

## LEGITIMACY, LEADERSHIP, AND LONGING FOR REALIGNMENT

### The Party Basis of the Bush Presidency

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**W**hat started rocky, ended rocky. Elected under controversial circumstances, George W. Bush entered office with a legitimacy crisis on his hands. A significant proportion of the American public viewed Bush as a dubious president, in part because he was outpolled in popular votes by the losing candidate and in part because his road to the White House took several legal detours through the Florida courts and finally through a contentious Supreme Court decision. His legitimacy crisis may have ebbed when 9/11 recast his presidency, but it did not disappear. About 65 to 70 percent of Democrats questioned the legitimacy of Bush's election throughout his first term, according to CBS News/Gallup polls. The broader leadership question encased in the legitimacy problem remained: how can this president lead? Most observers thought his second-place popular vote finish made any claim to a mandate irrelevant. Accordingly, when Bush entered office, many expected the new president to have tremendous difficulty enacting his legislative agenda and leading the government.

The American party system, however, provides opportunities for pres-

idents to establish legitimacy and exert leadership. Presidents seek to establish identities and political strengths independent of their party, but they remain dependent on party members to achieve many of their goals. Presidential leadership is connected to the party system in two important ways. First, the historical trajectory of the party system may be more or less favorable for the establishment of presidential leadership. That is, some presidents are simply in a more difficult position historically because of the strength or weakness of current party alignments. Second, presidents whose own victories were very narrow may face additional leadership challenges when their party's majority is also paper thin, but this situation can also create opportunities.

President Bush was in a strong position regarding the first point, the historical trajectory of the party system. Simply put, the basic dynamics of the party system—realignment, economic conditions, and decreasing ownership of issues by the Democratic Party—provided a relatively favorable environment for Bush's leadership claims. On the second point, Bush faced a challenge of legitimacy and leadership similar to that faced by many other presidents we classify as "plurality presidents"—those who receive less than half the popular vote and nonetheless win the presidency because of severe splits in the other party's coalition, reflected in the other major party's candidate losing significant vote share to third-party candidates—but Bush's situation was sufficiently different in that he had a distinctive set of advantages relative to other plurality leaders. Therefore, despite some similarities of their election victories, Bush started his term in a stronger position. The ingredients were in place for Bush to establish both legitimacy and leadership, even without the intervening events of 9/11.

For a long while, the president appeared to capitalize on this promise. Over his first six years, his support score in Congress—the percentage of times Congress voted in accordance with the president's position—was 81 percent. For eighteen months of those six years, Democrats controlled the Senate. As a measure, the support score has its weaknesses. For example, the votes in question might not reflect the president's agenda per se. And items on that presidential agenda that never made it to a congressional vote, such as the president's plans to reform Social Security, are not factored into the score. Still, the measure provides a rough sense that Congress was casting votes consistent with the president's wishes, to a degree that might be considered surprising in light of the circumstances surrounding the president's victory in 2000. The president felt compelled

to uncap his veto pen only once in those first six years, a historically low record.

Despite this success, the president's fortunes began drifting downward in his first term. Within twenty-four months, all of the approval bounce of 9/11 had been depleted. The conflict in Iraq, along with growing economic uncertainty, ate away at the president's approval and became a large share of political dialogue and rhetoric in Washington. Room for the president's other hoped-for signature accomplishments, including reform of immigration and Social Security, was scant. The president won reelection, but relatively weakly for an incumbent. By 2006, control of Congress had been lost. In the end, it was not legitimacy concerns that dragged the president down and weakened his leadership success in his final years. The president's leadership ultimately suffered from a weakened Republican Party, the difficulties in Iraq, a revitalized liberal political infrastructure, failure to adapt to a shifting domestic agenda, and the difficulties inherent in a plurality presidency.

### The Republican Ascendancy

When Bush became president, he inherited a party system that was well situated for his leadership efforts. Although Bush did not have an electoral mandate in 2000, the trends in the party system were largely favorable for his party and his presidency. First, although this is a matter of some controversy, it was plausible to say that the party system had shifted or perhaps even realigned in the Republicans' favor.

