

The Politics of Dealignment

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In the 1990 midterm election in the U.S., the American electorate sent two clear signals to politicians: that political parties are increasingly irrelevant to solving the nation's problems and that voters are losing confidence in the capacity of the government to address the fundamental issues facing the country. With the economy faltering, war in the Persian Gulf imminent, and all manner of social problems accumulating at home, American politics enters the 1990s in an advanced state of party dealignment and popular frustration. "Americans are very angry and cynical about the system," one pollster recently summarized. "They think government is simply not governing."

More than anything else, the 1990 election expressed that conviction. Generally disgusted with government, nearly two-thirds of the eligible electorate declined even to participate in the election, while those who did go to the polls made it clear they were not happy to be there.

To be sure, the message was not simply one of non-partisan anger and frustration. There were some shifts in the distribution of elective offices between the two major parties, with the Democrats narrow net winners. The Democrats picked up eight seats in the House of Representatives, bringing their total membership there to 267, or just 23 votes short of a "veto-proof" two-thirds majority. They gained one seat in the Senate, bringing their total there to 56 out of 100 seats. They maintained their roughly

3-2 dominance of Republicans in gubernatorial positions, while capturing two particularly important governorships in Texas and Florida. And they slightly augmented their already-strong dominance of state legislatures, where they now control 72 of the 99 legislative chambers. The victories in the state legislatures are particularly important because, under U.S. law, the boundaries of Congressional districts must be redrawn by state legislatures every ten years, following the completion of the national census. Since the precise shape of electoral districts largely determines the outcome of party competition within them, the party that controls the state legislatures can use its power in the "redistricting" process to increase its Congressional strength. With their victories in the 1990 state legislative elections, and a new set of district lines to be drawn beginning next year, the Democrats are well-positioned to increase their control of the House for the indefinite future.

But while these Democratic gains were not unimportant, they also were modest by comparison to the gains made by opposition parties during previous midterm elections, where some loss by the party controlling the Presidency is the rule. And much more striking than the small net change in partisan positions that did occur was the shifting beneath those stable totals -- a shifting that testified to a distinctly nonpartisan voter discontent with "politics as usual."

This discontent was most visible in state gubernatorial

aces, where voter unrest about the management of increasingly severe state fiscal problems was evident. While the balance between Republican and Democratic governors remained virtually unchanged, some 40 percent of the elections resulted in a partisan switch, and one quarter of the incumbent governors were thrown out of office. Even in the House of Representatives there was tension evident beneath its surface stability. For an unprecedented fourth election in a row, better than 95 percent of incumbents were returned to office. Despite the continued pattern of incumbent reelection, however, their average margin of victory dropped by a third, while the number of close races (with the winner taking less than 60 percent of the vote) more than doubled. This jump in competition is particularly striking because incumbents outspent their challengers by a record 4-1.

In the Senate, where incumbent funding advantages are even more pronounced, the election registered the lowest rate of turnover since 1966. But here too there was some tightening of victory margins, and some nasty surprises for the status quo. In Minnesota, free-spending centrist Republican incumbent Rudy Boschwitz was defeated by a barely-funded university professor Paul Wellstone, whose social democratic political views are radical by American standards. In New Jersey, Democrat Bill Bradley, a presidential hopeful and proven vote-getter, barely escaped defeat at the hands of an obscure GOP challenger whom he outspent twelve to one.

Again, no simple partisan interpretation can be put on these or other surprise results. Bradley's near defeat was universally interpreted as a vote of no-confidence in the "tax the rich" policies of the New Jersey Democratic governor, Jim Florio, with which Bradley was successfully identified. But Wellstone pulled his surprising upset while promoting a far more radical redistributive program. Meanwhile, in the House, "tax the poor" Republican Newt Gingrich, second in line in the House Republican leadership, suffered a near defeat as dramatic as Bradley's, while a self-proclaimed socialist, Bernard Sanders, made history with his victory as an independent Congressman from conservative Vermont.

Overall, then, the picture that emerges from the elections is one of diffuse but mounting voter discontent, as yet untapped or organized in any systematic way by either party.

What makes this discontent particularly troubling, both for the parties and for the prospects of effective public policy, is that the political process itself has become the target of public anger. Better than three-quarters of Americans now believe that their government is run by a "few big interests" looking out for themselves; almost as many do not generally trust the government to do "what is right"; fewer than one in five approve of the way that Congress is doing its job. In record numbers, Americans simply don't trust their government.

Policy stalemate is both a cause and consequence of these

record levels of distrust. The public distrusts government because it feels government has failed to do its job. At the same time, it is unwilling to authorize new initiatives by a government that it distrusts. So while there is widespread recognition of the severity of current social problems, and the need for government to do something about them, the public refuses to provide the government with the resources that it needs to address those problems.

