

**AMERICAN ELECTORAL POLITICS AND  
SPLIT-LEVEL PARTY REALIGNMENT:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE 1988 ELECTIONS**

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**Abstract**

Since 1968 the American political system has settled into a historically unprecedented pattern: Republican dominance in presidential elections, Democratic dominance in congressional elections. The Democrats' defeat in 1988 was their fifth loss in the last six presidential elections, yet they still maintained their majorities in Congress. The results of the 1988 elections reflected an unparalleled split-level realignment of the two parties in American electoral politics. The changing fortunes of the two parties are mainly attributable to a new kind of party alignment. This new realignment is grounded in the voters' expectations of the presidency and of individual members of Congress and in the nature of the Republican and Democratic parties.

Voters' ticket-splitting since the late sixties has produced divided control of the presidency and Congress by the two parties. This new pattern of American electoral politics can not be explained by the theory of classic realignment, such as the New Deal top-to-bottom realignment which gave the Democratic party majority at all levels and in all the elected branches of the federal system. So, it remains an interesting question: Why a divided government? A variety of polling data show that Americans want mutually incompatible things from the federal government. Most voters have national criteria in mind when they decide to vote in presidential elections, that is "peace and prosperity." In contrast, Congress is a locally elected branch wherein each member represents one state or congressional district. Thus most voters base their choices in

congressional elections more on the consequences for their own state or district. Therefore, an unprecedented split-level realignment has emerged.

In addition to the above, the nature of the two parties also plays a role in this new realignment. The Republicans, despite some differences between their evangelical “moralist” and economically motivated “enterpriser” wings on social issues, are a fairly homogenous party. The Democrats, in contrast, are raucously diverse — white, black, and Hispanic; liberal and conservative; Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish; uneducated and professionally educated. Thus in fielding candidates for Congress, the Democrats’ diversity is politically beneficial. Hence in elections to Congress or to other state or local offices, the Democratic party is, in one place or another, virtually all things to all people. The candidates of the more homogeneous Republican party seem almost everywhere to have been cast in a similar mold.

But heterogeneity haunts the Democrats in presidential elections. The Republicans do not have to worry about defining their party’s identity when writing their platform or choosing a candidate who will represent them to the whole nation. They have little problem projecting a confident, united front in their presidential campaigns. On the other side, the Democrats, who thrive on being many different parties in local elections, face the challenge of deciding which one party they will be in nominating a candidate for president. Almost invariably, the decision produces unhappy losers as well as a divided party and projects to the voters an image of vacillation and incompetence.

In a word, a split vote is consistent with differences in the duties that contemporary American voters assign to the president and members of Congress. The president is expected to look after broad national interests, while members of Congress are expected to protect particular local interests. Therefore, the advantage Republican presidential candidates enjoy may not extend to Republican congressional candidates at all. Hence, if no major historical events occur, such as the Great

Depression, the unprecedented split-level realignment and the divided control of U.S. government will remain for a long time.