

ELECTIONEERING

A Comparative Study
of Continuity and Change

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The Impact of Electioneering in the United States

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If elections in the rest of the world are becoming 'Americanized', then what is happening in America? The last forty years have seen a variety of notable changes in campaign technology, the role of political parties, and other important features of the electoral process. I shall attempt to distinguish between temporary changes associated with a specific set of historical events—in particular, with what Burnham¹ has referred to somewhat melodramatically as 'the cosmic smash-ups of the late 1960s'—and more permanent structural changes in the American electoral system.

Uncritical observers have, I believe, been too facile in seizing upon and extrapolating from the most salient electoral changes of the last generation. As a result, they have produced a caricature of contemporary American electoral politics—a colourful but sometimes misleading portrait of its current state and likely future prospects. In this essay, I draw upon events of the last forty years in attempting to clarify what is temporary and what is permanent, what is important and what is superficial in recent American electoral politics. The resulting picture features relatively more emphasis on underlying elements of stability than is currently fashionable, and more modest agnosticism concerning the political implications of the real and important changes that define the new American prototype.

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Candidate Selection

Over and above the numerous elections prescribed by the law, which were quite enough to bewilder the citizen, there were elections for choosing the representatives of the party. Besides the acts of the constitutional representatives of the people, the electors had also to follow and weigh those of the several series of representatives of the parties. The citizens were not equal to this task, and proved once more, and still more decisively, that the efficacy of the elective principle is limited.²

The most obvious and important changes in American candidate selection processes in the last forty years have been at the presidential level, where the uniquely American mechanism of direct primaries has become the dominant means of selecting the parties' presidential nominees. To Harry Truman, as Nelson Polsby has recalled, primaries were 'eyewash'. Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and even Hubert Humphrey in 1968 managed to be nominated without entering any primaries at all. More typically, in the 'mixed system' that emerged from the progressive reforms at the turn of the century and survived until 1968, presidential candidates would selectively enter primaries in several states in order to demonstrate their electability to the party leaders who actually controlled the nomination. Only in the last twenty years has an active and far-flung primary campaign become the main, and unavoidable, element in any serious quest for the presidency.

To a large extent this sea change is simply a matter of numbers: the proportion of each party's convention delegates selected in state primaries has doubled, from about 40 per cent before 1964 to about 80 per cent since 1980. But it is also a matter of legitimacy. The current primary-dominated system is the latest step in a long process of democratizing American candidate selection procedures. Like the changes from informal nominations to congressional caucuses, from congressional caucuses to national conventions, and from conventions to conventions-with-primaries, the change from a mixed system to a primary-dominated system was largely justified as an effort to create a more 'democratic' nominating process.³ Indeed, the transitional experience of Hubert Humphrey in 1968 suggests that any future candidate who could, somehow, manage to win a presidential nomination without competing in the primar-

ies might find that nomination so tainted in the public's estimation as to be nearly worthless.

A curious and significant feature of the current presidential primary system is that the various states vote sequentially over a four-month period. Thus, results in early states—amplified and interpreted by the news media—provide strong cues about the candidates' popularity to voters in subsequent primaries. One implication of this fact is that relatively unknown candidates may be able to parlay small-scale successes in the earliest states into significant national attention and support.⁴

This possibility has attracted more and different candidates than used to compete in presidential elections. For example, in December 1974, a Gallup poll asked Democratic voters to pick their first choice for the 1976 presidential nomination from a list of thirty-one major party figures. Jimmy Carter did not make the list. But by pulling off a few noteworthy early upsets, Carter managed to leapfrog over a field of better-known opponents to win the nomination. It is difficult to imagine a major party anywhere else in the world choosing as its leader a politician so inconspicuous only eighteen months earlier.

Carter's success dramatizes another important feature of the contemporary sequential primary system: its efficiency in 'winnowing' enough candidates out of the race to ensure that there will be a clear primary-season winner. Carter won his first primary, in New Hampshire, with less than 30 per cent of the vote in a crowded field. But he was able to capitalize so successfully upon that victory that most of his opponents were forced out of the race well before the end of the primary season. A similar dynamic has operated in other recent multi-candidate races. As a result, the national party conventions, which used to play an important role in the choice of party nominees, now serve essentially to ratify the outcome of the primaries and to launch the autumn campaign.⁵

Only a few states retain versions of the convention system for nominating candidates for state and local offices. Primary elections are common at all levels, but do not usually generate significant competition, especially if there is an incumbent in the race. Whereas two recent incumbent presidents—Ford in 1976 and Carter in 1980—have faced serious primary challenges, more than 90 per cent of incumbent senators and governors (and probably even larger proportions at lower levels) are unopposed within their party

or defeat their strongest opponent by more than 50 per cent of the primary vote. Primary competition is more common when there is no incumbent running, but still by no means universal: 23 of the 59 first-term senators and governors in office in 1990 were nominated by primary margins of 20 per cent or less, while 22 were nominated by margins exceeding 50 per cent of the primary vote.

Partisanship

The old parties are breaking up with daily increasing rapidity, they can no longer contain the incongruous elements brought together under the common flag; it is all very well for them to go on bearing the old names to wrap themselves in the ancient traditions; these names and these traditions do not succeed even in disguising the absence of common ideas and aspirations. Compact and stable majorities are only a historical reminiscence.⁶

The 'decline of parties' has been one of the major themes in academic commentary on contemporary American electoral politics. It is not uncommon for analysts to refer to a 'massive decay of partisan electoral linkages', or even to 'the ruins of the traditional partisan regime'.⁷ In some respects this change has been real and permanent and profound. In other respects it has been temporary or illusory or both.

The view that state and local party organizations have withered into insignificance is widespread but, apparently exaggerated.⁸ It does seem to be true that candidates play a larger role, and parties a relatively smaller role, than they once did in media coverage of campaigns and in voters' thinking about electoral politics. For example, the ratio of 'candidate mentions' to 'party mentions' in some major print media increased from about 2 to 1 in the 1950s to about 5 to 1 in 1980.⁹

But the evidence offered most regularly in support of the claim of partisan decline comes from trends in the electorate's 'identification' with one or the other of the major parties.¹⁰ The relevant data, which appear in Figure 12.1, do indicate a noticeable decline from 1964 to 1974 in the proportion of the public who said they thought of themselves as Democrats or Republicans. Self-designated 'strong' and 'not strong' identifiers combined made up 77

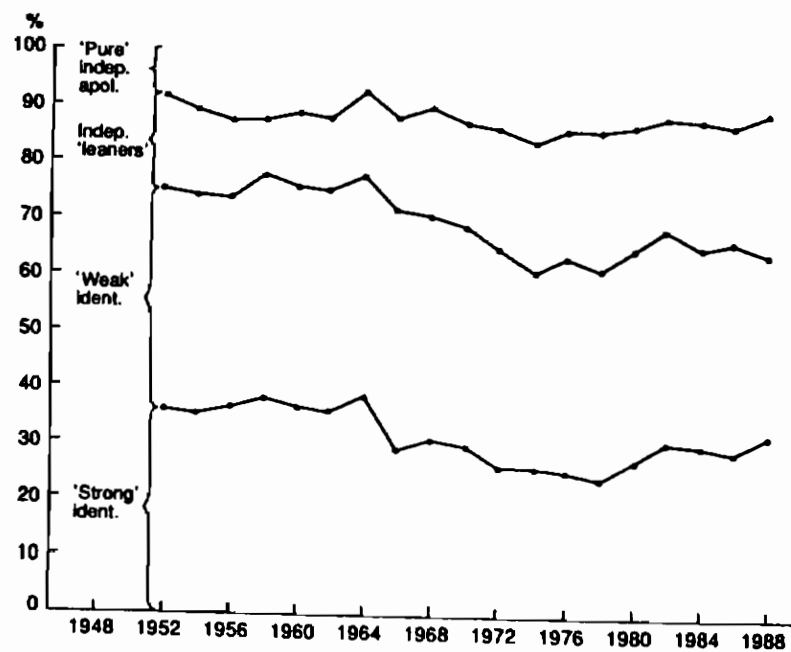


FIG. 12.1 Trends in strength of party identification in electorate, 1952-1988

per cent of the population in 1964 but only 60 per cent ten years later.