For example, the vast majority of the American people believe that what the United States does to improve the environment can make a difference to the world, and nearly 70 percent support policies of environmental protection even at the cost of increased government spending and new taxes. But intense popular concerns about the environment and a willingness to pay for its cleanup are matched by equally intense doubts about the capacity of government to address environmental issues. Fewer than 30 percent think that government is doing even a "pretty good" job protecting the environment, and only 40 percent are confident that state government policy is not biased in favor of private polluters. Such doubts about governmental competence led voters in California and New York to reject ballot initiatives that would have authorized new programs to cleanup the environment. Summing up the defeat of a \$2 billion environmental bond act in New York, Governor Mario Cuomo observed: "That 'No' on the bond issue wasn't 'No' to making the place cleaner and

greener. It was people saying we think you don't know how to do it. It was people screaming at the government that we don't trust you any more."

Nor certainly is this problem limited to environmental policy. Virtually everyone recognizes that the U.S. has any number of serious social problems, and recognizes that the successful solution to these problems will require substantial commitment of public funds. For the past decade and more, the U.S. has been marked by falling hourly wages and stagnant family incomes. Inequality has reached record levels, to the point that in 1990 the after-tax income of the richest 1 percent of the population will almost equal that of the bottom 40 percent. Powerfully combined with cuts in governmental spending on many domestic programs, these developments have exacerbated a range of already serious domestic problems. At present, an estimated 2-3 million Americans are homeless; 20-30 million adults are functionally illiterate; 32 million live below the poverty line; 31 million are without any form of health insurance (public or private).

Even beginning to address these sorts of needs will require an annual increase in federal expenditures on the order of \$85 billion. Cleaning up the environment and repairing the infrastructure are estimated to require an additional \$45 billion annually, bringing the dimensions of this "third deficit" (alongside America's trade and budget deficits) of unmet social

or economic need to \$130 billion annually. (We leave aside the \$500 billion or so the savings and loan crisis is now expected to cost, and speculations on the astronomic costs of bailing out the nation's ailing insurance companies.)

But it is one thing to recognize such needs and the cost of addressing them, another to be willing to bear those costs, and yet another to trust government as the agent of reform. As a general matter, the American public has long since taken the first step, and announced its willingness to take the second. But since it has no confidence that government would spend the money wisely, it is not prepared to take the third. Some 55 percent of the population think that tax increases are necessary to address the country's problems, but 57 percent are opposed to increasing taxes.

Indeed, consistent with this view, the only course of action that was a clear "winner" in the 1990 elections was a course of direct, nonpartisan attack on elected officials themselves. Several states (California, Colorado, Oklahoma) joined in the movement to put limits on how long state or federal officials may remain in office. Nationally, that idea now commands support from a massive 70 percent of the population. Apart from the dismally low turnout that marked the 1990 elections, it would be hard to find more direct evidence of public frustration with politics as usual.

What will this frustration lead to? An answer to this

question is suggested by the recent process of budget negotiations. In the months leading up to the election, American politics centered on a conflict about how to reduce a hemorrhaging federal deficit. An intensely partisan and bitter process, the budget negotiations featured even more than the usual level of conflict both between and (especially in the Republican case) within the parties. The government itself was shut down for one weekend, and constant threats of another shutdown dominated national politics. And while the agreement that finally emerged from this process was a great improvement over a proposal that was approved in the secret meetings of the party leaderships, it does relatively little, finally, either to reduce the deficit or reorder national spending priorities.

In the absence of a major catastrophe, the next two years in Congress will look a good deal like the last three months of bickering, stalemate, and threats of paralysis. The important difference will be that pressures to reach agreement will be much less intense, while the pressures of the 1992 presidential race will soon start openly driving the political agendas on both parties.

Democrats emerge from the elections rightly convinced that President Bush is vulnerable in 1992, but still without anything like a general economic program identified with the party. This is a situation ripe for endless feints, posturing, and other attempts to magnify differences with the Republicans without

committing to clear lines of division.

Republicans emerge even more bitterly divided than when they went in. The days of Reaganite domination of the party appear to be ending -- not because an alternative to Reaganism has emerged victorious but because of a wholesale reversion to the traditional battles between moderates and radicals in the party. Radicals like Gingrich, who only months ago were predicting the arrival of a "governing conservative majority" in the House, are licking their wounds, apparently unloved both by their president and their constituents. Meanwhile, a new breed of old-fashioned Republican, defined chiefly by fiscal conservatism and tolerance for abortion rights, and flush from victories in California and a range of midwestern states, is being heralded as harbinger of a revival of moderate, Eisenhower-style Republicanism. Whether these forces can manage the mutual antagonism that generations of Republicans before them found intractable remains to be seen. Certainly, abortion and the other "social" issues that divide the GOP much more sharply than the Democrats will not recede in the new few years. And almost certainly, Bush will suffer at least significant challenge to renomination in 1992.

None of this is likely to cure voter dissatisfaction with Congressional performance. Nor is it likely to heal the internal party rifts, or dislodge the power blocs, that have for so long forestalled articulation of a popular program of national

reconstruction. What it will do is leave lots of time for just what voters do not want, and said loudly in the 1990 elections that they did not want, namely "politics as usual."