

**Presidential Campaigns and Congressional Agendas:  
Linkage or Disconnect?**

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**Presidential campaigns clarify, arrange, and amplify the congressional agenda. They perform the combined functions of a sorter and a megaphone. Linkage or Disconnect? The short answer is “linkage.” But it is important to stress that the connection is not necessarily on the initiative of the presidential candidates or the ultimate victor, press coverage to the contrary notwithstanding. The slate in a presidential year is not wiped clean for the candidates to write upon. Most issues treated during a campaign are presently on the national lawmaking agenda. They have been identified and defined cooperatively or contentiously among the three elected branches: the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the presidency (with the active involvement of a professional apparatus of staff and bureaucrats, as well as legions of lobbyists). Agendas are, for the most part, continuous. And it is useful to be reminded that elections are by the calendar, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, not scheduled either by a crisis or a new set of issues. The founders went to some pains to create a continuous government and they were, for the most part, successful.<sup>1</sup>**

**What is the nature and structure of this continuity? Figure 1 presents the principal elements, as applied to a two-term presidency. The separation of powers is rooted in the separation of elections and the separation of elections produces institutional interdependency, even if one party wins it all. As shown in Figure 1, a president elected with a House and Senate of the same party has just two years before a national election in which he is not a candidate. Most unsettling for presidential management of Capitol Hill is the constitutional provision for staggered terms in the Senate. As is evident, the one-third of the senators up for election or reelection with the president will never again be with him on the ballot. So why is the answer “linkage” and not “disconnect?” Precisely because of the intricacies of this separation of elected institutions sharing and competing for powers.**

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<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this discussion is a distinction between two forms of linkage. First is that associated with the classic “party responsibility” perspective. By this view, political parties should develop a unified agenda and program, supported by presidential and congressional candidates—thus a party-driven linkage in national election campaigns. Second is that associated with the less conventional “government of parties” perspective. By this view, an agenda is generated by the continuous interaction of independent party units in the House and Senate, working for, alongside, and against the president. Linkage is achieved because of the policy or agenda setting that exists when the calendar designates that it is time to campaign.

By design the Senate is a continuous body, not tied electorally to the president. By experience the House too has become continuous—a 90+ percent average incumbent return rate; 98 percent in 1998. Congress is a bicameral institution continuously in the business of representing states and districts so as to make law. Each chamber is Janus-faced: one face to the people, the other to the law. Every four years there is a national debate on the principal issues on the national agenda—a debate that typically is conducted as work proceeds in the White House and on Capitol Hill. That is the context within which the presidential campaign takes place, performing its function of sorting through the issues treated currently and amplifying those judged to resonate with the public. These days this exercise is hugely augmented by multiple measures of public opinion from an increased number of sources. No topic of importance these days goes unpolled, typically by every major media organization.

There are, then, unbreakable ties of the presidential campaign to what is happening elsewhere and to what has gone on before. This is not to say that the presidential campaign is inconsequential. It is rather to specify its importance within the ongoing policy and political circumstances of the time. Candidates display and rank order the issues. They exhibit and test proposals for coping with these issues. They reveal organizational, political, and personal styles. And we learn who their friends are and who is likely to accompany them to the White House and the government. The keen eye can detect how the transition will go and something of the complexion of the new administration from choices made in the campaign. This conclusion was apparent from my study of the four most recent party shifts—to Nixon in 1968, to Carter in 1976, to Reagan in 1980, and to Clinton in 1992.<sup>2</sup> Each transition had special features associated with who was about to become president.

Withal the separation so characteristic of our system, occasionally an election appears to provide a congruent message—presidential and congressional—that is typically interpreted as a mandate for the president. When these “message elections” take place, as in 1964 or, to a lesser extent, 1980, the president has a substantial advantage in the early months of his administration—perhaps to the mid-term election. More usual, however, are the less congruent policy signals of the “mixed message election.” And, in fact, many voters have grown accustomed to splitting their tickets, producing frequent split-party governments at the national and state levels. Two truly national parties emerged following what some judged to be the model party responsibility election of 1964. The growth of the

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<sup>2</sup> Passages to the Presidency: From Campaigning to Governing (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

Republicans in the south and the strengthening of Democrats in the northeast and middle west resulted in more competitive parties but within governments of separated powers.

Here is the record, 1969-2001:

+One-Party Governments (6 years)	D: 1977-1981; 1993-1995 R: None
+Split-Party Governments (26 years)	
-President R; Congress D	1969-1977; 1987-1993 (14 years)
-President R; Senate R; House D	1981-1987 (6 years)
-President D; Congress R	1995-2001 (6 years)
+House Party Splits	
1969-1985	D=2111 (61%) R=1368 (39%)
1985-2001	D=1918 (55%) R=1557 (45%)
+Senate Party Splits	
1969-1985	D=440 (56%) R=351 (44%)
1985-2001	D=407 (51%) R=393 (49%)
+Governor Party Splits	
1969-1985*	D=31 R=19
1985-2001*	D=24 R=25

\*The number for governors is the annual mean split for the period.

