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In studying U. S. elections, patterns over time have always drawn interest. Certainly, this is true in American political development, where a scholarly generation of the 1950s and 1960s crafted an interpretative synthesis that echoes still. Political science was joined with history. “Critical elections” and “realignment eras” blossomed into prominence courtesy of E. E. Schattschneider, V. O. Key, Jr., Walter Dean Burnham, and James L. Sundquist.¹

Ideas of patterns had existed previously. Canonical still in the 1940s, if indiscriminating, was the idea of unending Republican dominance since the Civil War. The Democratic 1930s had shaken that picture, but it took Harry Truman’s startling victory in 1948 to spur a decisive rethink (Rosenof 2003, chs. 2-4). Then, in acknowledgement of the earthquake of the 1930s, in deference to possible such previous junctures, and in expectation, often joined with hope, of such possible future junctures—the mid-1960s arose as a favorite—American electoral history came to be sorted into long eras bounded by shocks. “Party systems,” “cycles,” “oscillation,” “tides,” “periodicity,” and “pendulum” lined up with “critical elections” and “realignments” in a lexicon of metaphors.

Central were the elections of 1800, 1828, and 1860, which brought to power the Jeffersonian Democrats, the Jacksonian Democrats, and the Civil War Republicans; that of 1896, which nearly, but not quite, empowered the populist-leaning Democrats led by William Jennings Bryan, and that of 1932 ushering in the New Deal. V. O. Key, Jr. saw such elections as “the most striking instances of electoral interposition in the governing process” (1964, 535). A periodicity of every 30 years or so came to be sighted. Discernible in the long run, perhaps, was a choppy evolution toward progress as spans of frustrating policy stasis gave way to abrupt, effective assertions of popular will (Burnham 1967, 301). On the measurement side, the realignments school took pains to show that the stipulated elections were in fact hinge points of coalitional change in a long time series (Key 1955; Burnham 1970; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980). Breakpoints like those of 1896 and 1932 were seen to leave statistical tracks. The various authors saw that “realigning election” could have either or both of two connotations. The term could mean “surge”: One party jumps to a higher plateau of electoral percentage and stays there a long time. But it could mean “interaction:” One party might score large, permanent gains in certain sectors of the electorate but simultaneously lose in other sectors, bringing no necessary net change in overall voter balance.²

¹ Rosenof (2003) is the authoritative history of this synthesis. The texts of it include Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960, ch. 5; Burnham 1965, 1967, 1970; Sundquist 1973. For a discussion of the empirical claims of the genre, see Mayhew 2002, ch. 2.

² See Mayhew 2002, 44-54. Bartels 1998 and Stonecash and Silina 2005 are sensitive to both of these connotations.

Alongside the realignments school, the postwar period brought the Michigan school's pioneering *American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). Survey analysis using national datasets thus came of age. "Party identification" joined the explanatory palette. Scarcely could the Michigan and realignments schools have differed more in analytic sinews, but there was a surprising congruence. The Michigan writers, in diagnosing a long-term constancy in party identification, backed up the realignments idea of long eras. Just as the Woodrow Wilson elections of 1912 and 1916 had once been seen as "exceptions" in a Republican era, now the Dwight Eisenhower elections of 1952 and 1956, and soon the Richard Nixon election of 1968, could be seen as "deviating" ones in a Democratic era (Rosenof 2003, 7, 25, 78, 87; Campbell 1966; Miller and Levitin 1976, 9-10). On exhibit in the new datasets was a "normal vote" (Converse 1966).

Classic was this array of theories, concepts, accounts, and data from the 1950s and 1960s. But history moves on as does scholarship. The changes have been many and vast. One quarter of U. S. national history has elapsed *since* the innovations outlined above. Today, in the study of elections we accommodate the often surprising course of political life since that time. We have new emphases—for example, race and multiculturalism. We have new analytic frames—econometrics; opinion tracking during campaigns. We have new themes, like divided party control and incumbency advantage. We have new concepts such as "balancing," "thermostatic" rotation, policy "blowback," voter "updating," and "retrospective voting." Party identification has come to look less like a constant, more like a variable—"a running tabulation of retrospective evaluations" (Fiorina 1981, 89; see also MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). We have learned to disaggregate congressional from presidential elections. These days, the two are studied chiefly separately. In the old "party systems" scholarship, reasonably in light of experience back then, the two realms were lumped together. Also, the writing of history has not stood still. We now enjoy, for example, fresh works on the elections of 1840 (Holt 1985), 1876 (Holt 2008), 1896 (Bensel 2008), 1912 (Milkis 2009), and 1948 (Busch 2012). We have new or revamped datasets—on the elections of 1787-1825 for many offices (Lampi 2012), on U. S. House election returns for earlier times (Rusk 2001), on unemployment before the 1940s (a window into the New Deal elections – Kiewiet and Udell 1998), and on public opinion in the late 1930s and 1940s (Berinsky 2009, Ellis and Stimson 2009, Schickler and Caughey 2011, Norpoth 2012).

