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ELECTORAL REALIGNMENT

Steven Alan Samson

Last week the Republicans took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years and only the third time since 1932. Newt Gingrich of Georgia became the first Republican to serve as Speaker of the House since Joseph Martin of Massachusetts held the position from 1947-1949 and again from 1953-1955.

The size of the Republican sweep in the congressional elections last November is impressive. When the dust finally settled a couple of weeks after the election and several close races had been decided, the Republicans claimed solid majorities of 53-47 in the Senate and 230-205 in the House with a net gain there of fifty-three seats over the previous term. Republican candidates for governor were elected in seven of the eight largest states. One or both chambers of several state legislatures switched from Democratic to Republican control. Thomas Foley became the first incumbent Speaker of the House sent home by his own constituents since 1860. Someday the midterm election of 1994 may be considered a *critical election*.

Even before all the returns were in, commentators raised the question of whether a *realignment*, a major shift in party loyalties, had taken place. Here a definition is in order. A *party realignment* may be defined as "a sharp, lasting shift [that] occurs in the popular coalition supporting one or both parties. The issues that separate the two parties change, and so

the kind of voters supporting each party change."¹ A theory of critical elections or electoral realignment was proposed forty years ago by V. O. Key, Jr., a political scientist. As a generation of Democratic dominance in Congress and the White House had just recently been interrupted by the election of President Eisenhower in 1952 and a short-lived Republican takeover of Congress.² The theory itself remains controversial and has been widely criticized, especially in attributing major shifts in American politics to "durable switches in voters' party preferences in a particular election or series of them."³

So, what is the issue? No one denies that party fortunes rise and fall in some fashion. But do individual elections reveal trends sufficiently well to make predictions? Can critical elections from one historical period shed light on another? The evidence is not clear. But for our purpose today it is not necessary to draw any of these larger conclusions or even to determine whether a realignment has taken place or is in the making. Only time will tell. Let us simply assume that election results reveal something about the mood of the electorate. Although it is certainly possible to compare election results, both geographically and historically, I will treat them here as indicators, not as trends. With this more

¹James Q. Wilson, American Government: Institutions and Policies, 5th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), p. 200.

²Byron E. Shafer, ed. The End of Realignment?: Interpreting American Electoral Eras (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 3.

³*Ibid.*, p. 3.

modest goal in mind, what may we say about the recent election?

First, it represents the largest turnover of incumbent office holders since 1980 when Ronald Reagan was first elected president and Republicans captured control of the Senate. The "Reagan Revolution," it was called, but by 1982 it had clearly lost momentum. That could happen again.

This raises a second point: the heightening of public expectations. We are always seeking the "signs of the times." When an unexpected change takes place, we ask: What does it mean, now or in the future? Historically, this sort of question has been usually referred to a priesthood of some sort. The "polltakers" of ancient Rome, priests called augurs (from whom we get the word inaugurate) would read the auspices: that is, the signs of the times. On what might be called an "auspicious occasion" when the reading was favorable, a Julius Caesar, who was the high priest, might choose to cross the Rubicon with his army in defiance of the Senate. On an inauspicious occasion, he might die on the Ides of March at the hand of assassins.

Modern political science may be regarded as a more sophisticated form of such "fortune telling" but its purpose is much the same: to get an accurate fix on the future. All the same, it has never been an exact science. Human behavior is so richly complicated and changeable. But given the nature of our political and economic system it is only natural that we should also demand a priesthood of some kind: one skilled at testing the political winds and appeasing what Francis Bacon called "the idols of the marketplace," or what we today might call the gods

of the voting booth. Since the 1930s political poll-taking and marketing surveys have increasingly filled this niche for prediction. Polling has become important because of the growth of Big Government and Big Business, and because it works. Human behavior may be predicted in the aggregate with surprising accuracy. Programs, contracts, and careers are at stake every time a new product is sold or an election is held. The stakes are too high to leave matters to chance, whether to consumer demand or to voter preference. Polling provides feedback. New products or policies may be test-marketed before being entrusted to the mercy of the market or the electorate. Consequently, poll-takers own the days and weeks immediately before an election.