As is evident from these data, we are in a period in which both parties have been winners, often at the same time as they share control of the government. Split party government has become our way of governing nationally and in an increasing number of states. Further evident is the growing strength of the Republicans in the House, Senate, and State Houses. Republican presidents have won frequently since 1952—often by landslides. But not until 1994-1998 were Republicans able to win majorities in the House and Senate for three consecutive congresses. They have also held a commanding majority among governorships since 1994.

I interpret these political conditions as forcing linkage. Presidential campaigns that ignore congressional agendas, that disconnect from the political and policy realities of power sharing by the two parties, risk irrelevancy, defeat, or both. Two contemporary campaigns are notably illustrative of the points made: that in 1980 was generally interpreted to have been a “message election;” that in 1992 a “mixed message election.” Both raised expectations—the first due to the size of President Reagan’s win over an incumbent combined with substantial Republican increases in Congress; the second due to Democrats having won control of the White House and Congress—“the stars are really

aligned right for the next four years,” according to one analyst.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is a useful exercise for purposes of this paper, to examine each of these election for the lessons they teach.

### The 1980 Presidential Campaign: The Double Digit Agenda

“The U. S. economy staggered into the 1980s.”<sup>4</sup> In few election years has the congressional agenda been more clearly etched. Double-digit inflation, interest rates, and unemployment combined to produce unusual public agreement on the major issues of the day. A CBS/*New York Times* exit poll in 1980 revealed that 88 percent of respondents mentioned economic and fiscal-related issues when asked: “Which issues were most important in deciding how you voted today?” Less than 40 percent identified all other issues (the totals exceeded 100 percent due to multiple answers).<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the “jobs and unemployment” issue, the huge proportion of voters identifying these issues as paramount voted for Ronald Reagan. These results were signaled by poll results showing that President Carter’s public approval ratings for handling the economy peaked at 27 percent in January 1980 and declined steadily to 19 percent in August.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps it was because of these low approval ratings that President Carter had so little to say about the economy in his State of the Union Address. His opening remarks seemed to be a lead-in to a discussion of that topic: “This last few months has not been an easy time for any of us.” But his reference was instead to foreign and national defense issues, including, of course, the Iranian hostage crisis. Domestic issues were reserved for the last few paragraphs, constituting no more than 20 percent of the Address.

Meanwhile the Democratic Congress struggled with a recession, energy issues, an increase in defense spending, and balancing the budget. In spite of large margins in both houses, the Democrats were unable to complete work before the election. A lame-duck session was planned, based on “a hope that the post-election climate would lead to more productivity.”<sup>7</sup> The Congressional Quarterly offered this summary: “Congress found little

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Sundquist in Sundquist, ed., Beyond Gridlock? Prospects for Governance in the Clinton Years—and After (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1993), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Martha V. Gotttron, ed., Congress and the Nation, Vol. V, 1977-1980 (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1981), p. 205.

<sup>5</sup> As reported in William Schneider, “The November 4 Vote for President: What Did It Mean?” in Austin Ranney, ed., The American Elections of 1980 (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), p. 237.

<sup>6</sup> As reported in Kathleen A. Frankovic, “Public Opinion Trends,” in Gerald Pomper, The Election of 1980: Reports and Interpretations (Chatham, N. J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1981), p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Congress and the Nation, p. 19.

it could do to combat the nation's fiscal woes. At the same time, it did not accomplish many of its other major legislative goals.”<sup>8</sup>

This pending agenda was tailor-made for the Reagan candidacy. And he was prepared to take advantage. Early in his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention, Reagan stated: “We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.” He then identified this agenda as requiring stronger leadership: “I will not stand by and watch this great country destroy itself under mediocre leadership that drifts from one crisis to the next...”<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in accepting renomination, President Carter explained how difficult it was to serve as president. He explained that “only the most complex and difficult tasks come before me in the Oval Office.” As with his State of the Union Address, he treated foreign and national security issues first, treating the energy and economic issues in the second half of the speech. He explained the difficulties that he faced in coping with these issues: “I inherited a heavy load of serious economic problems...” “The road's bumpy and last year's skyrocketing OPEC price increases have helped to trigger a worldwide inflation crisis.”<sup>10</sup>

President Carter refused to participate in the first debate because John Anderson, the independent candidate, was a participant. Thus, Reagan and Anderson had an opportunity to stress their views without a response from the president. The second debate took place just days before the general election and did not include John Anderson. It was a wide-ranging session focusing on national security, inflation, energy, urban decay, and the hostage crisis in Iran. Reagan was judged by poll results to have won (44 to 36 percent),<sup>11</sup> thus confirming in his mind the agenda he had stressed: a stronger national defense, tax cuts, curbing inflation, reduction in government. The following interpretation by two seasoned political analysts stressed “personality” but acknowledged the substantive implications of Reagan's success:

The Carter-Reagan debate in the final week of the campaign was crucial. With more than half of the television sets of the country tuned in—and presumably all the sets of the conscientious undecided—Reagan won the personality contest. He reassured the waverers that he was not a right-wing nut, that his youthful vitality had not all vanished, that he had a command of economics and world affairs, that he

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Text reprinted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, July 19, 1980, pp. 2063-2066.

<sup>10</sup> Text reprinted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, August 16, 1980, pp. 2430-2433.