In the face of these developments, the realignments synthesis has sagged.³ Since 1932, notwithstanding alertness for a major new realigning event,⁴ none has drawn wide support. In recent times, the theory has risked appearing a "plaything of quadrennial contests" as new realignments are routinely sighted (Rosenof 2003, 165). Alternative periodizations of the two centuries of history, and alternative stand-out elections, have grown in notice.⁵ The featured 1896 election has not held up well as a hinge point: "The data do not indicate that an abrupt change occurred in 1896," a recent

³ Critical commentaries include Lichtman 1982; McCormick 1982; Carmines and Stimson 1989, 19-26; Shafer 1991; Mayhew 2002.

⁴ For example, Aldrich and Niemi 1996.

⁵ For an example of an alternative diagnosis of stand-out elections, see Hawley and Sagarzazu 2012, 733.

analysis concluded (Stonecash and Silina 2005, 3).⁶ Gradual, as opposed to every-30-years-or-so electoral change—Key called the former “secular realignment” (1959)—has kept looking good as a general analytic bet. On balance, in explanatory style, we have edged away from widely separated upwellings of popular will toward other motors of electoral change. Long-term holism has come to share space with short-term, event-driven nominalism.

How does it all look now? Why, and in what resultant patterns, has electoral behavior lined up the way it has done during the more than two centuries of American history? Below are six discussions of pattern and cause. I draw on history, political science, and economics.

The economy

Nothing has added more to the picture than the econometric analysis of elections, which Gerald H. Kramer introduced to political science in 1971. Economic ups and downs had always been noted, but here was a dose of skilled measurement. The econometric insight has its ceilings. In time-series analyses using economic variables, it seems hard to explain more than a third of the variance in presidential elections or more than half in House elections. A good deal of room is left over. But the gist is there. Inflation and sagging growth in personal income (or, alternative to the latter, high unemployment), harm parties in possession of the White House in both presidential and congressional voting, and the opposite tendencies help them.⁷

To be sure, “as we go backward in time, the quality of available [economic] data deteriorates” (Balke and Gordon 1989, 41). This is a major problem for the nineteenth century. But economic indicators are not entirely lacking,⁸ and, at any rate, the core causal insight can be projected backward through historians’ accounts of crashes, booms, and elections to get a sense of what was going on.

On the crash side, it is a large story. There is a preface. In the 1780s, a “truly disastrous” economic decline of some 46 percent (compare: 48 percent in the Great Depression of 1929) backgrounded the writing of the U.S. Constitution. “By 1787 the insolvency of the national government was total.” Something had to be done, and it was.⁹ In effect, the economic crisis

⁶ The authors test for abrupt lasting changes in national vote share for Democratic presidential and House candidates, in demographic configurations of the vote, and in policy discourse during campaigns. See also Mayhew 2002, 43-60, 128-40. Relevant time-series measurement appears in Bartels 1998, 313-17; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980, ch. 3; Hawley and Sagarzazu 2012, 732-33, 736.

⁷ Kramer covered 1896 through 1964. Two recent treatments reaching back to 1916 are Fair 2002, 2009. An especially useful study is Kiewiet and Udell 1998, which accommodates 51 biennial House elections from 1892 through 1992 drawing on new or improved data. Analysis of this sort sidesteps the “interaction” connotation of the original realignments genre; net party ups and downs are the focus.

⁸ See, for example, Balke and Gordon 1989, 84-85; Curry and Morris 2010.

⁹ McCusker and Menard 1985, 358-77, first quotation at 373; Edling 2003, ch. 10, second quotation at 149. “During the middle years of the 1780s, slumping exports, falling prices for agricultural products, lower wages, and

empowered a new ruling coalition at Philadelphia. For its part, the nineteenth century brought a series of disastrous trans-Atlantic banking crises linked to depressions (Rockoff 2000, 665-73). The impact on American elections was stark. The panic of 1837—“by far the most severe before the Civil War” (Rockoff 2000, 665; see also Howe 2007, 502-08; Roberts 2012)—seems to have brought the Whigs their first (and only full party-control) shot at national power in the election of 1840. Michael F. Holt (1985) has shown how support for the ruling Martin Van Buren Democrats ebbed month by month through 1840 as the economy soured. The banking panic of 1873, which inaugurated “perhaps the most severe economic depression of the nineteenth century” (Holt 2008, 10), left a deep political imprint. The ensuing midterm verdict of 1874 had additional roots, yet one judgment goes: “Only the depression can explain the electoral tidal wave that swept the North in 1874.” It brought “the greatest reversal of party alignments in the entire nineteenth century” (Foner 1988, 523). The Democrats thus surged to control of the House—bad tidings for the already flagging policies of Reconstruction in the Deep South. But the Republicans would see better days, too. The severe depression of 1893 during the second Grover Cleveland presidency levered a record gain for a congressional out-party that still stands—120 House seats to the GOP in the midterm election of 1894 (Glad 1964, ch. 4; Jensen 1971, ch. 8; McSeveney 1972, chs. 2, 4)—and its impulse carried into the McKinley-Bryan election of 1896. Tested by shift in party vote share, the 1894 House election was a major marker as had been that of 1874 (Norpoth and Rusk 2007).¹⁰

In the twentieth century, the huge electoral impact of the Great Depression of 1929 does not need retelling, but we have not realized how ragged the economy was in the late teens under Wilson. For the whole century, the peak-to-trough decline in real per capita GDP during 1916 to 1920 ranked second only to that during 1929 to 1933. “Macro contractions” of this sort can be associated with wars (Barro and Ursúa 2009, 3, 5, 34-35). The Warren Harding election of 1920, which still ranks number one in scale of Republican victory, had a luxury of multiple causation, but a very bad economy seems to have weighed heavily (Fair 2002, 8-10). More recently, calendar 1980 brought by far the worst election economy of the four decades after World War II, featuring both inflation and unemployment—the setting for the Reagan revolution (Erikson 1989, 569, 572; Fair 2002, 9, 14).¹¹

Booms can count, too. The usual suspects come to mind—the William McKinley years, the Calvin Coolidge years, the 1960s. Perhaps underestimated is the contribution of post-World War II

stagnant industries caused widespread hardship, indebtedness, and, eventually, armed protests” (Campbell 2008, 43).