The concept of partisan realignment is an umbrella term covering distinctive varieties of political change. These varieties include secular realignment and critical realignment. Uniting these terms is an attempt to understand changes in the party system and how a party system moves from one type of competition to another (Stonecash 2005). In effect, realignment theory takes "before and after" photographs of the party system. The "before and after" might be from a period in which one party is dominant to a period in which the other party dominates, or from a time when a party has a particular coalition to a time when that party has a different supporting coalition, or from a period in which one party dominates to a period in which neither party dominates. No matter what type of change it is, significant policy departures accompany the party realignment.

Our analytical eye is often drawn to the dramatic and disruptive, but V. O. Key (1959) alerted scholars to the fact that significant political change

often occurs gradually, with the accumulation of small, incremental developments. This variety of realignment is known as secular (i.e., steady, gradual) realignment. As a social group becomes more affluent, for example, its members might find the policy appeals of a conservative political party more to their liking. As one particular social group becomes better represented within a political party, other groups might gradually pull out of that party. Scholars have suggested that both of these developments have occurred in the party system over the past few decades. For example, as Catholics moved steadily into the middle class, they became less reliably Democratic. As African Americans gained a louder voice in the Democratic Party, whites, especially southern whites, increasingly supported Republicans. As religious and social conservatives played an increasing role in the Republican Party, Republican moderates found themselves increasingly likely to vote Democratic. Evangelical Christians moved from Democratic voting to Republican voting over time.

In the 1990s, secular realignment moved in a direction that tended to favor Republicans. Groups that were considered part of the Democratic New Deal coalition—organized labor, agricultural interests, urban ethnic groups, Catholics, Jews, the less educated, southerners, industrial blue collar workers, liberals—tended to support Democrats less strongly in the 1990s than in the 1940s (Mayer 1998). Indeed, if these groups had still been voting for Democrats at their traditional level, Democrats would not have lost control of Congress, state legislatures, and governorships in the 1990s. Still, Jeffrey Stonecash (2000) and Stonecash, Mark Brewer, and Mack Mariani (2003) have shown that class-based divisions between the parties were on the upswing in the 1990s, so the idea that Republicans represented those who were better off economically and Democrats, the less well off, still held true.

In the 1990s, the New Deal coalition could no longer cement Democratic victories, and that worked to the Republicans' advantage. By the 1990s a Democrat, particularly a Democratic presidential nominee, could no longer plan on winning by simply rounding up the old coalitional suspects. Even candidates who found that they did well with these traditional New Deal coalition groups—and most Democratic candidates did do reasonably well with them—would find that they needed to reach outside this cluster to ensure victory (Bartels 1998). This situation provided an opportunity for Republicans in general and George Bush in particular. Although Bush fared miserably among African Americans, in 2000 he eroded some of the Democratic advantage with other groups, such as

women, and co-opted some of the issues that were typically seen as owned by Democrats, such as Social Security and education. And in 2004, Bush gained among a majority of groups in the population.

The upshot is that the Republicans were poised to strengthen their majority status when Bush entered office, and his fellow partisans knew that. That gave them great incentive to cooperate with Bush, which they did at very high levels in roll call votes. Unlike Bill Clinton, whom many Democrats suspected did not have the key to future Democratic victories—and indeed, the party's presidential nominees cast a more liberal tone in 2008 than Clinton had in 1992 and 1996—Bush seemed to have had his fellow partisans believing he had unlocked the code to Republican dominance. Regaining control of both houses of Congress with the 2002 elections only reinforced that impression among Republican elites. As Philip John Davies put it when reviewing the results of the national and state 2002 elections, “It is almost a statistical tie—a shift of a few votes here and there would have changed the results. But the Republicans won this tie. In every case the small majority lies with the Republicans, and the combination is to give that party a very considerable, and interlinked, foundation for national political authority” (Davies 2003, 146).

With secular realignment, Republicans were at worst co-equal with the Democrats or were arguably the majority party. It had been a long time since Republicans controlled the presidency, House, and Senate simultaneously and an even longer time since they had won and maintained control of Congress for several consecutive elections (which they did from 1994 through 2004). Bush's presidency, though the result of an unusual election, benefited early on from its place in history. His fellow partisans in Congress proved willing to let him lead. This did not mean that he had the unconditional support of his party, but it did mean that Bush was seen by fellow Republicans as the person who could make the Republican majority, thin as it was, durable (Barone 2002; Brooks 2003; Meyerson 2002; Teixeira 2003). This forecast was shattered in the 2006 and 2008 elections.