<sup>11</sup> A CBS poll as reported in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, November 1, 1980, p. 3232. The text of the debate is reprinted in this same issue, pp. 3279-3289.

was a man of peace. So the voters felt free to do what they had wanted to do all along—throw Jimmy Carter out.<sup>12</sup>

President Carter was, indeed, defeated, the first incumbent president to lose since Herbert Hoover (1928) and the first Democratic incumbent with that distinction since Grover Cleveland (1888). Our interest here is in the extent to which the campaign and election were linked to and had effects on the congressional agenda. The results for the Republicans were impressive. Not since 1952 had they experienced such a commanding win. The comparison is interesting and relevant:

Electoral Vote: Eisenhower 83%; Reagan 91%

Two-Party Vote: Eisenhower 55%; Reagan 55% (51% of total vote)

Net GOP Increase in House Seats: 1952: +22; 1980: +33

Net GOP Increase in Senate Seats: 1952: +1; 1980: +12

As it happened the smaller House and Senate increases in 1952 produced small Republican majorities in each chamber. In 1980 the House remained in Democratic hands. Yet domestically the 1980 election produced a more substantive policy message. In large part that was a consequence of Reagan's strongly conservative issue stands, his unexpectedly large win over an incumbent president, a truly national win—Reagan winning in every region,<sup>13</sup> the large net increase in House seats, and the stunning results in the Senate. This combination invited analysts to declare a “mandate” for the president, withal the associated anticipations of dramatic change. The exclamation point to Reagan's win was the Republican takeover of the Senate. Republican candidates won six of seventeen seats that were called for the Democrats by the Congressional Quarterly and eight of nine toss-up states.

The very mention of the word “mandate” raises a fundamental distinction for this discussion of the campaign's effect on the agenda. There is, first, the observed relationship between the campaign rhetoric and what is being worked on in Congress. There was linkage in 1980 by this measure. Second is the interpretation of what exactly is licensed by the election. It was a fair reading of the campaign and results that the president would be expected to offer a bold plan for economic recovery and strengthening national defense, and he did. It was, however, clearly a stretch for him to offer dramatic reform of Social

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<sup>12</sup> James L. Sundquist and Richard M. Scammon, “The 1980 Election: Profile and Historical Perspective,” in Ellis Sandoz and Cecil V. Crabb, Jr., eds., A Tide of Discontent: The 1980 Elections and Their Meaning (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1981), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Reagan's margin varied from 1 percent in the East South Central states to 32 percent in the Mountain states. Source: “Opinion Roundup: 1980 Results,” Public Opinion (December/January, 1981), p. 22.

Security or audacious reduction in government bureaucracy, which he also did and got burned.

A message election like that in 1980 offers a definite advantage for the winner in structuring his presidency and connecting with the new Congress. A theme emerges which then permits the president and his staff to “hit the ground running,” as the phrase has it. It is generally accepted that the Reagan transition in 1980 was among the most effective in modern times. The transition planning was integrated into the campaign organization, primarily through Edwin Meese.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the two major tasks of the transition—dismantling the campaign and creating a presidency—were separated: Meese in charge of the first, James Baker managing the second. As noted below, a campaign and election with multiple messages can make it difficult to specify a theme for the transition. In such cases, the media may characterize the new presidency as lacking focus, a characterization that is hard to shake during the crucial early months.

#### **The 1992 Presidential Campaign: “Lot of things, stupid”**

Surely one of the most repeated political slogans ever was that posted by James Carville as a reminder to himself and his staff in 1992: “The economy, stupid.” The indicators—interest rates, unemployment, and inflation—were not double-digit. But the economy was operating below par and the Bush Administration was seen as unable to make the needed improvements. In what was one of the most dramatic reversals ever for a scandal-free presidency, President Bush’s approval ratings fell from a record high of 89 percent during the Persian Gulf War to less than 40 percent by the time of the Republican Convention in 1992. In fact, there were strong hints of what was to come on the domestic front even as President Bush accepted plaudits for his successful conduct of the war. Asked at the time (Spring, 1991) about Bush’s handling of the economy, respondents were substantially less approving—44 percent favorable, 52 percent unfavorable.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, once the economy replaced the Gulf War as the top issue on the agenda, Bush’s approval rating plummeted.

As in 1980, the agenda in 1992 was dominated by economic and fiscal issues. But there was one major political difference. In 1980, a Democratic president worked with a Democratic Congress. In 1992, a Republican president lacked that advantage. He had to

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<sup>14</sup> Meese describes the Reagan transition in his book, With Reagan: The Inside Story (Washington: Regenery Gateway, 1992), Ch. 2. See also, Charles O. Jones, Passages to the Presidency: From Campaigning to Governing (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), pp. 66-80.

<sup>15</sup> Reported in “Public Opinion and Demographic Report,” American Enterprise (September/October, 1991), p. 91.



reach across the aisle in building majorities. The more he tried, the more his support within his own party was threatened, especially after he broke his “no new taxes” pledge in 1990. Therefore, as the approval ratings fell and the economy stagnated, the Democrats had little incentive to cooperate and a strong motivation to pass bills that invited vetoes. The consequence was public doubt about Bush’s capacity to lead on domestic issues. Meanwhile the Democratic Congress, itself, was experiencing a decline in public support in the face of House scandals (actually dipping to the lowest ratings in history at 17 percent, half that of President Bush). A weakened president facing an unpopular Congress is not a formula for legislative productivity. And so stalemate was the result. The Democratic Congress rejected the president’s proposals, he reciprocated by vetoing their bills (21 vetoes in 1992).