It is worth noticing, however, that most of those who deny thinking of themselves as partisans nevertheless allow that they think of themselves as 'closer' to one party or the other. If we include these 'leaners' among party identifiers, the much-vaunted collapse of partisan loyalties looks rather meagre. Indeed, the fraction of the public identifying with one party or the other by this criterion has remained at a consistently high level for forty years, varying between 82 and 92 per cent in every election since 1952, and rebounding by 1988 to a level closer to the top than to the bottom of that range.

That the distinction between 'weak' identification and 'leaning' is largely rhetorical should be evident from the vote choices of people who place themselves in each category. 'Leaners' vote with

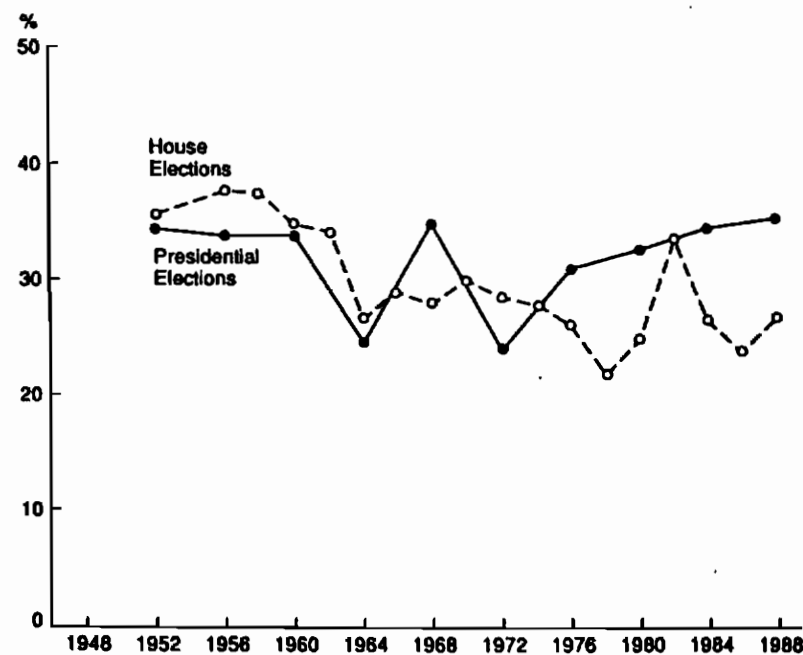


FIG. 12.2 Total impact of party identification on voting behaviour in presidential and House elections, 1952-1988

their party about 75 per cent of the time in House elections; the corresponding figure for weak identifiers is about 80 per cent. In presidential elections 'leaners' have actually been more loyal than weak identifiers, voting for their party's candidates about 80 per cent of the time.

The net result, illustrated in Figure 12.2, is that partisan loyalties had at least as much impact on voting behaviour at the presidential level in the 1980s as in the 1950s. In each period, by comparison with the vote choices of 'pure' independents, it appears that party loyalties of all sorts ('strong', 'weak', and 'leaning') shifted the votes of about one-third of the electorate, as compared to one-quarter or less in the troughs of 1964 and 1972. In this sense at least, the declining impact of partisanship in the 1960s and early 1970s was clearly a temporary phenomenon, attributable to spe-

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26. See Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).
27. See Larry J. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 128, 134, 140–2, 157.
28. Kern, *30-Second Politics*, 310.
29. See Jeff Greenfield, *The Real Campaign: How the Media Missed the Story of the 1980 Campaign* (New York: Summit Books, 1982).
30. Kern, *30-Second Politics*, 210.
31. Ibid. 93.
32. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*, 121.
33. See Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics 1990* (Washington, DC: National Journal, 1989).
34. See Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).
35. Page 292 (see n. 50 below).
36. See David R. Mayhew, 'Does it Make a Difference whether Party Control of the American Government is Unified or Divided?', a paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (Atlanta, 1989), 139.
37. Quoted by Nelson W. Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 106.
38. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties*, 125.
39. See Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President* (New York: Praeger, 1980).
40. See S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard Noyes, *The Video Campaign: Network Coverage of the 1988 Primaries* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1988), 17.
41. Bartels, *Presidential Primaries*, chs. 5, 8–10.
42. See Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1988 Elections* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1990), 172.
43. Greenfield, *The Real Campaign*, 248–9.
44. See Wilson Carey McWilliams, 'The Meaning of the Election', in Pomper *et al.* (eds.), *The Election of 1988*, 177–206.
45. Barone and Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics 1990*, p. xxxvi.
46. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*, 337.
47. See Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).
48. Quoted by Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform*, 118.

49. Greenfield, *The Real Campaign*, 242.
50. M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, ii: *The United States*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964). The original edition of Ostrogorski's book was published in 1902.

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Stability and Change

American electoral politics in the early 1990s looks significantly different from American electoral politics a generation ago. Nevertheless, one argument of this essay is that these striking differences in form have tended to obscure equally striking similarities in the nature of the electoral process—and in the underlying problems facing campaigners, voters, and reformers—over long periods of time. The candidate's need to inform and mobilize potential voters may produce precinct organizations in one era and media campaigns in another, but the need itself will not go away. Differential access to money is a perennial concern, regardless of the specific technology by which that money happens to be translated into political influence. Ordinary voters in any democratic system are vulnerable to manipulation by the reigning political élites—but only up to a point.

Some evidence for the persistence of these problems can be derived from the fact that all of the observations about electioneering used to introduce them above were written at the turn of the last century by one of the very first systematic observers of mass party politics.⁵⁰

Notes

1. See Walter Dean Burnham, 'The Reagan Heritage', in Gerald M. Pomper *et al.*, *The Election of 1988: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1989), 21.
2. Page 329 (see n. 50 below).
3. See Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1975).
4. See Larry M. Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
5. Compare Paul T. David, Ralph M. Goldman, and Richard C. Bain, *The Politics of National Party Conventions* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1960) and Byron E. Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics: Evolution and Reform in the National Party Convention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
6. Page 329 (see n. 50 below).
7. Burnham, 'The Reagan Heritage', 24.

8. See Cornelius P. Cotter, James L. Gibson, John F. Bibby, and Robert J. Huckshorn, *Party Organizations in American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
9. See Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-1988* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 95.
10. See Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960).
11. See V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949, repr. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).
12. Pages 302-3 (see n. 50 below).
13. See Edward R. Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
14. See Gerald H. Kramer, 'Short Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behaviour, 1896-1964', *American Political Science Review*, 65 (1971), 131-43; Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy*; see also Steven J. Rosenstone *Forecasting Presidential Elections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983); and Gregory P. Markus, 'The Impact of Personal and National Economic Conditions on the Presidential Vote: A Pooled Cross-Sectional Analysis', *American Journal of Political Science*, 32 (1988) 137-54.
15. Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy*, 143.
16. Page 299 (see n. 50 below).
17. See V. O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups*, 5th edn. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1964), 487-8.
18. Based on data compiled by Herbert E. Alexander, *Financing Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980).
19. See Gary C. Jacobson, *Money in Congressional Elections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); see also Donald Philip Green and Jonathan S. Krasno, 'Rebuttal to Jacobson's "New Evidence for Old Arguments"', *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (1990), 363-72.
20. Page 323 (see n. 50 below).
21. Alexander, *Financing Politics*, 5, 10.
22. See Stanley Kelley, Jr., *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956).
23. See Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969).
24. See Nelson W. Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections: Contemporary Strategies of American Electoral Politics*, 7th edn. (New York: Free Press, 1988), 121.
25. See Montague Kern, *30-Second Politics: Political Advertising in the Eighties* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 207.