¹⁰ Here also the “interaction” connotation of the original realignments genre is skirted.

¹¹ In reading British history, I have been surprised that writers show virtually no interest in a possible relation between economic crises and electoral downturns (although see Hodgson and Maloney 2012). Certain patterns seem to be there. The first two elections in which a British opposition party displaced an incumbent party directly courtesy of an election were those of 1841 and 1874 held in the throes of bad slumps (Evans 1983, 261-62; Parry 1993, 141-49, 272). The election of 1895 seems another promising case (see Mayhew 2002, 150). In all these instances the Tories ousted Whig or Liberal governments. For the Depression-ridden election of 1931, when a floundering Labour-led coalition lost overwhelmingly to a Tory-centered one, Achen and Bartels have connected the dots (2005, 20).

prosperity, which was something of a surprise, to the fortunes of the Democrats and the Truman administration (Norpoth and Suong 2010; Higgs 1992).

Statistical relations understate the drama and drive of history. At the least, in an economic crisis, an opposition party needs to mount a credible case that “It’s all their fault.” Textbook examples are the Republican platform of 1896 and the Democratic platform of 1932. But it goes well beyond that. Central to history are the parties’ competing visions of political economy—their webs of stories regarding what causes what in the economic realm. Those visions can receive a thorough workout in a crisis—as with “the money question” in the 1870s and 1890s (Barreyre 2011, DeCanio 2005, Ritter, 1997). A crisis-driven election can help delegitimize a dominant view of governing: Thus 1840 was bad news for the Jacksonian banking philosophy, 1896 for the Democrats’ traditional small-government ideology as carried forth by the Cleveland administration (Gerring 1998, ch. 5; Huston 1993), 1932 for the voluntaristic, cooperative capitalism championed by Herbert Hoover in the 1920s, and 1980 for the managerial Keynesianism dominant since the 1940s. Also, crises can spur ideological invention. In terms of hinge points, the main importance of the election of 1896 seems to lie in its historic switch by the Democratic Party, fed up with the discredited Cleveland policies, toward activist government at the behest of its Bryan faction (Gerring 1998, ch. 6). Thus also the Republicans’ commitment to protectionism as a blueprint and tonic in their election appeals of 1860 (Huston 1987)¹² and of 1894 and 1896 (McSeveney 1972), the Democrats’ move to hands-on government in 1932, and the neo-liberal economics of the Reaganites in 1980.

To return to the econometrics, there is a point about development in the long term. What can it mean if year after year, decade after decade, voters tend to reward governments for prosperity and penalize them for slumps? In general, governing parties are likely to react by doing their best to spur economic growth (Kiewiet 2000). Across the two centuries, in effect, American voters have kept asking for a growth regime and the competing parties, accordingly incentivized, have worked to give them one.

National security crises

Since 1789, roughly half the two-year intervals between national elections have brought national security crises, events, or at least situations, of one kind or another. This includes hot wars, the insurgency-rich context of the Deep South during Reconstruction, the span of the Cold War, the war scares of 1798 (with France), 1808 (with England), 1860 (looming secession), 1916 (with Germany), 1940 (with the Axis powers), 1948 (the Berlin blockade and airlift), and 1962 (the Cuban missile crisis), and it includes the discordant aftermaths of wars as in 1815-16, 1945-46, and 1919-20.

Often, elections have been affected (Mayhew 2005, 482-84; Saldin 2011). It seems a good bet that national security has rivaled the economy in influencing elections. Why do we have a well-

¹² The panic of 1857 had hit especially hard in the mining and manufacturing areas of pivotal Pennsylvania. Tariff protection could be a remedy and prophylactic.

developed science of the one but not the other? Chiefly, it is because national security situations cannot be easily metricized. The variety of the events cited above suggests the problem. But even in the case of certifiable hot wars, voters may make judgments for at least three distinct reasons (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006): Wars can be costly in money and casualties, they can be successful or unsuccessful—who's winning? (Sidman and Norpoth 2012), and they can be popular or unpopular in principle—a feature of special importance when an opposition party balks from the start, flags in support, or calls for quits, as has routinely happened (Berinsky 2009). On the cost and success fronts, wars can pose “valence” issues; on the principle front they can pose “position” issues (Stokes 1966).