Neither institution was well positioned to take up the slack for the other, as, for example, occurred during the last two years of the Reagan administration, when congressional Democrats were aggressive in taking policy initiatives. In the Bush case, each institution lacked confidence in itself at the same time it perceived weakness in its opposite. Bargaining can take place when strength is pitted against strength, but it is unlikely to occur between two weak and irritable contenders.<sup>16</sup>

This is not to suggest that nothing was happening. As stated, the president offered a fiscal plan, Congress rejected it; Democrats passed bills, the president vetoed them. Thus, the agenda was clearly etched during the election year but action was not completed. Bush’s presidential support score on Capitol Hill in 1992 was the lowest recorded to that date. Few major pieces of legislation were enacted, just four by my count. And so presidential candidates did not have to cast about for issues, they were apparent in any review of lawmaking (or the lack thereof) in 1992. One further point. Stalemate between the parties was also an invitation to an ambitious third party or independent candidate. All that was required was the money to launch a maverick campaign. H. Ross Perot had those funds and was willing to spend them in running alongside the two parties, needling them to engage the primary economic issues, as he defined them. In sum, “The economy, stupid” was unquestionably a relevant and trenchant slogan.

But there was more to the Carville reminder to himself and his staff: “Change vs. more of the same” and “Don’t forget about health care.” The first referred to the policy stalemate in Washington and therefore had major agenda implications. That is, if an all-Democratic government were to be elected, presumably the stalemate would be broken and

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<sup>16</sup> Charles O. Jones, The Presidency in a Separated System (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 288-289.

the agenda cleared. The second reminder gave prominence to one of a host of domestic welfare issues, selected in part because of Carville's involvement in a Pennsylvania Senate race (for the seat of John Heinz, killed in an airplane accident) in which it was estimated that health care was a major issue. These terse reminders of campaign priorities were necessary in large part because the candidate, Bill Clinton, was an acknowledged policy wonk for whom "It's everything, stupid." Carville's discipline helped maintain focus during the campaign but the candidate was anxious to do it all.<sup>17</sup>

Exit poll data on election day provided confirmation of the Carville choices, notably "The economy, stupid." Respondents identified the economy and jobs (43 percent), the deficit (21 percent), and taxes (14 percent) as priorities—for a total of 78 percent mentioning issues in this set. Health care was mentioned by 19 percent, education by 13 percent. All other issues received 41 percent (the total exceeds 100 percent due to multiple mentions). Clinton had an enormous advantage among voters who considered the economy, health care, and education as important issues; Bush had an advantage among those identifying taxes as significant.

In his 1992 State of the Union Address, President Bush, like Carter in 1980, began with international issues. His news was more upbeat, however: "By the grace of God, America won the Cold War." Understandably, then, the president led with good news, also reminding viewers of the success of the Gulf War in the preceding year. These comments took up about 30 percent of the Address. He then turned to the bad news: "Now to our troubles at home. They are not all economic, but the primary problem is our economy." Inflation and interest rates were less a problem than for Carter, "but unemployment is too high, some industries are in trouble, and growth is not what it should be." The president then set forth an elaborate plan that touched most of the issues that later dominated the campaign—including health care reform. He challenged Congress to pass his economic proposals by March 20.<sup>18</sup>

The Democratic Congress ignored the president's deadline and, as noted above, he resorted to the veto pen for proposals they enacted. The end-of-year summaries were not becoming. This by the Congressional Quarterly was typical: "Hobbled by partisanship and purse strings [mostly the restrictions in the 1990 budget agreement], the 102<sup>nd</sup> Congress

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<sup>17</sup> Clinton was reported to have told Carville and Paul Begala early in the campaign: "What I need most of all from you guys is focus, is clarity. I don't know how to bring it down, to condense it." Quoted in Mary Matalin and James Carville (with Peter Knobler), All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Text reprinted in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, February 1, 1992, pp. 264-267.

produced one of the shortest lists of legislative accomplishments in recent memory....Congress did little more than talk about some of the biggest issues facing the country.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus it was that the pending agenda came to dominate the campaign. As a consummate campaigner, Bill Clinton was no more likely to ignore or misread the signals than was Reagan in 1980. He had the good fortune of Perot’s withdrawal on the day that he accepted the nomination. In a near endorsement of Clinton, Perot stated that: “Now that the Democratic Party has revitalized itself, I have concluded that we cannot win in November...”<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, it was left to Clinton alone to specify the out-party agenda. It did not take him very long in his acceptance speech to identify the central issue. He did so in the context of acknowledging the collapse of Soviet communism. “And yet just as we have won the Cold War abroad, we are losing the battles for economic opportunity and social justice here at home.” Noting that “10 million of our fellow Americans are out of work” Clinton observed “unemployment has to go up by one more person before a real recovery can begin. And Mr. President, you are that man.” He offered a “New Covenant” of opportunity, responsibility, and community for jobs, education, and health care.<sup>21</sup>