George Bush's use of the Willie Horton incident during the 1988 presidential campaign has come to symbolize the meanness, superficiality, and irrationality of modern electoral politics. One analyst, convinced that 'the electronic media give greater force and currency to scurrilities', argued that James G. Blaine's charges that Grover Cleveland 'had appointed to office 137 convicted criminals, including 2 murderers, 7 forgers, and several brothel keepers', and that the president 'beat and abused' his wife 'had nothing like the impact of a glowering Willie Horton, illustrating Republican claims that Dukakis had been "soft on crime".'⁴⁴

It is hard to know how we might begin to evaluate this assessment of impact. In any event, it seems at least as fair to argue, as Barone and Ujifusa have, that Bush's advertisement

showed how Dukakis took a sensible and defensible policy (granting furloughs to prisoners scheduled to be released) and carried it to ridiculous extremes (granting furloughs to prisoners sentenced never to be released). It provided a valid basis for an inference that liberal Dukakis appointees would take sensible liberal policies and carry them to ridiculous extremes, with Dukakis's approval—which is exactly what many voters thought happened in the last national Democratic administration. Such an inference was neither racist nor irrational.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most important question is whether new patterns of electioneering have weakened or severed altogether the connection between elections and government. According to one 'very prominent consultant' quoted by Sabato, 'we simply look for good candidates. Whether they become good officeholders is no longer a factor. In fact, we can compensate pretty well for their not being good.'⁴⁶ If this claim was justified by the facts, then American democracy would indeed be in sorry shape. But in fact the claim is as implausible as it is arrogant. The strong correlation between objective economic conditions and electoral outcomes documented above, and more generally the strong influence of retrospective evaluations on vote choices,⁴⁷ should be sufficient to dispel the notion that campaign consultants 'can compensate pretty well' for their clients' failures in office.

The optimistic hypothesis that electioneering and governing are not radically disjoint activities in the modern media age finds some telling support in the most famous argument offered by the most famous media candidate in contemporary American politics,

Ronald Reagan. A few days before the 1980 election, with his political future on the line, Reagan appeared in a nationally televised debate with the incumbent President. In 1979, in the midst of his period of 'malaise', Carter, had told the American people, 'Often you see paralysis and stagnation and drift. You don't like it and neither do I.'⁴⁸ Essentially, Carter based his campaign for re-election on the argument that things were bad despite his efforts rather than because of them.

In his concluding remarks in his debate with Carter, Reagan answered this claim of irresponsibility not with slickness or manipulation, but with a straightforward assertion of electoral accountability.

Next Tuesday, all of you will go to the polls, you'll stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think, when you make that decision it might be well if you would ask yourself: Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than four years ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel our security is as safe, that we're as strong as we were four years ago? And if you answer all of those questions yes, why then I think your choice is very obvious as to who you'll vote for. If you don't agree, if you don't think that this course that we've been on for the last four years is what you would like to see us follow for the next four, then I could suggest another choice that you have. This country doesn't have to be in the shape it is in.⁴⁹

Reagan's argument was an artful piece of partisan political rhetoric; but it was rhetoric based upon a widely shared and clearly relevant view of how America had fared during Carter's years in office. Its success represented a triumph not of campaign technology, but of substantive political accountability.

If Reagan's campaign highlighted the impact of governing upon electioneering, his performance as President, particularly in his first year in office, highlighted the reciprocal impact of electioneering upon governing. Having campaigned and won on a platform of reducing taxes, increasing defence spending, and constraining domestic programmes, Reagan proceeded to implement that platform with considerable success—in large part because the Washington community treated his election 'mandate' with a seriousness quite unfashionable among academic observers of electoral politics.

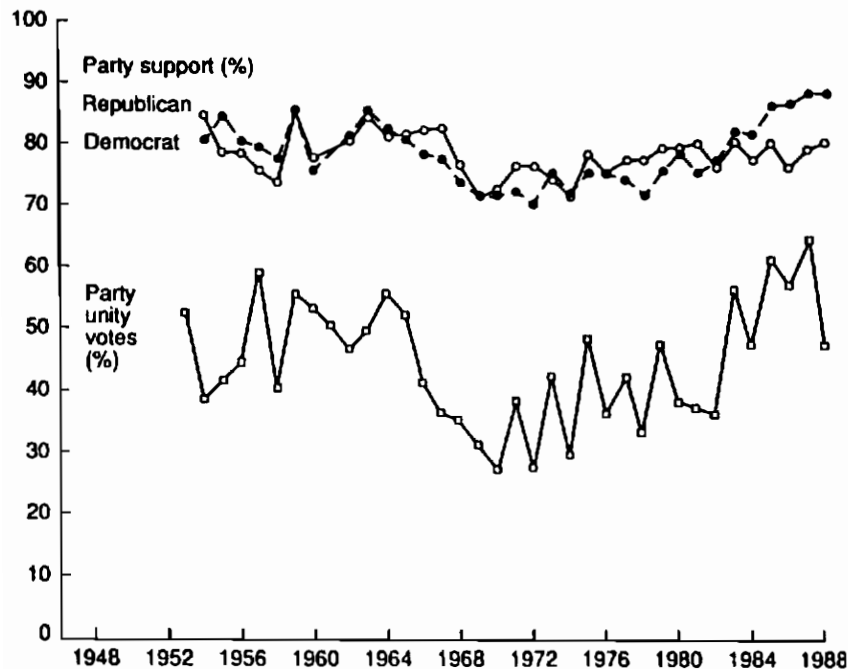


FIG. 12.10 Party voting in Congress, 1953–1988

by party discipline? According to a 1979 report in *Time* magazine, a Congress that 'used to operate through party discipline enforced by party leaders like Sam Rayburn' has become 'a catfight of centrifugal energies, a fractured, independent crew that in its less disciplined moments approaches the opera buffa standards of the Italian Chamber of Deputies'.³⁷

The only problem with this picture is that it, too, is unsupported by the facts. As Figure 12.10 shows, party unity in Congress, which did dip significantly in the late 1960s, has returned to levels at least as high as in the good old days of Sam Rayburn—despite the fact that party identification continues to play a less important role in congressional voting. Thus, there seems to be more plausibility in the first half than in the second half of Wattenberg's suggestion³⁸ that 'voters reacted gradually over the last quarter of a century to the way in which politics was presented to them. Political parties themselves became less institutionally relevant and the public adjusted their views of them accordingly.'

Does the triviality of modern campaigning render democratic accountability impossible? Hoopla and tactical manoeuvring certainly play a prominent role in media coverage of elections.³⁹ A content analysis of network television news during the heart of the 1988 presidential primary campaign (from the New Hampshire primary in early February through the New York primary in late April) found that almost 70 per cent of the stories had to do with the 'horse race'; less than 15 per cent had to do with policy issues.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, issues and ideology continue to play an important role in presidential nominating politics⁴¹ as well as in general elections.⁴²

In some respects, modern forms of electioneering have made candidates more, rather than less, directly accountable for their statements and actions. The production values of television news have increasingly made candidates the central figures in their own campaigns. Televised debates have attracted huge audiences in every presidential campaign since 1976, and in many campaigns at lower levels as well. These debates have probably focused more unmediated public attention on the candidates, their policies, and their political priorities than in any previous electoral era.

Finally, campaign consultants, however powerful they may be, provide none of the legitimizing cover of political parties. Roger Ailes and Robert Teeter may have been instrumental in picking Dan Quayle as a vice-presidential nominee, but there was never any doubt that it was George Bush whose political career rode on the consequences of that choice.