All this makes for an analytic nightmare. But that does not end the question. Good traction is available in some areas. For example, cross-sectional analysis—does an incumbent party do especially worse than last time in states or districts high in war casualties?—points to downside casualty effects in the far-apart midterms of 1862-63 during the Civil War and 2006 during the Iraq War (Carson et al. 2001, Kriner and Shen 2007, Grose and Oppenheimer 2007). Generally speaking, a sense of the particularities is required. Obviously, casualty rates alone do not dictate. In all of U.S. history, the most blood-drenched election years were 1864 and 1944, when military success (the capture of Atlanta and, among other things, D-Day) and a sufficient war popularity (in the Civil War case, the resoluteness of the Unionists) overrode casualties. A poor mix of troubles on the fronts of cost, success, and principle can be deadly for an incumbent party as seen in 1952 (Korea), 1968 (Vietnam), and 2006 (Iraq).¹³ Going back in history, it is well to notice the threat contexts that perhaps aided Wilson in 1916 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1940. At times, as in 1798-1800 (France), 1846-48 (Mexico), and 1898-1900 (Spain), war-related matters led the content of the politics but it is hard to see who came out ahead electorally.¹⁴ It is easy enough for the election of 1816, when the Federalists became “the most conspicuous casualty of the War of 1812” (Turner 1971, 299).¹⁵ Their foot-dragging in that ultimately boasted-about war finally did them in.

Neglect of the election of 1920 is a particular vulnerability of the realignments canon. Difficulties tumbled out of World War I into 1919 and 1920—demobilization, ethnic resentments, race riots, crippling strikes, a red scare, international revolution, not to mention the botched Versailles Treaty ratification and the lame economy. All this happened on the watch of the Wilson presidency. The Democrats suffered an all-time disaster in November 1920.¹⁶ Republican fortunes lasted. The statistical case for a 1920 realignment hinge is good (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980, 92-93; Bartels 1998, 313-17; Mayhew 2002, 128-30). In the presidential vote, no party otherwise has lost by

¹³ In a multivariate analysis covering presidential elections from 1948 through 2000, Bartels and Zaller 2001, using a war dummy variable for 1952 and 1968, find a four percent penalty. On the 2006 midterm: Jacobson 2007. Also on 1952: Divine 1974b, chs. 1-2. Also on 1968: Converse et al. 1969.

¹⁴ On the 1790s, see Elkins and McKittrick 1993, 691-726; Edling 2003, 137, 215-16; Sharp 2010, chs. 4-7. On the 1840s: Holt 1999, chs. 8-11. On the 1890s: Saldin 2011, ch. 2.

¹⁵ See also Mayhew 2005, 484.

¹⁶ In the resulting Congress, the Democrats had only 23 House members from outside the South (taken to include Kentucky and Oklahoma); no Democrats at all were elected from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Iowa. No Democrat won a Senate seat anywhere outside the South in 1920.

consecutive margins of 26, 25, and 17 percent as did the Democrats in 1920, 1924, and 1928.¹⁷ In the House national vote, the Democrats' worst showings in history have been those of 1920, 1924, 1926, and 1928.¹⁸ Kramer, in his model, remarked on the Republican-side residuals for most of the 1920s (1971, 65). Blowback from the war is a plausible basis of this Republican era, although other factors might have helped—the prosperity of the mid-1920s, possibly some tricky effects of women's suffrage.

There is a general point. The long periodic cycles of the realignments genre are roughly compatible with business cycles, which sort into widely spaced panics. But what about shocks such as wars that might also have knock-on coalitional effects? Suppose they occur randomly or, by the standard of long cycles, off-calendar? Then what? Then we might expect short as well as long spans of voter constancy—as in the interval between 1860 and 1874, or between 1920 and 1932.¹⁹

Race

Along with the economy and wars, race issues complete a threesome of chronic high-impact ingredients of American elections. Slavery, the South, and civil rights keep coming up. This is well-known for the 1860s and the coalitional volatility before that in the elections of, for example, 1848, 1854, and 1856 (Sundquist 1973, chs. 4, 5).

It is plain for the 1870s, too, although the realignments school went light on that decade. They did not see a realignment in the election sequence of 1874 and 1876 (the disputed contest between Rutherford Hayes and Samuel Tilden – see Holt 2008). Yet, on grounds of a statistical hinge point as well as event or policy history, the case for the mid-1870s as a realigning hinge seems at least as good as that for, say, the mid-1890s (Mayhew 2002, 54-59). It was an eventful decade. The depression of 1873 struck and Reconstruction floundered. In a flex of multiple determination, both depression anxieties and Reconstruction fatigue poured into the disruptive midterm of 1874, which has been called a “constitutional moment” (McConnell 1994). The election settlement of 1876-77 closed off federal protection for mixed-race Republican coalitions that had been electing state governments in the Deep South in the face of insurrection and intimidation.²⁰

¹⁷ By contrast, for example, McKinley won by 4 and 6 percent in 1896 and 1900.

¹⁸ See Norpoth and Rusk 2007, 401. The Democrats did better in 1922 due to economic factors, but their performance was still poor.

¹⁹ See Norpoth and Rusk 2007, 401. See also in Britain the devastation of the Liberal Party associated with conducting World War I and, just over a decade later, the woes of the incumbent Labour Party decked by the depression in 1929-31. In Germany, three shocks and you're out seems to have been the fate of the centrist Weimar coalition that presided over the armistice in 1918, the inflation in 1923, and the depression in 1929.