Another form of historical change is known as critical realignment. Elaborated most importantly by V. O. Key (1955) and Walter Dean Burnham (1970) and vigorously challenged by David Mayhew (2002), realignment theory posits that some elections (either an individual election or a series of two elections in sequence) have enduring consequences for the party system. Rather than the gradual change at the heart of secular realignment, critical realignment focuses on sharp, quick transformations

of the political landscape that have effects for a generation or longer. Typically, critical realignments bring a new majority party to power and have effects at the local, state, and national level. Scholars place the elections of 1800 (Jeffersonian Republicans), 1828 (Jackson and the Democrats), 1860 (Lincoln's Republicans), and 1932 (Roosevelt and the Democrats) in this category. Other realignments might keep the same majority party but create a new supporting coalition for that party, as in 1896 (McKinley and the Republicans).

Scholars such as John Aldrich (1995) and Walter Dean Burnham (1996) have argued that the 1968 election marked a critical realignment of a different type. This realignment was notable for its dealigning features: members of the public pulled away from their party loyalties, turnout began to drop, and control over government was usually divided between the two major parties. With this shared power, policy began to move in a more conservative direction after decades of nearly continuous Democratic control in Congress and Democratic presidents for twenty-eight of thirty-six years. The dramatic victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980, in this view, solidified the ongoing system rather than marking a realigning election in its own right. The Republican Party was strengthened by gaining control of the Senate from 1981 through 1986, and policy moved even more clearly in a conservative direction, but control of government in Washington remained divided and the Democrats remained the majority party in the states and cities.

The 1994 electoral earthquake had all the hallmarks of a traditional partisan critical realignment: issues were highly prominent, the political atmosphere seemed unusually energized, the election results tilted almost universally toward one party, institutional reorganization (especially in the House) was extensive, and policy changes (or attempts at policy changes) were numerous and, for the most part, ideologically consistent (Burnham 1996). It seemed that at last the Democratic era was over.

History, however, is rarely as neat and tidy as our models. In this supposed new Republican era, a Democrat won the presidency in 1996 and the Democrats pulled off the historical anomaly of gaining seats in the midterm election of 1998. Much of the conservative Republican agenda either failed or was watered down to ensure passage and the Democratic president's signature.

Still, with 1994, the Republican Party achieved parity with the Democrats throughout the country and at all levels of government. The period from 1968 to 1994 featured divided government that leaned toward Demo-

cratic control at most levels and in most offices but with generally increasing Republican success, notably in the 1980s. The 1994 election seemed to most Republicans to hold the promise that the balance of party power had tilted in their direction. By the end of 2005, Republicans had remained the majority party in Congress for six straight terms (with a brief deviation following the defection of Senator James Jeffords in 2001), something the party had not accomplished in nearly seventy years. Moreover, of the nineteen states where population growth from 1990 to 2000 exceeded the national average of 13.2 percent, Bush won fourteen of them in 2000. Republicans were doing best where the population—and the electoral votes it provides—was growing the most. This was apparent in 2004; if Bush simply won in 2004 the same states he won in 2000, his electoral vote margin would have increased from his four votes in 2000 to eighteen votes in 2004.

And the Republican Party's electoral fortunes remained strong during Bush's first term. The party picked up seats in the House and Senate in the 2002 midterm elections, a historical oddity at any time. In 2004, the Republicans picked up even more, partly as a result of the redrawing of congressional districts in Texas in 2003. Republicans, unhappy with a judicially created redistricting map for their state, opened a special session of the legislature to produce a new map, which ultimately would lead to seven new Republican-leaning districts. Democratic state senators went into hiding in Oklahoma, and then New Mexico, in protest. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the legislature's right to redraw the map. The party also retained a lead in state governors and split evenly on the number of state legislators.