Can voters be fooled more readily by politicians wielding modern campaign technology than they were by politicians wielding the campaign technology of any earlier era? Does a simplistic televised mantra—'Read my lips: no new taxes'—communicate a candidate's commitment any less clearly or credibly than an issue paper or 'stump' speech? The case is, at least, unproven.

Perhaps, as Greenfield argued with regard to the 1980 presidential campaign,

The public had been exposed to political ads, and to their gimmicks, ever since the Eisenhower campaign of 1952 used spot advertising. They had grown in sophistication along with the medium. . . . More important, the press itself was so conscious of campaign advertising that political commercials had ceased to be isolated from the scrutiny given to speeches, position papers, and charges and countercharges.⁴³

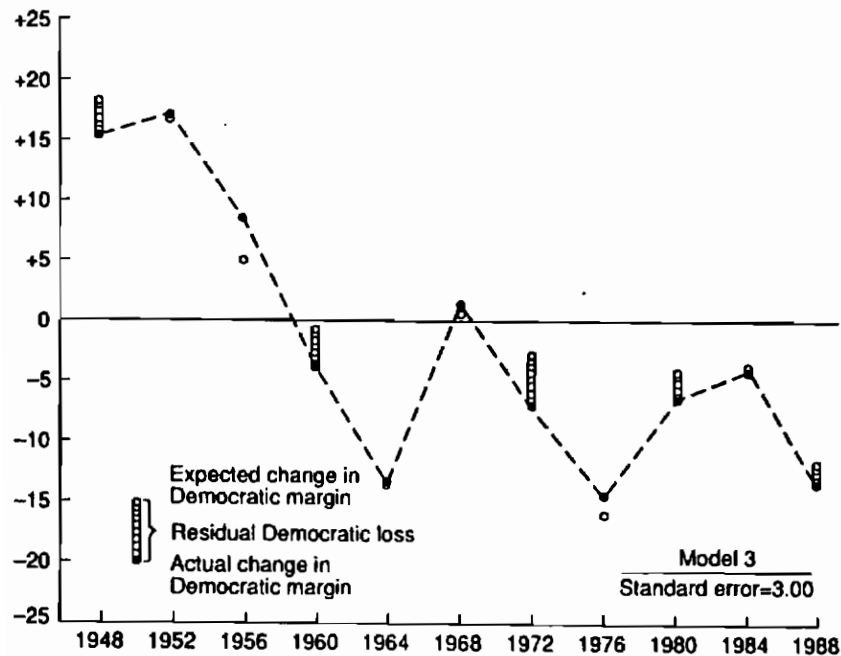


FIG. 12.9 Actual and expected changes in Democratic vote margins during presidential election campaigns, 1948–1988

worse, and probably better, than Truman's campaign, once these factors are taken into account. The wizardry of Roger Ailes and the ineptness of Michael Dukakis together produced a residual vote shift of less than 1 per cent in 1988. And at the outer extreme of unexplained variation, Richard Nixon won over an additional 2.1 per cent of the electorate in a year when his opponent ran what may really have been 'the worst managed campaign in this century', most notably by selecting and then abandoning a vice-presidential nominee who had been treated for depression with shock therapy.

The fact that recent presidential campaigns have not seemed to produce many large, unaccountable changes in electoral support should not be taken to suggest that campaigns are therefore unimportant. Most obviously, residual vote shifts of the magnitude suggested by Figure 12.9 are more than sufficient to change the outcome of a close election. But in addition, it is worth bearing in mind that even an unusually inept presidential campaign is a far

cry from no campaign at all. In a world where most campaigners make reasonably effective use of reasonably similar resources and technologies most of the time, much of their effort will necessarily be without visible impact, simply because every campaigner's efforts are balanced against more or less equally effective efforts to produce the opposite effect.

Electioneering and Governing

... the expression 'politics' has become a synonym for election affairs and has almost ceased to be associated with ideas of government and administration. Hence, the citizen who has been wrought into a paroxysm of excitement by the elections sinks into apathy immediately afterwards, and takes no interest in the way in which his representatives discharge their trust.³³

American electoral politics has changed in significant ways in the last forty years. But what have been the implications of those changes for American government? Some connections seem obvious. If candidates are elected without recourse to parties, then they will tend to govern without recourse to parties. If control of the government is chronically divided, then major policy initiatives will be rare. If campaign news is filled with horse races, hoopla, and sound-bites, then politicians will not be electorally accountable for their actions.

Fortunately or unfortunately, such seemingly obvious connections between electioneering and governing often seem to dissolve upon close inspection. Divided government has been a prominent feature of American politics for most of the last forty years. But observers of contemporary electoral politics too often lose sight of the fact that it has been a fairly frequent occurrence throughout American political history. For example, different parties controlled the White House and the House of Representatives in 13 of the 19 Congresses since 1955, but also in 13 of the 27 Congresses from 1843 to 1897. In any case, the impact of divided partisan control on the outcomes of the legislative process is more often assumed than demonstrated. The only analyst to study the question in detail concluded simply and bluntly: 'It does not make all that much difference.'³⁶

Have legislators become increasingly independent and unbound

analysis of presidential-level advertisements from 1952 through 1984 collected by the Political Commercial Archive found that fully a quarter of them were negative'. Presumably the other three-quarters were not. In 1972, one leading media specialist, Charles Guggenheim, was fired from a presidential campaign because he resisted producing negative advertisements, believing them to be 'ineffective'.³² Guggenheim's client, George McGovern, was not obviously benefited by adopting a more negative media strategy, if in fact he did so.

Other analysts attributed the outcome of the 1988 election less to Ailes's media wizardry than to the ineptitude of his Democratic counterparts. Democratic Senator Terry Sanford's claim that Michael Dukakis ran 'the worst managed campaign in this century'³³ is an extreme example of this view. But even without the hyperbole, the explanation fails to explain how the same team that shepherded Dukakis masterfully through the 1988 Democratic primaries somehow became inexperienced, rigid, unpolitical bumbler in the autumn.

In fact, most changes in candidate support during recent presidential general-election campaigns can be accounted for nicely—without any reference to campaign wizardry or bumbling—on the basis of three simple principles:

1. Underdogs tend to gain ground. Holding a lead through four months of intensive national campaigning is no easy feat, even for a politician sufficiently skilled to have built such a lead in the first place. People will change their minds, and if most of them supported you in the first place those changes will tend to work to your disadvantage. Indeed, the regression results reported for Model 3 in Table 12.1 suggest that, other things being equal, less than 40 per cent of the pre-convention lead in the average post-war campaign has lasted until election day.
2. Economic prosperity gives the incumbent party a significant 'ace in the hole'. The effect of economic conditions on presidential election outcomes has been widely recognized; but it has not been widely recognized that much of this effect occurs during the course of the general-election campaign. In June or August, voters may have a variety of idiosyncratic concerns—or none at all. But the autumn campaign and the approach of election day tend to bring fundamental issues to the fore, and among these issues the state of

the economy is often foremost. The results reported for Model 3 in Table 12.1 show that, in the eleven post-war presidential campaigns, the incumbent party has gained or lost an average of about 1.6 per cent of the vote between June and November for every 1 per cent change in real income. In a boom year like 1964 or 1984, this effect might produce a vote shift of six or seven percentage points toward the incumbent, other things being equal; in a recession year like 1980 it might produce a vote loss of about three percentage points.

3. Candidates who outspend their opponents tend to gain ground. Although public financing of presidential campaigns has evened the playing field since 1976, previous campaigns saw significant spending differentials. The regression results for Model 3 in Table 12.1 suggest that a 25 per cent edge in campaign spending was associated with an expected vote gain of one percentage point, while a 100 per cent edge in campaign spending—the advantage enjoyed by Republican candidates from 1964 to 1972—was associated with an expected vote gain of about three percentage points. This association may be partly an artefact, reflecting the ability of good candidates to raise more money as well as the impact of spending itself. Thus, Model 4 in Table 12.1 compares the results of regression based solely upon the underdog and economic effects. Both effects are slightly weaker but still clearly significant given this specification of the model.