²⁰ In important respects, Reconstruction or its effects continued well beyond the 1870s. Full disfranchisement of the African-Americans of the South, who at times and places figured in winning electoral coalitions, did not occur until a sequence of state-by-state moves beginning in 1890 (Kousser 1974; Perman 2001). At stake in the 1870s, however, was control of the state governments of the Deep South where blacks were a majority of the population or nearly so—notably Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. These governments were major prizes. By 1877,

One set of junctures might be explored more. Lawmaking was once routinely carried on in lame-duck sessions after elections. In three widely spaced Congresses after the Civil War, Republican majorities pressed high-publicity civil rights bills that pended *during* midterm elections. A flavor of popular referendum was thus available. Voters could watch and react. How much did this happen? The instances are the eventual Civil Rights Act of 1875 that was on hold in late 1874 (Holt 2008, 12-13; McConnell 1994; Calhoun 2006, 59-60), the “Force bill” to secure African-American suffrage in 1890 (Schickler 2001, 42-43; Calhoun 2006, 252-53), and the Dyer antilynching bill in 1922 (Jenkins, Peck, and Weaver 2010, 66-77). The first was enacted in weakened form; the latter two died in the lame-duck sessions. Many things drove the three midterms, but there is plenty of explanatory room in losses of 96, 85, and 75 seats.

After World War II, once the Democratic Party embraced civil rights, the old “solid South” immediately broke up at the presidential level. Starting in 1948, no Democrat except Jimmy Carter in 1976 has carried more than seven of the eleven secession states. Then, the 1960s brought the well-known electoral effects of that era’s Democratic-led policy moves in civil rights (Carmines and Stimson 1989). “Interaction,” as especially blacks and southern whites swung their voting weight in opposite directions, possibly outscored any net national party “surge.”²¹

Long-term parity

There are patterns of other kinds. In the very long haul, one is a near equality in party electoral performance. In the presidential elections of 1828 through 2008, the Democrats won a median of 50.4 percent of the major-party popular vote, a mean of 49.5 percent (Mayhew 2012). To add 2012 to this span,²² the Democrats took taken the White House 22 times starting in 1828, the Republicans (or the Whigs before them) 25 times. The Electoral College tipped the Republicans to victory in 1876, 1888, and 2000, yet a messy context may point the other way in 1960.²³ The long-run popular vote edge might thus be 24 to 23 Democratic.²⁴ In the major-party vote for U. S. House, the

white-supremacy Democrats had them all, and they kept them. The decade’s paramilitary activity aiding that outcome is recounted in Lemann 2007; Zuczek 1996, chs. 8, 9.

²¹ For a relevant perspective, see Hawley and Sagarzazu 2012, 734.

²² As of this writing, the outcome of the 2012 election was certain, but the parties’ exact shares of the presidential and congressional vote were not.

²³ It hinges on the Alabama count. A respectable case exists that Nixon won an edge in the national popular vote in 1960. See Mayhew 2011, 4-5, 10-11. From World War II through 2012, using plausible statistics, the Electoral College slightly favored the Republicans eight times (certainly in 2000), the Democrats nine times (including in 2004, 2008, and 2012). See Mayhew 2011, 17-22.

²⁴ The very close election of 1888 instances an ambiguity. That contest seems to be the best historical bet for a split result caused by intimidation of southern African-Americans from the polls. Absent that intimidation, the Republican Benjamin Harrison might have won a national popular vote edge (in the accepted accounts, he did not) to match his real winning Electoral College edge.

Democrats scored a mean 51.3 percent in the elections of 1828 through 2004;²⁵ there is no overall trend (Robbins and Norpoth 2010, 322).

Parties have bad spells, but over time luck and smart strategy are likely to bring them back.²⁶ There are “equilibrium tendencies” (Stokes and Iversen 1966, 190). The incentive for a party to claw its way to parity and edge is one of the most powerful in politics (Downs 1957). There is no shortage of such strategic behavior in American history. To their great advantage, for example, the Democrats led the disfranchisement of southern blacks in the late nineteenth century (Perman 2001; Tuck 2009; Valley 2004, ch. 6), and also executed an 180-degree switch from their old agrarian anti-statism as the industrial age arrived (James 2000). Then they appealed to the black vote starting in the 1930s. For the Republicans, a classic instance is their “southern strategy” in the 1960s aimed at anti-civil rights whites. Adaptations like these have revolutionized the geography of American politics: The election maps these days are a near converse of those of a century ago. Now as then, Vermont and South Carolina are at opposite poles, but the party labels on the poles have switched.

Has immigration been a parity breaker? Not really. In general, as seen in Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, Speaker Joseph Cannon around 1900, and George W. Bush, the Republicans have been pretty good at tamping down their nativist base so as to avoid alienating immigrant communities fatally. In the late nineteenth century, demographic trends borne of white immigration that seemed to favor the Democrats proved no match for bad luck (the 1893 depression) and a McKinley stance of cultural inclusiveness (Tichenor 2002, ch. 3; McSeveney 1972, chs. 1, 2). Today, regarding immigration, it would be unwise to buy a theory that has the Democrats riding a demographic elevator to endless success. In general, that is not the way politics works, at least not for long.²⁷

Short-term equilibration

For those seeing regularities across elections, long-term periodicity has largely given way to short-term equilibration. “Thermostatic” rotation is one take. Incumbent parties lean either liberal or conservative (to cite today’s sides) in their policymaking. Whichever, voters react after awhile by leaning the other way, eventually ousting the in-party and empowering the out-party, then become satisfied for awhile, but then get fed up and lean the other way, and so on. There is symmetry across the parties. Thus the electorate swung conservative after a taste of the Great Society, liberal after a taste of Reaganism. All this is well-measured in public opinion. The effect is of “decade-long swings

²⁵ Republican non-contestation of large numbers of southern House seats during the many decades of the “Solid South” may, in a sense, pad this figure a bit for the Democrats.

