but the geographical alignment evident in the presidential and congressional voting in 1996 was unique. For a century after the Civil War, the South was the backbone of the Democratic Party; now it is clearly the Republicans' best region. Nearly two-thirds of the GOP's electoral votes in 1996 and more than one-third of its House seats were won in the South.

Meanwhile, the Northeast, long a Republican redoubt, has swung nearly as solidly to the Democrats. In both 1992 and 1996, Clinton swept all 12 states in the Northeast (which included Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia and the District of Columbia for the purposes of this discussion). And it is the one region of the country where Democrats hold more House seats than Republicans.

So, say what you will about the electorate in the 1990s—fickle, cynical, unrooted—it also has been increasingly congruent, at least in terms of the district-by-district voting for president and Congress.

Elections in the 1990s have seen the lowest levels of this form of ticket-splitting in a generation. In 1992, fewer than one-fourth of the nation's 435 congressional districts voted for a president of one party and a House candidate of another, the lowest rate of ticket-splitting since 1952. In 1996, barely one-fourth of the districts produced split results, the second-lowest rate since 1952. And sandwiched in between was the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, fueled in large part by the

ability of GOP congressional candidates to finally win dozens of districts that for years had been voting for Republican presidential candidates but electing Democrats to Congress.

Much of the increased congruency between presidential and congressional voting in the 1990s has been due to the increasing Republicanization of the South, a top-down realignment of the region that has reached tidal wave proportions during the Clinton years. When President Reagan scored his landslide re-election victory in 1984, for example, more than 70 Southern districts voted Republican for president, Democrat for House. In 1996, only 14 such districts were left across Dixie and the number could fall even lower in the years ahead.

Ticket Splitters Move North

In the process, the South has been displaced by the Northeast as the prime venue for ticket-splitting. In New York state, for instance, President Clinton swept all 31 congressional districts in the 1996 presidential voting. But moderate-sounding Republican House candidates were winners in 13 New York districts, from Michael P. Forbes on Long Island's eastern tip to Bill Paxon in suburban Buffalo. In no other state in 1996, even California, were there so many districts that voted for a president of one party and a House candidate of the other.

Yet while the electorate has become more congruent in voting for federal office, it has also appeared to be increasingly untethered. For decades now, polls have noted the decline in partisan identification, and it is not unusual to see the national electorate described these days as being roughly one-third Democratic, one-third Republican, and one-third Independent.

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That new dynamic has been reflected in recent elections. With each party's base of hard-core supporters dwindling, and the pool of self-described independents growing, wide swings in voter sentiment have not been unusual. Republicans lost nearly 10 million votes between the presidential elections of 1988 and 1992, the largest fall off in the party's history. But Republican House candidates gained nearly 9 million votes between the midterm elections of 1990 and 1994, the largest midterm-to-midterm increase ever posted.

Thinking About the Political Process

Keeping Voter's Attention

Nor has political volatility in the 1990s been limited to partisan vote swings. There have also been significant ups and downs in turnout from one election to another that have been far more dramatic than occurred in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Then, the rate of voter participation was on a steady decline, interrupted only by a brief surge in turnout for the midterm election of 1982 (that was held against the backdrop of recession) and a small uptick in voting for the presidential election of 1984.

The 1990s began with a continuation of that downward trend, as less than one-third of the voting-age population cast votes in the congressional elections of 1990. It was the lowest turnout rate for a midterm election since the midst of World War II.

But just when it appeared that an impenetrable layer of apathy and alienation had encased the electorate, turnout in 1992 surged. The youthful Democratic ticket of Bill Clinton and Al Gore sparked interest. So did the energetic independent candidacy of Texas billionaire Ross Perot. And the widespread perception of recession fueled voter antipathy toward the Bush administration. For the first time in the nation's history,

more than 100 million ballots were cast in a presidential election, and the turnout rate jumped to the highest level in 20 years.

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trol of both houses of Congress for the first time in four decades. More than 70 million ballots were cast that year, the most ever for a midterm election.

Voters continued to closely watch politics in Washington for a time. But once the Republican Revolution fizzled, Clinton rebounded and it became clear that the 1996 election would not be a high-stakes political Armageddon between the Democrats and Republicans,

voters' eyes tended to glaze over. In November 1996, less than half the voting-age population cast ballots in a presidential election for the first time since the 1920s.

Yet even in 1996, there were signs that when voters saw something of interest, they responded. The number of ballots cast in the first-in-the-nation Republican presidential primary in New Hampshire that February was 20% higher than the previous record set four years earlier. And turnout for the decisive Republican primary in South Carolina, which cleared the way for Dole's nomination, was fully 40% higher than for any previous GOP presidential primary in that state.

Clearly, the electorate these days is less rooted in partisan loyalty than ever before. Arguably, it is jaded, well-experienced by now with the foibles of politicians and the limitations of government. But it is not a disengaged electorate. Rather, one might say it is discriminating. Just as voters seem willing to separate President Clinton's alleged peccadillos from this ability to govern, so too do they seem willing to draw distinctions between elections—participating in large numbers in those they regard as meaningful, and voting in smaller numbers in those they do not.



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