Figure 12.9 compares the actual change in the Democratic candidate's margin during each of the last eleven presidential campaigns with the change predicted on the basis of national economic conditions, erosion of early leads, and differential spending using the regression results for Model 3. Most of the observed change is accounted for by these three general tendencies. And much of what is left is inconsistent with the conventional assessments of journalists and other observers concerning campaign success or failure.

Harry Truman's dramatic comeback in 1948, the subject of one of the earliest and most influential academic studies of presidential campaigning³⁴ is more than adequately accounted for by the underdog factor, economic conditions, and Truman's spending advantage. Indeed, the three most recent Democratic campaigns—disasters all, according to the conventional wisdom—look no

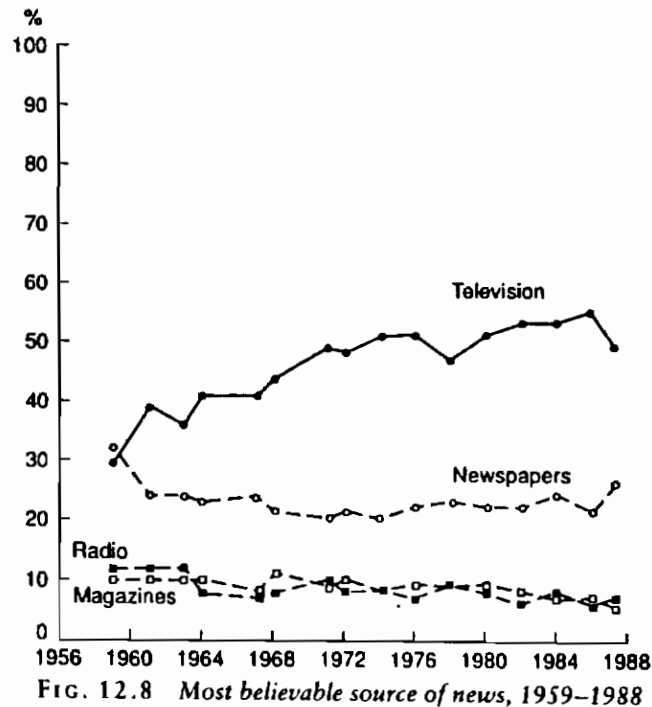


FIG. 12.8 Most believable source of news, 1959-1988

itself has generated considerable cynicism about 'The Selling of the President'.²³

One index of the increasing influence of technical specialists within political campaigns is their increasing prominence as influential advisers between political campaigns. Jimmy Carter's media man, Gerald Rafshoon, continued to serve as a trusted adviser after his boss reached the White House. Pollsters Patrick Caddell and Richard Wirthlin likewise continued to consult on a regular basis between elections with Carter and Ronald Reagan, respectively. Caddell was instrumental in precipitating one of the defining episodes of Carter's presidency, the 1979 Camp David retreat and subsequent announcement of a national 'crisis of confidence'.²⁴

In 1988, media consultant Roger Ailes and pollster Robert Teeter are supposed to have been the most influential boosters of Dan Quayle as a vice-presidential candidate.²⁵ Teeter was reportedly considered (though not selected) for a top White House staff position after Bush's election. Meanwhile, in a classic blend of

electioneering, government, and entertainment in the television age, Ailes served as the co-executive producer of CBS's 1991 *All-Star Salute to Our Troops*, a blockbuster Gulf War welcome-home special featuring none other than the victorious commander-in-chief, Ailes' one-time client, George Bush. All of these examples point toward the evolution of what Blumenthal²⁶ has referred to as 'the true permanent campaign', with its consequent emphasis on the potential electoral costs and benefits of every policy step.

That campaign consultants and strategists are the 'masters' of 'bewildered public opinion' is much less obvious. In fact, much less is known in general about the impact of modern election campaigns on voters than one might gather from a superficial reading of the literature. Breathless accounts of brilliant campaign operatives manipulating the electorate are often based upon no better evidence than the claims of the operatives themselves. Specific assessments of effectiveness almost always take the passive voice (one consultant's campaign lyrics 'are generally conceded to be effective and entertaining' another's advertisements 'are given partial credit' for a candidate's comeback), or are attributed to 'observers', 'critics', or other consultants.²⁷

When more substantial evidence is offered for the effectiveness of a particular campaign strategy, it is usually evidence of the simplest and least trustworthy sort: Campaign A did X and won. Thus, based on the evidence of the 1984 campaign, Kern²⁸ reasoned that 'Ronald Reagan's brand of emotional advertising' has become 'nearly indispensable in competitive races'. Of course, this reasoning overlooks many other factors that contributed to Reagan's victory in 1984—as well as the fact that Reagan won in 1980 with very simple advertisement emphasizing issues.²⁹

Kern³⁰ similarly reasoned that 'Few can argue with the success of Roger Ailes's effort' in producing negative advertisements for George Bush in 1988. But what is the evidence of that success, other than the fact that Bush managed to win an election in a period of peace and prosperity and on the coat-tails of a remarkably popular predecessor? (Post-war patterns of presidential voting suggest that Bush should have been expected to win by nine or ten percentage points, given the state of the economy in 1988.)

In any case, negative advertisements have come and gone before in the cycle of campaign fashion. According to Kern³¹ 'a recent

minimum the responsibility of the latter to their pretended constituents, and placed the real power in the hands of the election agencies and their managers, who, on pretence of helping bewildered public opinion, thus became its masters.²⁰

At the local level, many American election campaigns look and work much like the campaigns of a generation ago. The slickest form of campaign technology in the average race for a seat in a county or state legislature may be the leaflet or the yard sign. But the higher the office and the larger the constituency—and, not coincidentally, the more money there is to spend—the more likely it is that campaigners will rely upon the distinctive technologies of modern electioneering: systematic polling, telephone banks, direct mail, and, above all, television.

Television emerged as a major social force in the United States during the 1950s. At the beginning of the decade, less than one American household in ten owned a television; by the end of the decade almost nine in ten did, and average television viewing exceeded five hours per day. Public responses to periodic surveys, summarized in Figures 12.7 and 12.8, suggest that in the early 1960s television surpassed newspapers both as the most important source of 'news about what's going on in the world today' and as the most 'believable' news medium. By the 1980s the percentage of the public who would 'be most inclined to believe' television reports in the case of a conflict was about twice as large as the percentage who would 'be most inclined to believe' newspaper reports.