President Bush accepted the nomination of his party by first stressing the foreign and national security policy accomplishments of his presidency. Much of the rest of the speech was defensive in tone, even to the point of apologizing for having signed a “Democratic tax increase” in 1990. He listed domestic achievements but cited the obstruction of congressional Democrats to other initiatives. He sought to walk a fine line between accepting the domestic agenda as outlined by Clinton, Congress, and others, and explaining why it was that more had not been done to cope with it. It was not a simple assignment.<sup>22</sup>

Perot re-entered the race in time for the debates. The effect for Bush was two against one in an exercise for which the president was unlikely to excel even head-to-head. Three debates were scheduled, each with a different format. Clinton easily won the debates, the topics of which also confirmed the unfinished agenda of the current Congress. There was one other effect: “The debates did...help legitimize the second Perot campaign....So focused

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<sup>19</sup> Colleen McGuiness, ed., Congress and the Nation, Vol. VIII, 1989-1993 (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Statement printed in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, July 18, 1992, pp. 2131-2132.

<sup>21</sup> Text printed in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, July 18, 1992, pp. 2128-2130.

<sup>22</sup> Text printed in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, August 22, 1992, pp. 2556-2559.

was his attack on the current drift of the United States in economic policy during the debates...that his standing improved dramatically.”<sup>23</sup> One might have added: All at the expense of President Bush.

For a second time in twelve years, an incumbent president was defeated in 1992. Clinton’s win also represented a return of one-party government, as Democrats retained their majorities in Congress. Not so apparent, however, was the extent to which the Democrats could, in fact, dictate the agenda. President Clinton won with the smallest plurality of the popular vote since 1912. Perot received 19 percent and it was rightly noted that Clinton would have won even if Perot had not been on the ballot (Perot voters splitting their ballots evenly between Bush and Clinton, with a quarter not voting).<sup>24</sup> Perot was on the ballot, however, and his presence there had meaning for Clinton and the Democrats as they calculated their political capital. For those choosing Perot had a chance to vote for Clinton and they did not.

Comparisons with 1980 were relevant in a 1992 post-election analysis by Clinton and his advisers. There was also an independent candidate in 1980—John Anderson. Voting analyses for the two elections show that Reagan in 1980 was successful in attracting substantially more defecting Carter voters (1976 to 1980) than was Clinton in attracting defecting Bush voters (1988 to 1992). On this basis alone, it appeared that Clinton had to proceed cautiously in preparing his agenda.

But there were other reasons for exhibiting prudence over aggressive partisanship. House Republicans had a net gain of nine seats and a net loss of just one Senate seat (retaining sufficient numbers to protect the filibuster). Whereas Bush received just 37 percent of the popular vote for president, Republicans received 47 percent of the vote for the House. This extraordinary result showed a strong minority party, one likely to increase its numbers further in the 1994 midterm elections, especially if most 1992 Perot voters favored Republican congressional candidates in 1994 (as they did).

These political realities were acknowledged in editorials, which, nonetheless, offered encouragement. The Washington Post recalled the Carter presidency to illustrate that one-party government was no guarantee of “efficiency or even action.” On the other hand, the Post identified “an enormous opportunity” and referred to “the new dispensation.”<sup>25</sup> The New York Times interpreted the election as representing “a relentless rejection of Mr.

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<sup>23</sup> F. Christopher Arterton, “Campaign ‘92: Strategies and Tactics,” in Gerald M. Pomper, ed., The Election of 1992 (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1993), p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald M. Pomper, “The Presidential Election,” in Pomper, The Election of 1992, p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> Washington Post, November 5, 1992, p. 22.

Bush's presidency" and yet observed that "the test now will be how quickly President-elect Clinton can convert his mandate [that word again] into momentum."<sup>26</sup> Spotting a mandate when 57 percent of the voters chose someone else and the president's party had a net loss of congressional seats was extraordinary. A more realistic interpretation was that the new president had to reach across the aisle from the start in building coalitions, especially if he planned to introduce agenda-splintering initiatives like a national health care proposal.

By definition, a mixed or ambiguous message election like that in 1992 creates special problems for the transition. Considerable sophistication was required in building an administration and specifying its agenda. Historian Alan Brinkley doubted that any president in the twentieth century "has entered office facing a more difficult combination of pressures." He noted that liberal Democrats "greeted him with a rapture born of 12 (many would say 25) years in the political wilderness." And on the other side, "centrist and conservative Democrats expect Clinton to rescue the party from the liberal wing and recast it in their own image."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for the new president, his team lacked the experience and Washington savvy effectively to manage these conflicting expectations. The president-elect's campaigning skills were still in evidence during the transition as he continued to make public appearances, even conducting a conference on the economy in Little Rock. Less certain were his or his staff's abilities in forming a new administration and integrating it into the permanent government. It is apparent in hindsight that Bill Clinton was a different kind of leader, one unlikely to have formed a traditional White House. His has been a more public, campaign-oriented style of governing. Therefore even if he and his staff had known Washington better, they would not have patterned their transition on past practices. The Clinton transition was uniformly criticized as the worst in modern times. The explanation, in part, is in their inexperience and disinclination to conduct a standard transition on the one hand and their inability to shape a campaigning style of presidency, suited to their leader, on the other. To be fair, openly doing the latter would not have been welcomed by the Washington community even had the Clinton team known how to go about it. Here is how I summarized these developments:

Bill Clinton in person represented a change that had yet to be fully absorbed in the working government or acknowledged by presidency watchers: that of the greater publicness of agenda setting and policymaking. Thus Clinton and his most intimate

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<sup>26</sup> New York Times, November 4, 1992, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Brinkley, "The 43 Percent President," New York Times Magazine, July 4, 1993, p. 22.

aides...lacked the incentive and the experience to effect a conventional transition from campaigning to governing. They may also have questioned the relevance of any such passage. Yet they [the Clinton team] were not prepared to substitute a crisply defined and reality-tested alternative process, one so well designed for the effective implementation of campaign-oriented governing as to impress or persuade official Washington.<sup>28</sup>

It was, therefore, left to the new Clinton administration to formulate a campaigning style of governing over the period of his service in the White House. This effort had profound implications, essentially fashioning continuous linkage between campaigning and the congressional agenda. The first major effort, the national health care initiative, was a spectacular failure for the president (in large part because the health care industry campaigned more successfully). Yet the president and his team learned much from that case. They were unlikely ever again to muscle their way onto the congressional agenda without a more careful reading and analysis of public support.

#### The 1994 Congressional Elections: The “Contract With America”

My assignment was to compare the 1980 and 1992 elections in treating the relationship of the presidential campaign to the congressional agenda. It so happens, however, that the 1994 congressional elections also illustrate the extent to which the continuous agenda serves to define campaign issues and to demarcate an electoral mandate. For just as Reagan misread his win in proposing Social Security reform and Clinton his win in offering a radical reform of the health care system, Newt Gingrich saw “revolution” where much lesser change was licensed. The point for this paper is this: The 1994 election was more a correction of Clinton’s interpretation of the 1992 agenda than it was a credentialing of a rebellion against the status quo.

There is no gainsaying that the results in 1994 were stunning. Election scholars doubted that the Republicans could recapture the House in the foreseeable future. Yet they won the huge majority of open seats, leading Walter Dean Burnham to observe that the Democratic loss was the largest “by any party in a file of 103 elections extending right back to 1790.”<sup>29</sup> What did it mean? The triumphant new Speaker of the House of Representatives viewed it as a revolution, the covenant of which was the Contract With America. He warned President Clinton against thwarting “something that most of the

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Passages...*, p. 190.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, “Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and Its Implications,” in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds., *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1995), p. 363.

people in the country want.”<sup>30</sup> Polling data cast serious doubt on the basic premise of Gingrich’s interpretation. Most respondents (71 percent) said that the Contract made no difference in their vote. And of those who said it did make a difference just seven percent identified it as a positive factor, five percent a negative factor.<sup>31</sup>

The president’s interpretation of what happened in the election was also critical. If Gingrich was correct that a revolution was underway, there was little the president could do to thwart it. If, on the other hand, the election was primarily a rebuke of the president’s stewardship of the agenda during the first two years, then he could make adjustments accordingly. Clinton estimated correctly that the voters favored change, but not revolution, and they had doubts about the Democrats’ ability to govern effectively. He was asked in his post-election press conference whether it was actually his belief that the voters agreed with him. The president responded this way:

I think they were agreeing with me, but they don’t think we produced....I agree with much of what the electorate said yesterday....They sent us a clear message. I got it, and I’m going to try to redouble my efforts to get there. I think that the Republican congressional leadership will at least have the chance to work with us. I’m going to do my dead-level best to do that and to be less partisan. Most Americans are not strongly partisan and they don’t want us to be.<sup>32</sup>

This deft statement sought to preserve his leadership status, inviting Republican leaders “to work with us,” as he laid the basis for a charge of partisanship if they did not. His reading of the election also provided a justification for his campaigning style. For if the 1994 election was a rejection of Clinton’s interpretation of his 1992 win, then there was ample justification for constant campaigning so as to keep faith with the American people and their policy preferences. So as Gingrich and the House Republicans proceeded to govern in Washington by passing the items in the Contract, President Clinton took to the road, patiently fashioning a poll-tested agenda suited to public preferences (and raising his job approval scores along the way). By the end of 1995, the president had repositioned himself sufficiently well to accomplish exactly what Gingrich said he could not—i.e., thwart the Republican budget plan. At the same time, it should be noted that Clinton’s moves were toward the center, forced there by Republican successes in 1994.

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Michael Kelly, “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet.” *New Yorker*, April 24, 1995, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> As reported in Gary C. Jacobson, “The 1994 House Elections in Perspective,” in Philip Klinkner, ed., *Midterm: Elections of 1994* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Text printed in the *Washington Post*, November 10, 1994, p. A12.

Thus it was that the 1994 election was yet more evidence for the linkage of campaigns and the dominant congressional agenda. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress provided many signals to Clinton that he was going beyond what was sanctioned by the 1992 election. He conceded that he had learned the lessons of the 1994 election. Gingrich then proceeded to make Clinton's mistake, far exceeding what could reasonably be interpreted as a message of the Republican win. Interestingly, he, too, absorbed the meaning of his defeats on the budget in 1995 and 1996, working then to compromise with the president on many issues. The result of this education for the president and the Speaker was impressive legislative production in 1996—the third most productive single session of Congress in the postwar period (enactment of thirteen major laws).<sup>33</sup>

### Looking Ahead: 2000 and Beyond

What are the lessons of the 1980, 1992, and 1994 elections for this fall? First and foremost we would expect that the campaign agenda would draw primarily from those continuing priority items being treated on Capitol Hill. As I have shown, the reasons are both institutional, even constitutional, and logical in nature. Congressional agendas are characterized by continuity, filled as they are with persistent issues, the most important of which are unlikely to be resolved by dramatic, one-shot solutions. And, in fact, many, if not most, issues on the agenda of a modern government grow out of existing programs. “Reform” is the most common noun: Social Security reform, welfare reform, tax code reform, health care reform, etc.