²⁶ The Federalists and Whigs suffered both luck and strategy difficulties.

²⁷ For skepticism about any such current elevator, see Caraley 2009.

in the fortunes of ideology and party” that trigger occasional turnovers in party control (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, ch. 9, quotation at 374).²⁸

“Balancing” is another homeostatic emphasis. Notably in congressional midterm elections, voters may balance ideologically against the party controlling the White House by trimming its seat shares on Capitol Hill (Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Fiorina 2002; Erikson 2010; Busch 1999). Whatever the explanation of it, little is more central to American politics and governing than midterm sag. Since 1840, parties holding the White House have lost House seats 93 percent of the time in the midterms. Formal party control of the House has sunk away a third of the time. The eighteenth-century idea of two-year accountability lives on.

“Blowback” is another emphasis, notably in the midterms. In focus here are particular policy initiatives of the previous two years that raise a storm. The midterm penalty takes a special jump. Good cases recently are 1994, 2006, and 2010, when the Clinton legislative program, the Iraq War, and the Obama legislative program stirred blowback. These effects were apparently general—that is, overall net sags—but they can be seen cross-sectionally in the greater penalties suffered by House members of the president’s party who cast roll calls *for* certain White House measures as opposed to those who voted *against* them. Examples of such burdens are Bill Clinton’s 1993 budget, the Iraq War resolution, and the Affordable Care Act (Jacobson 1996; Grose and Oppenheimer 2007; Brady, Fiorina, and Wilkins 2011). It is well to keep such blowback in mind in parsing American history. Quick, decisive voter reactions against policy lurches from the status quo may often be a simple and sufficient story. Electoral devastation for northern Democrats followed the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 (Potter 1976, 174-76). Devastation for Republicans followed the enactments (and their press for the “Force bill”) of their “billion dollar Congress” in 1890 (Schickler 2001, 42-43; Williams 1978, 41-53).

Aiding these various homeostatic patterns is probably the following. Especially in single-member-district systems like the British and American, elections can generate governments that are somewhat distanced on either ideological side, depending on the winning party, from the median voter (Kim, Powell, and Fording 2010; Bafumi and Herron 2010). Policy enterprises keyed to party “bases” may accordingly be undertaken. Voter penalties may ensue. Parties aiming to wire their major policies into law irreversibly may take the risk. The all-time instance is possibly 1860: The Republicans, poised at an extreme in a four-party race, won the presidency then with 39.9 percent of the vote and stuck to their antislavery platform. Yet median-voter mandates can be clocked and performed on, too. Plausible instances include the sign-off to muscular Reconstruction in 1876, the

²⁸ This analysis seems consonant with that of Merrill, Grofman, and Brunell (2008), who employ a “spectral analysis” in a search for periodic cycles in House and Senate seat shares and in the presidential vote during 1854-2006. The authors report a regularity. In House or Senate seat shares, spells of 13 or so years of ascendancy for one party give way to such spells for the other. Abrupt change points do not seem to figure. Any effect in the presidential vote is faint to nonexistent.

Progressive impulse in 1912, the “do something” message of 1932, the yes to Cold War stiffening in 1948, and the endorsement of basic civil rights in 1964.²⁹

Personal incumbency advantage

At the congressional level, the parties may enjoy long spans of good electoral fortune. These are sometimes, although not always, inaugurated by shocks as in 1874, 1894, 1920, and 1932.³⁰ The Democrats’ domination of the House for 40 years starting in 1954 (no initial shock there) stands out. In general, lasting edges in party identification among voters no doubt assist these spans as does a tendency for individual candidate traits to cancel out across the many states and districts. Yet there is another factor. In any election year, in the bulk of House and Senate constituencies, incumbents run again. Incumbents enjoy a leg up. Congressional majority parties field more incumbents than do minority parties. Hence a boost for stationary party control of a chamber. What with a rise in the value of personal incumbency in the 1960s, this logic seems to have worked with special force during the Democratic House hegemony of 1954-1994 (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992; Jacobson 2001, 107-10; Norpoth and Rusk 2007, 399-400). Recently, in the election of 2012, the 63 Republican House freshmen who had captured Democratic seats in the midterm of 2010, and then ran again facing Democratic challengers, fared an average 2.6 percent better than they had done in 2010— notwithstanding a nationwide four percent pro-Democratic shift in the House vote between the elections. This statistical “sophomore surge” occurred largely independent of who controlled the redistricting processes in 2011-12 (Mayhew 2013).