Politicians and broadcasters alike were quick to seize upon the electoral potential of the new medium. The presidential election of 1952 saw the first television coverage of the parties' nominating convention, as well as other campaign news and candidate-sponsored television advertising. Television and radio advertising together accounted for about 30 per cent of each presidential candidate's general election campaign costs in 1952, with the fraction increasing to about 50 per cent by 1968.²¹

The pre-eminence of the mass media in modern presidential campaign strategy was highlighted in 1976, when new financial regulations drastically reduced the major candidates' general election campaign budgets. Jimmy Carter was allowed to spend about half as much as George McGovern had in 1972; Gerald Ford was

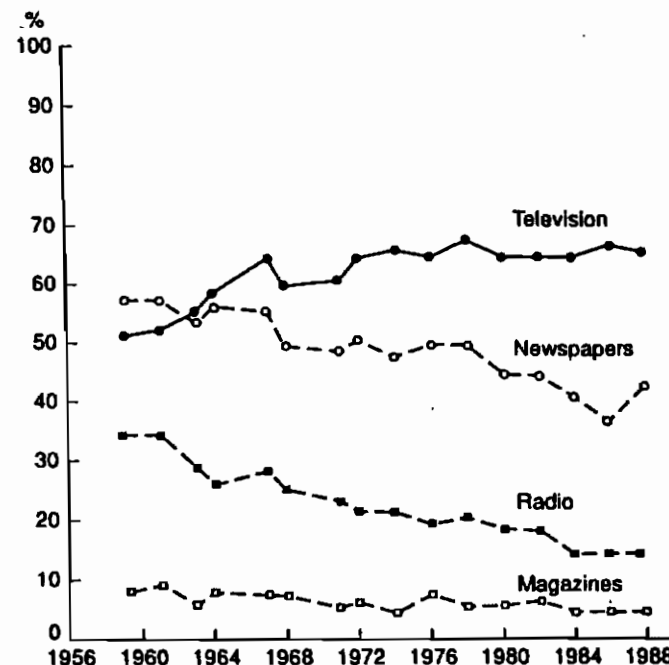


FIG. 12.7 Primary sources of news, 1959–1988

allowed to spend only about a third as much as Richard Nixon had in 1972. Nevertheless, both candidates managed, by drastically cutting their expenditures on everything from field staffs and local headquarters to campaign buttons and bumper stickers, to spend about as much as their predecessors had on television and radio advertising.

What have been the political effects of the rise of television, survey research, direct mail, and other new campaign technologies? One effect, recognized early on by academic analysts, is that political influence has gravitated toward the professional specialists who control these technologies.²²

Since many of the new technologies have evolved primarily in the commercial realm, the result has been a transfer of power from the professional political operatives who managed the canvassing activities of traditional party organizations to the professional pollsters, marketing specialists, and advertisers who have applied the same new technologies to sell soap, cars, and beer. That fact in

a prominent Senate campaign contributor by the 'Keating Five', and more generally by a jump in already high incumbent re-election rates and by the increasing prominence of Political Action Committee (PAC) money in congressional election campaigns.

The role of PACs is to channel contributions from organized interest groups such as corporations, unions, professional associations, and ideological groups. The total number of PACs increased from about 600 in 1974 to more than 4,000 by 1986, while total PAC contributions have grown from about \$130 million in 1975-6 to \$350 million in 1987-8 (in 1988 dollars). About 40 per cent of these contributions are to congressional candidates, with most of the rest going to candidates for state and local offices.

PACs are prominent targets for campaign reform in part because the 'special interest' groups that fund them are themselves objects of considerable popular mistrust. What is more, PAC contributions lack any appearance of principled political consistency because they are so overwhelmingly directed to incumbents of any and all stripes. In House races in 1988, incumbents took in eight PAC dollars for every one contributed to their challengers. And, as Figure 12.6 illustrates, the growing disparity in PAC contributions in recent years has been largely responsible for the fact that congressional incumbents now typically spend twice or three times as much on their campaigns as challengers do on theirs.

It is not entirely clear how much this growing disparity has contributed to the increasing security of incumbent Congressmen. Different studies provide somewhat different estimates of the impact of campaign spending in congressional elections.¹⁹ They do agree that challengers' spending tends to be more productive than that of incumbents, presumably because many challengers are so unknown that they have much to gain simply by publicizing their existence. But this advantage seems far from sufficient to overcome the incumbents' advantage in PAC receipts, especially as it is the sort of advantage that tends, by its very nature, to disappear in races where the challenger manages to mount a serious campaign.

In any case, the most important function of incumbent fund-raising may be to dissuade serious challengers from entering the race in the first place. When the average incumbent Congressman running for re-election raises almost \$400,000 and the average incumbent senator running for re-election raises almost \$4,000,000, it is not surprising that many prospective challengers

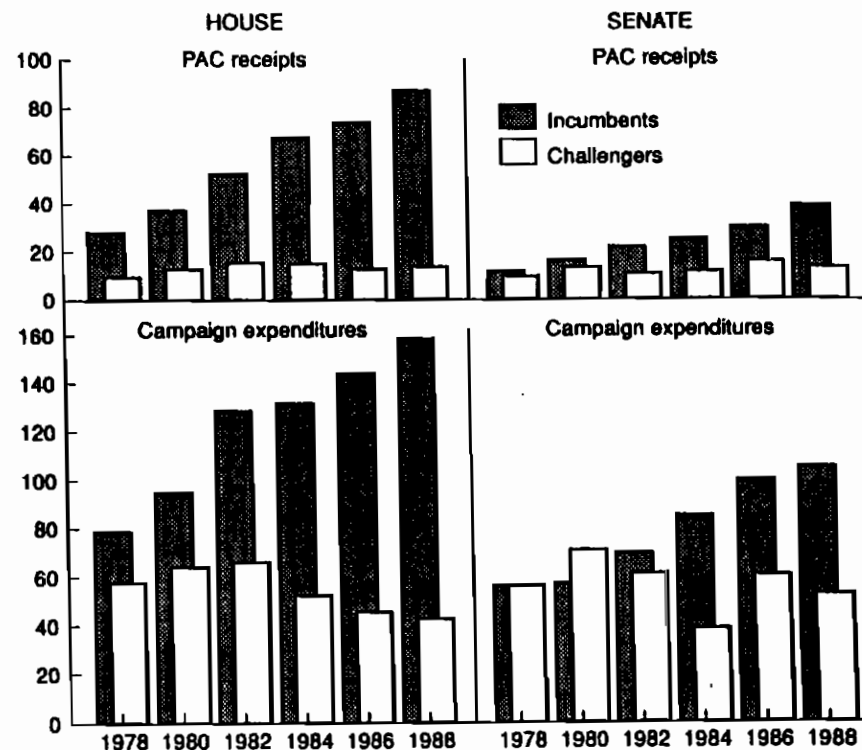


FIG. 12.6 PAC receipts and total campaign expenditures in House and Senate elections, 1978-1988 (in 1988 \$ millions)

prefer to wait for death, resignation, or indictment to create a more level playing field.

It seems likely that any system of congressional campaign finance that provided more money to challengers would thereby make congressional elections more competitive. The most obvious remaining hurdle to reform is that any such system would have to be legislated into existence by the same incumbent Congressmen who are the main beneficiaries of the current system.

Campaign Technology

The interposition of third persons between the people and its numerous representatives, the selection of whom it did but ratify, reduced to a

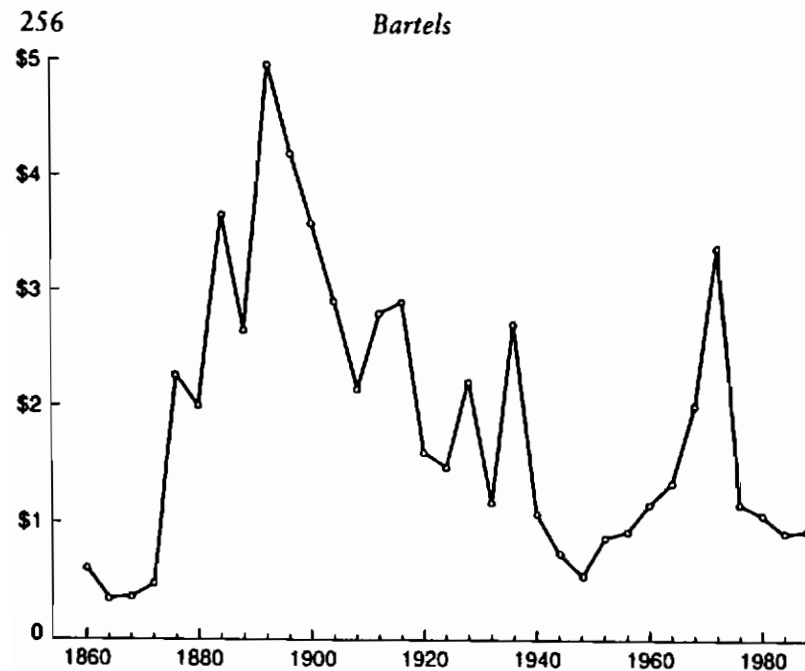


FIG. 12.5 Campaign spending in presidential general elections, 1860–1988 (in 1988 dollars per voter)

presidential candidates together in recent general elections does not seem extravagant.