The 1990s and first Bush term also witnessed the partial demise of ideas that the American electorate was dealigning at the national level. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of scholars pointed out that Americans seemed to be losing their partisan moorings, that attachments to the parties were not as deep or as permanent as they had once been. Rather than realignment, these scholars suggested, *dealignment* best described the new American electorate. To a large degree, these accounts were compelling descriptions of the electorate of those two decades. In the 1990s, however, this trend bottomed out and reversed. Most notably, the percentage of voters splitting their tickets between the two major parties—for example, voting for a House candidate of one party and a presidential candidate of another party—declined throughout the 1990s and in the 2000 election. In 2000, that percentage of vote splitters (14 percent) was the low-

est it had been since 1964. Similarly, the percentage of districts electing a House member of one party while supporting a presidential candidate of another party in 2000 (20.2 percent) was at its lowest level since 1952. This figure dropped even further in 2004. Voters had become better "sorted" into the correct political party, with liberals encamped in the Democratic Party and conservatives in the Republican Party.

In both senses of realignment, secular and critical, the historical position of the party system was advantageous for George W. Bush. Republicans had, for the first time in many decades, a clear opportunity to become a durable majority party. Viewing the hard-right tactics of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s to have been a failure, the party was open to a different approach and somewhat different message. Bush capitalized on these openings and garnered tremendous loyalty from Republicans in Congress. Coming to office when he did, Bush was able to leverage his leadership opportunities to an unusual degree, certainly to an extent greater than his thin 2000 victory would suggest. His ability to exercise leadership, his Republican colleagues realized, would enhance his legitimacy credentials. This favorable environment would shift starkly after 2004.

We will mention other features of the historical trajectory—political time, economic conditions, and changing issue ownership—only briefly. First, Bush's leadership benefited Republicans because of his place in political time. As explained elsewhere in this volume, Bush entered office as an "orthodox innovator," in Stephen Skowronek's terms. Expectations are relatively low for such presidents, and their ability to lead is tied to the perceptions of the president they are linked to, the president whose agenda they are seen as eager to advance. In Bush's case, that would be Ronald Reagan. The reverence for Reagan among Republicans was and is substantial, and Bush found himself domestically in the role of fine-tuning and adjusting the Reagan legacy and agenda, not discarding it. For this, he was given substantial leeway to lead among Republican politicians and activists. His early passage of a large tax cut and his insistence on additional cuts proved his Reaganite credentials to both groups. By the end of his second term, however, Bush was widely criticized by conservatives for deviating from the Reagan philosophy.

Second, Bush inherited an economy that had grown strongly for years and generated budget surpluses. This situation allowed him to make the case for his tax cuts in 2001 despite, initially, any clear economic reason the economy required such stimulus. Early into his term, however, the economy began to slide, and the tax cut in the Economic Growth and Tax

Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 could now be defended as reasonable and stimulatory. He could use the continuing troubles of the economy to push additional rounds of tax cuts in the Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act of 2002 and the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. In his first term, the president was able to leverage economic conditions in pursuit of his ideological beliefs in a manner satisfactory to his base. This pattern would not hold out for long, however.

Third, Bush in 2000 rode the wave of the nationalization of the education issue, particularly as the link between education and financial well-being became ever more strongly entrenched in public assumptions. Both of these developments proved helpful for passage of major parts of the Bush campaign agenda. Because of his personal efforts, the Democratic ownership of the education issue had diminished markedly by the time Bush took office. The same was true of Social Security, though the collapse in the stock market following 2000 prevented Bush from making any early headway on his campaign promise to reform the pension system. And while Bush had weakened some of the Democratic ownership of key issues, he was able to reinforce issues on which Republicans had been strong. The tragedy of 9/11, in particular, provided a means to reinforce Bush's arguments during the campaign that American military and security readiness needed to improve. On issue ownership, too, Republicans would be worse off by the end of Bush's second term.

### Avoiding a Legitimacy Crisis

We believe that "close matters," but it does not fully determine presidential success and public acceptance. For most Americans in 2001, President Bush's legitimacy would depend on his ability to achieve some measure of policy success. That success would depend on his ability to master the difficulties inherent in his controversial victory. Even after 9/11, it was not obvious or inevitable that Bush would escape questions about the legitimacy of his presidency, even if these questions might be asked in hushed tones.