What varies from one election to the next is the urgency and priority of issues. As noted in the introduction, elections are by the calendar, not issue emergence. Accordingly, there will be times when neither the public nor public officials demand immediate government action on pending issues. Some elections simply lack overriding crises or even dominant policy themes. Typically the result is a return of incumbents—an easy win for the president or the candidate of the president's party and impressive incumbent return rates for the House and Senate. I refer to these as “approval” elections in which voters endorse the sitting government. There have been five such elections in the postwar period: 1956, 1972, 1984, 1988, and 1996. Interestingly all five were split-party governments that were returned in place, four with Republican presidents (one of which was an heir apparent, Bush in 1988) and Democratic congresses (just the House in 1984); one with a Democratic president and a Republican Congress. They are remarkably similar contests in which out-party presidential and congressional candidates could find little issue traction.

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<sup>33</sup> See Charles O. Jones, Clinton and Congress, 1993-1996: Risk, Restoration, and Reelection (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), Chap. 4.



The 2000 contest has many of the characteristics of these “approval” elections and, of course, bears the most resemblance to 1988. As was the case then, one party controls the White House, the other Congress; a sitting vice president faces a governor; and times are good, with no major domestic or international crises. However, the political configuration this year is the mirror image of that in 1988—a Democratic president and a Republican Congress. And there are other differences to consider. The governor, George W. Bush, is from Texas, the third largest state in electoral votes in 2000 (now second largest in population) and is the son of a former president. The president with whom Vice President Gore has served was impeached by the House of Representatives, though not removed by the Senate. As with Reagan in 1988, Clinton’s job approval ratings have been moderately high; unlike Reagan, Clinton’s personal scores have been low. On the congressional side, Democrats in 1988 had virtually the same Senate margin as the Republicans now but they had a substantially greater House margin—81 for the Democrats (1988); just 13 for the Republicans (2000).

It remains to be seen whether the split-party government in 2000 will match that of 1988 in legislative production. Defying the odds, the 100<sup>th</sup> Congress (1987-1988) was the most productive of major legislation of Reagan’s four congresses (twelve measures compared to a previous high of nine).<sup>34</sup> One effect was to clear the agenda of major items for the presidential campaign. President Reagan and Congress even passed a two-year budget agreement in 1987, thus eliminating the normal intense budget battle in 1988. The result: “Bush persuasively argued one continuing theme: Life in America is good. The theme had multiple variations, positive and negative. A Republican administration had brought peace and prosperity, but Democrats bring unrest and inflation; George Bush stands for consensual national values, but Dukakis is a liberal and therefore suspicious; the vice-president is experienced and safe, but Dukakis is incapable and risky.”<sup>35</sup> Sound familiar?

Exit polls in 1988 failed to identify a specific set of issues as dominant as was the economic set in 1980 and 1992. The budget deficit (25), national defense (23), abortion (20), and crime (18) were the most mentioned.<sup>36</sup> Those respondents approving of President Reagan’s record voted overwhelmingly for Bush, as expected. The issue most mentioned

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<sup>34</sup> As calculated by David R. Mayhew, Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-1990 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 52-73.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald M. Pomper, “The Presidential Election,” in Pomper, ed., The Election of 1988: Reports and Interpretations (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), p. 138. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> As reported in ibid., p. 143.

among these voters was “experience,” with “prosperity,” “crime,” the “liberalism” of Dukakis nearly tied as more distant seconds. Likewise the most positive characteristics mentioned for Bush were “experience” and “competence.”<sup>37</sup> The 1988 election was heavily criticized as failing to treat the important issues but there did not appear to be a consensus as to what they were. As one measure of the lack of serious attention to the agenda, the Pledge of Allegiance became a subject during one of the debates.

To this point, the 2000 presidential campaign has been reflective of a congressional agenda that includes a number of important, long-range issues. One big difference from 1988 is that the budget debate is about managing surpluses rather than deficits. That change alone has had an impact on the agenda. The prospect of surpluses naturally raises the question as to what should be done with the money—a question likely to elicit partisan responses. Strongly-held party differences make it more difficult to fashion cross-partisan agreements. Thus there are at least two reasons why the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress will be less productive than the 100<sup>th</sup> or the 104<sup>th</sup>. First are the above-mentioned differences, as amplified by the expected surpluses. Second is the gravity of the issues involved: Social Security reform, health care reform and regulation, changes in the tax code, defining the future role of the federal government in education, trade agreements, missile defense. All of these issues are undergoing serious review, with proposals being formulated, debated, and tested. The presidential campaign is very much a part of this process, as is the continuing work on Capitol Hill on these subjects. It is an unfortunate characteristic of media coverage of Congress that these periods of policy gestation and testing are judged as unproductive.