What does seem problematic is a system in which very wealthy contributors dominate the campaign fund-raising process. The role of big contributors was still relatively minor in the early 1960s, but increased markedly in 1972, when contributions of \$10,000 or more amounted to more than \$50 million (in 1972 dollars), including more than \$2 million from one wealthy insurance executive.

The increasing cost of modern campaigns had already prompted some congressional efforts to control campaign expenses. But the sudden prominence of huge individual contributions, and especially vivid Watergate era revelations about Nixon's White House operatives strong-arming corporations for bags of cash, produced new and irresistible public support for reform. The Democratic majority in Congress was more than happy to produce an alternative system, in no small part because Democratic candidates had been outspent

by about two to one by their Republican opponents in each of the three most recent presidential campaigns.

There were two key innovations in the post-Watergate system of campaign finance. First, individuals are prohibited from contributing more than \$1,000 to any one candidate in an election cycle or more than \$20,000 to all candidates, groups, and parties per calendar year. (These limitations are held not to violate contributors' freedom of speech because they do not prohibit additional 'uncoordinated' spending in support of favoured positions or candidates). As a result, it is now impossible for a few very wealthy contributors to bankroll a candidate's campaign. Instead, candidates must attract numerous smaller contributions, both by participating in endless rounds of fund-raising dinners and cocktail parties and by organizing sophisticated direct mail solicitations.

The second key innovation in the post-Watergate system is that it offers public funds—albeit to presidential candidates only—in exchange for 'voluntary' adherence to expenditure limits. Before the nominating conventions, candidates who demonstrate 'seriousness' by raising \$5,000 in relatively small contributions (\$250 or less) in each of twenty states are eligible for public matching funds on a dollar-to-dollar basis, if they are willing to abide by overall and state-by-state expenditure limits. Since 1976, every major primary candidate but one (John Connally in 1980) has accepted expenditure limits in exchange for public matching of private contributions in the pre-convention campaign.

Every major party nominee since 1976 has accepted additional public funding for the general election campaign. These grants are equal for both parties and fixed in advance (but adjusted for inflation in each election cycle, so that in 1992 each nominee will get about \$55 million, plus allowances for convention and accounting costs). The cost to the candidates of receiving these public funds is that they must limit their campaign expenditures to the same fixed amount. There are some loopholes—for example, presidential candidates can and do raise money for other candidates' campaigns, and they can and do benefit from uncoordinated expenditures by 'independent' individuals and groups—but the system has generally been considered effective.

With presidential elections off the agenda, recent efforts to reform campaign finance have focused on Congress. The impetus for reform has recently been refuelled by revelations of favours for

TABLE 12.1. *Regression results for models of presidential election outcomes*

Explanatory variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	-6.48 (4.49)	-15.36 (6.08)	-2.65 (1.75)	-1.67 (2.93)
Election year income change (%)	4.80 (1.40)	0 (—)	3.18 (.59)	2.71 (.98)
Three-year income change (%)	0 (—)	3.06 (.77)	0 (—)	0 (—)
Pre-convention poll margin (%)	0 (—)	0 (—)	.369 (.060)	.410 (.100)
Campaign spending (ln odds)	0 (—)	0 (—)	9.12 (2.29)	0 (—)
Standard error of regression	8.46	8.08	3.00	5.08
Adjusted R-squared	.52	.65	.94	.83
Number of observations (years)	11 (48-88)	9 (52-84)	11 (48-88)	11 (48-88)

Note: In each case, the dependent variable is the incumbent party's margin of victory (+) or defeat (-) in percentage points. 'Election year income change' is the percentage change in real disposable income per capita from the year before the election to the year of the election. 'Three-year income change' is the compounded percentage change in real disposable income per capita in the year before the election, the election year, and the year after the election. 'Pre-convention poll margin' is the incumbent party candidate's percentage point margin (+ or -) in the last pre-convention Gallup poll. 'Campaign spending' is the natural log of the ratio of incumbent spending to challenger spending. Standard errors of parameter estimates are in parentheses.

electoral incentives will tend to be in relatively close accord with voters' long-run economic interests.

What is the electorate's time horizon? The data on this point are less than definitive, but they are suggestive. In the nine presidential elections from 1952 to 1984, the incumbent party's margin of victory or defeat was positively related not only to income changes in the election year (the most common specification), but also to income changes in the years just before and—even more telling—just after the election year. As a comparison of Models 1 and 2 in Table 12.1 shows, compounded changes in income over these three years account for election outcomes even better than election year changes alone. (The analysis of Model 2 is based on the nine elections for which three-year income data are available; but the

specification in Model 1 produces essentially similar results for this subset of elections as for the entire post-war era.) Since conditions in these three years taken together encompass most of what a reasonable observer could plausibly associate with the economic policy of the current incumbent, this result suggests that the American electorate is actually rather less myopic than politicians and analysts alike seem to believe.

Money

The stronghold of the general interest, the State, was invaded on all sides by money. The corporations bought legislation, 'protection,' and favours of every kind, wholesale and retail; rich men bought seats in the highest legislative assembly more or less disguisedly, obtained seats in the Cabinet, ambassadorships. It seemed as if nothing could resist the well-filled purse, that money was king in the Republic.¹⁶

Money has always played an uncomfortable role in democratic politics. When citizens are free to attempt to influence their rulers, it seems inevitable that, whereas some will bring to bear time and effort and others eloquence and influence, still others will prefer to pay cash. Almost alone among Western democracies the United States has treated campaign spending as a protected form of political expression; this constitutional nicety has forced American reformers to invent elaborate, indirect, and incomplete controls on the role of money in campaigns, and their record of success has been correspondingly mixed.

The sheer amount of money spent in election campaigns has troubled some observers, but that concern seems overblown. After all, as V. O. Key observed long ago,¹⁷ 'The aggregate expended in the year of a presidential election may seem huge, yet it probably does not exceed the total of the annual advertising bills of the principal soap companies.' Moreover, although campaign costs escalated markedly with the rise of television and other expensive new campaign technologies in the 1950s and 1960s, Figure 12.5¹⁸ suggests that presidential campaign costs were still much lower in real terms (and allowing for the increasing size of the electorate) at their peak in 1972 than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Certainly, the dollar or so per voter spent by both

inter-party politics remains an organized and predictable affair by comparison with the real disorganization and unpredictability of politics without party labels. The last generation has certainly seen a secular—and presumably permanent—increase in the relative salience of candidates in American politics. But what is surprising in light of this change is not that partisan loyalties have become so weak, but that they have remained so strong.

Pocketbook Voting

Of all races in an advanced stage of civilization, the American is the least accessible to long views. . . . Always and everywhere in a hurry to get rich, he does not give a thought to remote consequences; he sees only present advantages. . . . He does not remember, he does not feel, he lives in a materialist dream.¹²

Politicians have long recognized that incumbents tend to fare well when economic conditions are good and poorly when economic conditions are bad. There was more than rationalization in Richard Nixon's account of the 1960 presidential campaign: 'In October, usually a month of rising employment, the jobless rolls increased by 452,000. All the speeches, television broadcasts, and precinct work in the world could not counteract that one hard fact.'¹³

The contribution of recent scholarly work¹⁴ has been to specify the magnitude and regularity of the impact of economic conditions on electoral politics. Indeed, the relationship between economic conditions and election outcomes is by now one of the best documented relationships in the whole field of American politics.