Through most of the 2000 campaign, many Americans appeared unmoved by the leading presidential candidates and unconvinced that the upcoming election would make much of a difference in their lives. Indeed, Ralph Nader grounded his insurgent candidacy in the premise that a President Gore would differ from a President Bush only in the smallest details of program and rhetoric. Amid the unfolding drama of election night, however, many formerly uninterested citizens began to suspect that

something vitally important was at stake. By the time the Supreme Court ended the suspense five weeks later, committed partisans on both sides had adopted scorched-earth tactics in pursuit of their preferred outcomes, and many of those who yawned their way through the official campaign now seemed certain that the extra-inning selection of their next president would be very consequential indeed (Dionne and Kristol 2001).

Submerged by the remarkable developments of the Bush years, the political problem of the forty-third president's legitimacy receded beyond recognition during his first term. What explains the rapid disappearance of legitimacy as a politically contentious characteristic of the Bush presidency? Credible questions of legitimacy could have plagued this president, especially given the deep partisan divides in American politics and the then-still-fresh memories of the Clinton impeachment. That they did not requires an explanation that situates George W. Bush in the ongoing flow of American party politics.

We begin with the simple notion that elections provide political information to winners and losers alike. Generally speaking, winners—and the journalists who play a central role in establishing the conventional wisdom after each election—will credit the victorious side's savvy tactical decisions, the general brilliance of the triumphant candidate, or, at times, the inevitability of the outcome. Losers, on the other hand, engage in postmortem analysis not simply to apportion blame but to develop a strategic plan for future contests. Not all presidents are elected in the same circumstances. Some win landslides. Others win comfortably. Others manage close wins. Some win despite having received less than half the vote. In this last category, some win largely because of the implosion of the opposition party. Presidents like Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton won, to a significant degree, because of the internal fractures within the opposition party that led to third-party candidates. It is this last type of presidential winner that we refer to as a plurality president.

The central intrigue of the plurality presidency is that it fuses the analytical frames of the winner and the loser into a single act of political interpretation. After all, plurality winners have indeed triumphed, and they are thus entitled to use the authority of the presidency, but the unconvincing nature of their victory compels them and their teams to search for more reliable footing in the shifting sands of American politics. This prospective project—a fusion of the winner's rationalization and the loser's retooling—captures the basic outlook of the plurality presidency. More-

over, this dynamic process connects elites and voters in an ongoing process of party definition in which elites offer voters a choice, voters choose, and elites interpret that choice with an eye to the next round of electoral competition.

As party politicians assess their prospects, the best guide to an upcoming election is the most recent one. In other words, potential candidates (including incumbents) look ahead by looking back. In search of a winning formula, candidates in the just-defeated party assess the political terrain and build an electoral blueprint based on the best available information. A defining characteristic of a plurality election is that its winner must engage in effectively the same analysis as the losers of most other elections. The key difference is that the winners of these elections conduct such assessments from the White House. To put it another way, plurality presidents engage in something like a loser's analysis from a winner's position of power.

To understand the plurality presidency, one must understand what it is not. First, it is not an automatic result of multiparty elections. Third- and fourth-party insurgencies have played significant roles, but other notable multicandidate contests have not produced plurality presidencies as we define them. Consider the 1948 election, in which Democrat Harry Truman fell just short of a popular majority at 49.6 percent of the vote. We do not regard Truman as a plurality president because the minor-party candidates who held him short of a majority—Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond with 2.4 percent of the vote and Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace with 2.3 percent—broke from the Democratic orbit.

Truman won the presidency *despite* a split in one of the major parties. Plurality presidents, on the other hand, win in part *because* of a split in one of the major parties. Elites will derive little political information from the simple fact that a candidate does not reach 50 percent. Instead, elections that reveal the winning side's persistent weakness in the party system generate useful political information. If Truman could succeed even when his party suffered two breakaway movements, he would perceive electoral vindication for the orthodox Democratic formulas of the New Deal and Fair Deal. Victory in such a contest would thus embolden its winner, suggesting little need to revise basic party positions.