There is another difference to be considered in comparing 2000 to 1988: Bill Clinton is no Ronald Reagan. Clinton’s impeachment has been a matter to be managed by both presidential candidates, neither of whom can be absolutely certain of its electoral effects. Then there is the simple matter of age. Reagan was days shy of 78 when he left office. Clinton will be 54. Reagan was exiting public life, Clinton will see six more presidential campaigns before he reaches Reagan’s time of retirement. Associated with this fact is Clinton’s interests and abilities in policymaking. No modern president and few public officials can match Clinton’s knowledge of the agenda or his facility in articulating the issues. The conclusion is obvious: Bill Clinton will be a continuing presence during the campaign and after.

In summary, this review offers good news about the 2000 election. There is linkage between the presidential campaign and the congressional agenda. Congress itself is

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<sup>37</sup> As reported in *ibid.*, pp. 143, 145.

working on a number of longer-term issues, almost none of which is susceptible to quick and easy resolution. And for the most part, these are the issues being debated in the campaign. There is an agenda in 2000 in spite of good times and a lack of crisis. It is reasonable then to expect that the new president's program will be fitted into the ongoing work on Capitol Hill.

My final comments also deliver good news. Whichever candidate wins may be expected to conduct an orderly transition, each facing somewhat different challenges. Al Gore has spent his entire political career in Washington. He has experience at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and many of his assignments as Vice President have involved management issues (including the reinvention of government initiative). He is intimately acquainted with the Washington and Democratic Party establishments. A principal challenge will be that similar to George H. W. Bush in 1988, i. e., trying to create an administration separate from the one of which he was recently a part. The experienced pool of appointees will have just served in the Clinton administration and many in this pool may expect an assignment in the Gore regime. Additionally, a Gore administration will likely face a Senate with a Republican majority, suggesting the special need for a transition that develops a strategy for cross-partisan agreements. Presumably the Lieberman selection will be of assistance in meeting this challenge.

George W. Bush has had no direct experience as an office holder in Washington but he has direct access to those who have, including his father. Further, he has served as governor of the second most populous state and has had, therefore, executive experience somewhat analogous to that of Ronald Reagan prior to his election as president. Seemingly, also like Reagan, he relies heavily on staff in lieu of active participation himself in detailed policy development (as was characteristic of both Carter and Clinton). Further the selection of Dick Cheney compensates for the inexperience of Bush in making the connections necessary during the transition. Bush, too, has several trials. Those who may help from his father's presidency are now eight years from their service and, truly, a great deal has happened in that time (the shift from deficits to surpluses alone has had a transforming effect). The governor has had success in working with Democrats in the Texas legislature but that experience bears only a slight resemblance to what faces him in Washington. Democrats there are more diverse and, overall, more liberal, than those in Austin. They will also have regained majority status in the House of Representatives. So, like a Gore presidency, a Bush presidency may have to prepare an administration trained in cross-party politics.

One other factor is relevant to the pending transition. Bill Clinton's campaigning style of governing happens to have coincided with dramatic developments in information

technology and distribution. The new president will have to cope with the greater publicness of the policy and lawmaking processes. That means successfully incorporating political consultants and pollsters into his White House operations. At one time it was said that such persons “should be put out to pasture,” to quote one seasoned transition aide. That has been changing for some time but the Clinton White House institutionalized a campaigning strategy, applying it to governing as well as electioneering. That it is not only a consequence of Clinton’s stylistic preferences is attested to by the growth of policy campaigning by members of Congress and interest groups. Today most major issues—tobacco regulation, trade, health care reform, education—are played out more publicly than ever before. The next president must prepare himself for these contests. Among other challenges, he must consider how best to integrate policy campaign consultants into his White House without disrupting the work of more traditional staff. I have summarized this development as follows:

Public status in the Clinton revised perspective...is policy specific, issue responsive, interactive, and continuous. The public status strategy is applied at the formative and expressive phases of public opinion. Polls are taken continuously in regard to major issues as well as daily concerns of various groups. Influenced by poll results, policy discourse is oriented to these matters, using the bully pulpit...and, as needed, television advertisements, paid for with privately raised funds, to gain support for the president’s position and record. Response to opponents is instantaneous, thus requiring careful preparation to anticipate counter positions.<sup>38</sup>

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I return to the theme of my opening remarks. Presidential campaigns are inexorably linked to congressional agendas because those agendas represent the people’s interests. This linkage is by the design of the separated system. Presidents who either ignore that design (and few do) or are moved by the majesty of victory to elevate their status beyond support soon find their appointed place. Elections almost never sanction presidents to make big change; however they do license them for the vital task of setting priorities—to say: “Let’s start here.” And then the bargaining begins, with the president more or less well positioned to influence settlements through the lawmaking process. As stressed, the president’s public status as enhanced by constant policy discourse may be a Clinton contribution to the linkage between campaigning and governing, an endowment that may well be a marker used to measure his successor.

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<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Passages...*, p. 192. President Clinton himself articulated much of this strategy in his session with ministers the week before the 2000 Democratic Convention. He explained his use of polls this way: “What I primarily use polls for is to tell me how to make the argument that’s most likely to persuade you that I’m right about what I’m trying to do.” Text available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/elections/clinton081000.htm>.