Yet it is a flawed system at best. In the Spring of 1991 George Bush appeared to be unbeatable. His popularity ratings reached the 80% range. Even so, he fell the following year to a relatively unknown Democratic challenger with what the pollsters call "high negatives."

Third, there is an unusual fact about this election worth noting. For the first time in many years, the reelection rate for *incumbents* -- that is, for current office-holders -- dropped below 90%. This has become rare. By the mid-1980s it was common knowledge that election to Congress was tantamount to being fixed for life. Until the recent election, the average length of service in Congress by the leadership, including party leaders and committee chairmen, was around thirty years. By the 1980s the turnover of congressional seats had become so low that,

during the 1986 and 1988 elections, over 98% of incumbents who ran for reelection to Congress were returned to office. During one of those years, only three incumbents were defeated, despite the growing unpopularity of Congress itself.

The reason for this is instructive. Members of Congress had learned by then that the key to reelection is massaging the constituents. This is known as *casework*. Pork barrel -- or bringing home the bacon -- is only one means of cultivating voter loyalty. Visibility and accessibility to constituents are also very important, something that Guy Vander Jagt of Holland, Michigan learned the hard way during the Republican primary in 1990. The growing popularity of term limits is indicative of a perception by voters that the perks of office give members of Congress an unfair advantage at election time.

A fourth factor to consider is the existence of a large and still growing block of independent voters who do not register with either major party. This is still a comparatively new phenomenon. Like the so-called liberal Republicans and Reagan Democrats, these independents are an important part of the swing vote in any given election. Whether they may be absorbed into an existing party, coalesce into a new party, or continue to fragment further remains to be seen.

Here it is useful to put these questions into historical context as we consider possible scenarios for the future.

First, each previous critical election or realignment has always been preceded by large gains in the House of Representatives in previous elections. Let us look at the three

strongest cases -- 1860, 1896, and 1932 -- beginning with the first. The Republican Party was originally formed by members of the Whig, Free Soil, and other minor parties in 1854. Yet it capitalized on public frustration and captured 46 House seats (behind the Democratic and American parties) in the congressional election that same year. It continued to grow in power until 1860, when Republicans captured the White House with only 39% of the popular vote and several states from the Democratic South seceded.

Following the Civil War, several major shifts of fifty or more seats in the House took place in 1890 (Democratic), 1894 (Republican), 1910 and 1912 (Democratic), 1920 (Republican), and 1922 (Democratic). Yet none of these surges or countersurges has been described as a critical election. In 1890, the year of the Billion Dollar Congress, the Democrats gained seventy-six seats while a Republican occupied the White House. This was followed four years later in 1894 with a 117 seat gain by the Republicans while an increasingly unpopular Democratic president lost support within his own party. The so-called critical election of 1896 simply confirmed a renewal of Republican dominance.

The 1932 presidential election which inaugurated a generation of Democratic dominance was preceded by a fifty-three seat gain in the House in 1930 that led to a Democratic majority that persisted with only two brief interruptions until this year. But no election since 1932 has created a new party coalition capable of putting its signature on national politics. Now and then some progress has been made by the Republicans, but it

either stalls, as in 1938, or fails, as in 1946, and is reversed two years later. [The Republican party gained over fifty seats in 1938 during the so-called Second Depression and briefly took over Congress after gaining fifty-five seats in the 1946 election. But neither of these congressional elections was followed up by a Republican presidential victory. In 1948, in fact, the Republicans lost seventy-four seats in the House when Harry Truman narrowly won the general election.] On the other hand, when the Democrats substantially increased their existing majority in Congress in 1958 and again in 1974, they were able to reclaim the White House two years later.

It is clear that electoral realignment is a rare phenomenon: a fact that tends to reinforce what the framers of the Constitution intended. The House of Representatives was designed to be the most sensitive gauge of the public mood. Periodically it is shaken up by a major housecleaning when the public mood changes. The 1994 election produced the greatest numerical increase in membership by one congressional party in the last forty-six years. But nothing is inevitable or automatic about what follows. Whether this is the beginning of a surge to the right, a revitalization of the Republican party, or even a prelude to a restructuring of the party system remains to be seen.