Figure 12.4 illustrates the most familiar version of the relationship between economic conditions and election outcomes. The figure graphs the incumbent party's margin of victory or defeat in each of the last eleven presidential elections (measured on the left-hand scale) and the percentage change in real disposable income per capita in each election year (measured on the right-hand scale). The correlation between income changes and incumbent margins is far from perfect—the standard error of the linear regression reported as Model 1 in Table 12.1 is 8.5 percentage points—but it is clear that economic conditions have had a significant electoral impact. By this estimate (the more elaborate analysis by Markus in 1988 produced a similar estimate), every 1 per cent change in real

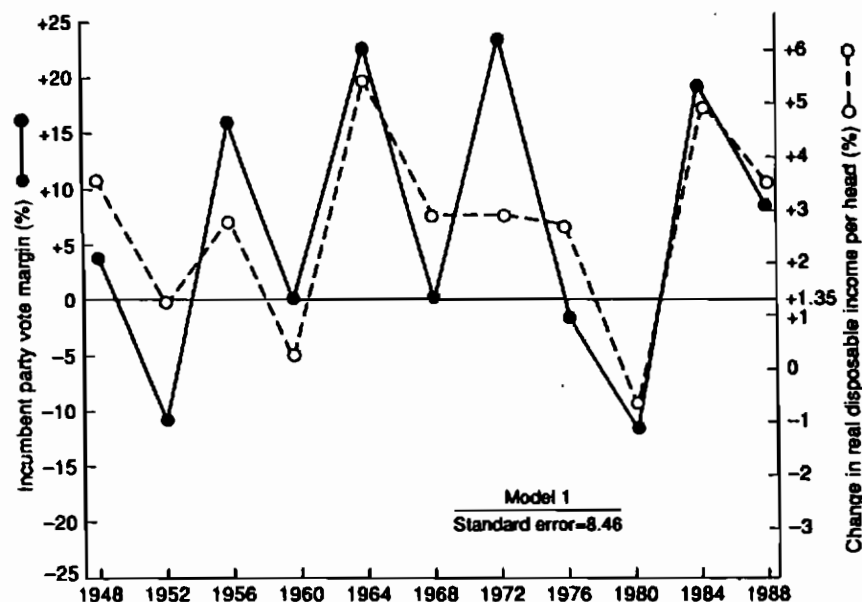


FIG. 12.4 *Income changes and incumbent party vote margins in presidential elections, 1948–1988*

income has translated into a change of 4.8 points in expected vote margin. Thus, for the incumbent party's presidential candidate, the difference between a boom year (4 per cent income growth) and a recession year (no real income growth) is the difference between a possible landslide and a likely defeat.

Should this strong connection between economic conditions and election outcomes be reassuring or disconcerting from the perspective of democratic theory? The answer to this question hinges in large part upon a matter of timing. It is customary for analysts to measure economic conditions in the election year against the conditions of the immediately preceding year. But if the voter 'sees only present advantages', as this formulation suggests, then, as Tufte warned,¹⁵ 'There is a bias toward policies with immediate highly visible benefits and deferred hidden costs—myopic policies for myopic voters.' Conversely, if voters evaluate incumbent parties on the basis of their cumulative performance in office, then

cific candidates and events rather than to any permanent collapse of the 'traditional partisan regime'.

The corresponding trend for elections to the House of Representatives, also illustrated in Figure 12.2, tells a somewhat different story. Here there has been a more sustained decline in party voting, mostly attributable to the fact that incumbent representatives of both parties have been increasingly successful in appealing to voters across party lines. Even here, however, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the continuing significance of party identification, which is evident both from the impact of partisanship in recent congressional elections in Figure 12.2 and from the fact that more than 70 per cent of the voters in recent congressional elections have continued to vote in accordance with broader partisan loyalties.

Another way to illustrate the continuing influence of partisanship in American elections is to contrast the continuity and predictability of general election coalitions with the fluidity of coalitions in nominating campaigns, where the organizing influence of parties is truly absent. Following a lead of Key,¹¹ Figure 12.3 illustrates the relationship between states' general election votes (Figure 12.3(a)) and primary or caucus votes (Figure 12.3(b)) for the Democratic presidential candidates in 1984 and 1988, Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis.

Except in the District of Columbia, Mondale's general election vote percentage varied in a fairly narrow range (from 25 to 50 per cent) and Dukakis's varied in a similarly narrow range (from 30 to 55 per cent). Moreover, the continuity of support for the two candidates was very considerable, as evidenced by the strong correlation between the outcomes in each state in the two elections.

The primary and caucus results in Figure 12.3(b) present a very different picture. Each candidate's support varied from less than 5 per cent in some states to more than 60 per cent in others. (Dukakis garnered more than 60 per cent of the primary vote in many more states than Mondale did, because most of his opponents dropped out of the race earlier in the primary season). But what is even more significant is that there is almost no correlation—positive or negative—between Mondale's support in 1984 and Dukakis's in 1988. Without the organizing influence of party labels, each candidate had to build his supporting coalition from scratch.

The comparison in Figure 12.3 suggests quite vividly that, whatever real decline American political parties may have seen,

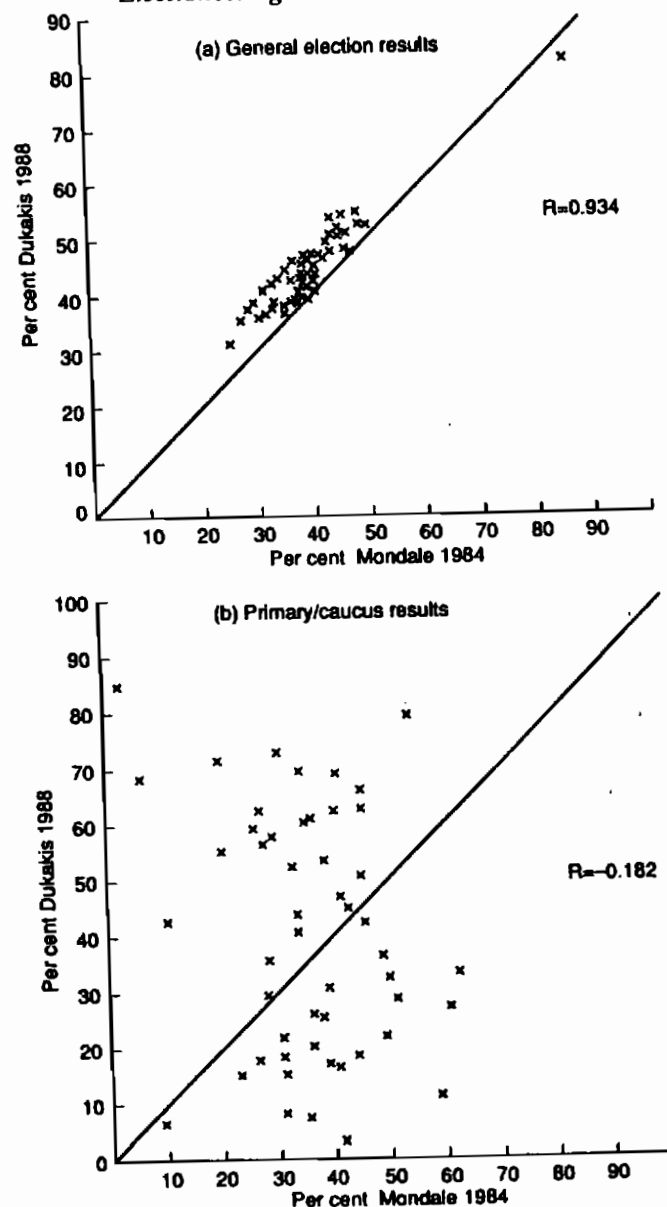


FIG. 12.3 Continuity of democratic nomination and election coalitions, 1984–1988
(a) General election results
(b) Primary/caucus results