In at least two respects, presidential elections work somewhat differently. First, in the flush of publicity at the presidential level, candidate traits, including perceived managerial abilities, can render party identification an also-ran in the minds of swing voters. It seems to fade as a determining factor. From 1900 through 2012, using plausible data guesses where needed, the party with a likely identification edge among actual voters took the White House 17 of 28 times. Coin flips might have yielded 14 victories.³¹ “Deviation” is very common.³² Second, chronic open-seat elections—that is, no incumbent running—have been amply dished up at the presidential level by the norm and, then, the constitutional requirement of term limits. Running an incumbent presidential candidate does indeed give a party a leg up as it does in congressional elections. Vote bonuses of 4 and 6 percent are

²⁹ Such verdicts do not necessarily take the form of blow-away election percentages for one victorious party. On 1912, see Milkis 2009. On 1948, Busch 2012. On 1964, Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2006.

³⁰ In the case of 1874, that meant Democratic control of the House for 16 of the ensuing 20 years.

³¹ See Mayhew 2008, 203-04. The election of 2004 is omitted since party identification among voters that year seems to have been a tie.

³² An extreme case of executive “deviation” is New York City. It is thought-provoking as a boundary instance (see Arnold and Carnes 2012). Democrats have held the city council, and a likely party identification edge to match, since 1915. Yet during that time through 2012, Republican-based coalitions won the mayoralty, the city’s top prize, with Fiorello La Guardia, John Lindsay (for his first term), Rudy Giuliani, and Mike Bloomberg. Nine times the mayoralty shifted party flavor in elections. Therein lies much of the city’s political history. In companion respects, the United States at the national level bears at least a slight resemblance to New York City.

reported (Fair 2002, 46-51; Weisberg 2002).³³ But that leg up makes for its own kind of story at the presidential level. The advantage can be generous, but the possibility for it vanishes frequently and, at such open-seat junctures, completely (since the office is one-person). Open-seat presidential contests are both commonplace and a species apart.³⁴ Gans (1985), in a study of presidential elections from 1856 through 1980, reports that a presidential contest four years ago offers virtually zero predictive power for a contest this year featuring fresh candidates—either in which party wins or in party vote share.

The upshot is an overarching pattern (Mayhew 2008). From 1788 through 2012, the United States held 57 presidential elections. For 55 of those cases, it makes sense to ask the question: Did the party holding the White House keep it?³⁵ Those cases can be sorted into 32 where the in-party ran an incumbent as candidate (as in 2004 and 2012) and 23 that were open-seat contests (as in 2000 and 2008).³⁶ What kind of a difference did this make? A clear pattern jumps out. Basically, it is a disparity of two-to-one versus tossup—69 percent versus 48 percent. Parties running an incumbent candidate won 22 of 32 times—a profile of advantage. In-parties in open-seat contests won 11 of 23 times—no advantage at all.

Several reasons for this gap are plausible (Campbell 2000, 110-23). On the incumbency advantage side, strategic manipulation of personal candidacies by the in-parties or out-parties may play a role, although this factor is probably minor.³⁷ Some incumbents may be just plain superior politicians—like Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton—who might roll on endlessly age and law permitting (Zaller 1998). Voters, for their part, can be risk-averse: Why take a chance on a newcomer? There are the fruits of office: White House occupants can gain new skills and flex them, stock up campaign money, make appealing speeches and appointments, rev up the economy, issue executive orders at apt times, these days dispatch cruise missiles or drones, and so on. It helps to be at the switch, even if bad luck or questionable performance can sometimes lead to thumping losses as with Hoover in 1932 or Carter in 1980.

³³ Samuels 2004, 428-29, in an analysis of presidential elections in 23 countries, reports a bonus of over 8 percent.

³⁴ See also Norpoth 2002. Economic voting seems to figure less in open-seat presidential contests.

³⁵ The exceptions are 1788 and the Adams-Clay-Jackson contest of 1824. It is unusual, but does not swerve the results, to comb back to these early generations for data points (Mayhew 2008, 206-07); popular vote totals are not needed for the particular analysis here. In 1844 and 1868, the Whigs and Republicans are respectively coded as the parties holding the White House; the overall pattern does not change if both judgments are reversed.

³⁶ “Incumbent as candidate” can include vice-presidential succeeders to the presidency like Truman running in 1948 and Gerald Ford in 1976.

³⁷ See Mayhew 2008, 219-25. Faced by incumbent candidates, have the out-parties fielded especially weak candidates? Probably not at the presidential level (Weisberg 2002, 342). How about strategic retirement by incumbents in the face of anticipated loss? It has been rare—normally the first-term presidents run again despite adversity, as did Hoover in 1932—and the possible instances are murky. The most convincing case for an opt-out is Lyndon Johnson dogged by the Vietnam War in 1968 (his fifth year of office), but even there multiple determination rears its head. Johnson was in physical decline. He had commissioned a secret actuarial study of himself in 1967 that predicted an early death, and in fact he came to suffer a coronary setback in 1970, then an incapacitating heart attack in June 1972, and died two days after an additional term would have ended in January 1973.

But take away personal incumbency and the politics reverts, on average, to tossup or square one. A voter edge in party identification seems to offer a White House in-party little help.

There is an implication for the past. Only three times has an American party enjoyed the good—as the dice speak—fortune of running incumbent candidates two or more elections in a row. The instance from the 1970s—Gerald Ford in 1976, echoing the reelected Nixon in 1972 as an incumbent Republican candidate in the backwash of Watergate and Nixon’s resignation—is not an advertisement for consecutive incumbency; Ford lost. But consider the other instances. Absent personal incumbency, how rock-solid were certain well-known party eras of the past? In the case of “the McKinley era,” how much did the Republicans profit by fielding the incumbent Theodore Roosevelt in 1904—his move-up status owing to McKinley’s assassination—after fielding the incumbent McKinley in 1900? Strip away the received wisdom about those times, the deep sense of order as it really did roll out, and what are the odds? Seemingly impregnable coalitions can crumble in a hurry as happened to the Republicans in 1910 and 1912 (Milkis 2009).³⁸

Exhibit A for giving an old wisdom a new look is “the New Deal era.” Uniquely in American history, a party fielded an incumbent candidate *four* times in a row—FDR in 1936, 1940, and 1944 and Truman in 1948. Several of this chapter’s themes bear on the days of FDR and Truman. In 1932, the Depression boosted the Democratic vote lastingly at both presidential and congressional levels.³⁹ Then, things got better. The economy’s surge during FDR’s first term was a politician’s dream (Eggertsson 2012, 527). During 1936 taken alone, economic improvement gauged state by state tallies with Democratic electoral performance by state (Achen and Bartels 2005). Measurement of relevant indicators has upgraded: To count federal relief jobs—a specialty of the 1930s—as employment, rather than unemployment, does wonders for the jobs variable as a predictor of elections (Kiewiet and Udell 1998, 234-39). On the domestic policy front, Social Security, for which we have opinion data, won popular support at an early date; no blowback there (Schickler and Caughey 2011, 183). All this backgrounded a stellar Democratic showing in the election of 1936 (Fair 2002, 8; Norpoth and Suong 2010, 13).

But then disaster struck—the economic plummet of 1937 that took the FDR coalition to ground in the midterm election of 1938 (Hamby 2004, 354-66; Busch 1999, ch. 5; Achen and Bartels 2005, 13-15). As a creative policy thrust, the New Deal was bounded by the economic slumps of 1929-33 and 1937-38. Then, national security zoomed to political and policy primacy. The menacing Nazi aggression of the election season of 1940 seems to have revalorized FDR as an experienced incumbent, willing in the circumstances to run again. Absent that threat spur, according to accumulating scholarship, to hold the presidency in 1940 was a shaky prospect for the Democrats. In 1944, an appreciation of war management greased another incumbent victory for FDR.⁴⁰ There are down-ticket implications. Had the presidency fallen to the Republicans in the 1940s, the House might have fallen too: Until the 1950s, a split of those outcomes in a presidential year was truly a freak

³⁸ In Britain, the Tory ascendancy of Salisbury and Balfour begun in 1895 crumbled in 1906.

³⁹ See Bartels 1998, 313-17; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980, ch. 3; Norpoth and Rusk 2007, 398.

⁴⁰ On both elections: Divine 1974a, chs. 1-4; Norpoth 2012; Berinsky 2009, 197-200. On 1940: Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968, 71.

event.⁴¹ It could use more emphasis that 1948, with its Cold War onset and showdown over Berlin, was yet another crisis year managed by an incumbent president to apparent acclaim (Divine 1974a, chs. 5-7; Busch 2012).⁴² For the 1930s and 1940s, incumbency is a good share of the story.

The elections of 1860 and 1932, the tall monuments of the original realignments genre, still stand. But otherwise the decades have brought new impulses, new knowledge, and new ideas to fill in the historical space. For the field of American political development, where might the study of elections go from here? As backgrounds to writing, at least three guidelines seem wise. First, steer clear of partisan or ideological teleologies; these can be deadly to analysis. Second, keep tuned to a variety of relevant scholarships—in history proper, economic history, sociology, and the quantitative reaches of political science. Third, keep an eye on other countries: If their electoral trends or behaviors match those of the United States, that likeness should offer a thought-provoking cue to analyzing this country. As for the substance of its scholarship, American political development seems to have a special niche and mission in ordering electoral history: Dig deeper for content and context. Standard quantitative political science, for all its value in plumbing history, can be spare and bloodless. It falls short in meaning. For APD scholars, content and context may have a lush future what with the growing online availability of past prose from newspapers and otherwise. What was really going on in those election campaigns of the past? What seems to have bugged the voters? How did the parties and politicians frame their appeals? How did they *adapt* them to the events of a campaign?⁴³ How were election outcomes interpreted? What kinds of developmental accounts can be woven from such discoveries?

⁴¹ It had happened only in apparently 1792 (party labels of officials then are somewhat blurry), the multi-party election of 1848, and the disputed election of 1876. Starting in 1956 the split became commonplace, occurring in just over half of the presidential elections from 1956 through 2012, possibly because television came to personalize presidential candidates and incumbent House candidates. See Fiorina 2002, 11-12; Prior 2006.

⁴² In answer to Gallup open-ended questions asking what is the country's "most important problem," a majority of responses in each of the postwar elections of 1948, 1952, 1956, and 1960 referred to foreign or military matters. Specifically, this is the pattern for the survey conducted in each election year closest to, yet before, the election. The high reading holds for 1948 even though that year's latest survey was conducted in June thus just missing the Berlin blockade and airlift that came later and continued through November of that year.

⁴³ One model for such timeline analysis, using today's survey technology, is Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004, but systematic investigation of eras before the 1930s using other sources does not seem impossible.

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