Now consider the contrasting message of the 1912 election, in which Woodrow Wilson won largely—if not exclusively—because of Theodore Roosevelt's challenge to incumbent Republican William Howard Taft. In

nearly eight years as president, Roosevelt forged a distinctly progressive identity for himself and, by extension, for the Republican Party. By siphoning substantial progressive support from Taft's Republican coalition, Roosevelt effectively guaranteed Wilson's victory. The political upshot of this election turned on what Wilson would do with the information conveyed by his election. In practice, Wilson's plurality election compelled him to pursue a new direction for the Democratic Party, which remained tied to the conservative impulses of the Bourbon South. The important point here is that plurality presidents (a category for which the winners in 1856, 1860, 1912, 1968, and 1992 clearly qualify) win under conditions that encourage them to reformulate their parties' respective identities.

If the plurality presidency is not just a function of multicandidate campaigns, neither is it a simple consequence of close races. The more relevant question is, what does a narrow victory suggest about the underlying state of party competition? It certainly suggests that it is *close* and that any given election can go either way. But narrow victories do not necessarily indicate that the winners prevailed in spite of their party's ongoing electoral weakness. In turn, narrow victories do not necessarily recommend that the winners and their party move in any particular ideological or programmatic direction in order to generate additional support in future contests.

All of this leads us back to the election of 2000. Did George W. Bush qualify as a plurality president? He may be the most difficult historical case to categorize. The 2000 election was indeed quite close. By winning nearly 48 percent of the popular vote, Bush did well enough to suggest that his party remained fully competitive, if not dominant, at the presidential level. In addition, continued Republican control of Congress suggested that the party was plenty viable at that level. Nevertheless, on one count—the nature of significant minor-party insurgencies—the 2000 results suggested that Bush would confront the challenges and opportunities of plurality leadership.

Given the razor-thin margins in key states where Ralph Nader hurt Al Gore, Bush may have won because of Nader's departure from the Democratic fold. It is true that Patrick Buchanan's share of the vote could be said to have denied Bush victories in some states, but Nader's vote totals in these states were often larger still. During the campaign of 2000, Bush fused appeals to his ideological base with self-conscious departures from party orthodoxy, which is a hallmark of savvy plurality leadership. The

notion of "compassionate conservatism" fits comfortably within the basic premise of plurality leadership, which recommends subtle revisions to the presidential party's identity.

### The Elections of 1824 and 1992

To get a clearer sense of Bush's legitimacy and leadership situation in historical perspective, one might look back to two other presidents. In early 1825, John Quincy Adams prevailed in the House of Representatives after no candidate in the effectively partyless contest of 1824 received a majority of the votes in the Electoral College. Immediately, a defeated Andrew Jackson railed against the "corrupt bargain" allegedly struck between Adams and the fourth-place finisher, Speaker of the House Henry Clay. The purported deal between Adams and Clay had the former agreeing to appoint the latter as secretary of state. When Adams did so, he added substantial fuel to Jackson's political fire. Jackson had won the popular vote by more than 10 percent, and he did not let Adams or the rest of the country forget it. In the ensuing four years, Jackson assembled a potent set of electoral claims rooted largely, though not exclusively, in the presumptive illegitimacy of the Adams presidency. Ultimately, those claims propelled Jackson to victory in 1828 and finally secured the enduring connection between the constitutional office of the presidency and the extraconstitutional domain of party politics.

One should not strain the comparison with more than it can bear, but the events of early 1825 are at least roughly analogous to the events of late 2000. In both cases, a popular vote winner was stymied not only by the Electoral College but also by the intervention of a co-equal branch of government and was ultimately forced to concede the election to a bitter rival. For our purposes, however, two key distinctions are more instructive than the similarities between the cases. First, where Andrew Jackson protested his defeat unrelentingly in the mid-1820s, the defeated Al Gore did nothing of the sort in 2000. Second, where John Quincy Adams had no viable, reliable party organization to which he might turn for support, George W. Bush enjoyed the effectively unanimous backing of a vigorous Republican apparatus before, during, and after the Florida controversy. Though it is tempting to think of the latter as a matter of course, the unbridled enthusiasm with which Republican elites advanced Bush's claims in the postelection period requires some elaboration and explanation. Moreover, Gore's dignified concession attracted substantial praise at the time, but, following Jackson's (admittedly remote) precedent, he might

have protested a bit more loudly. Why did all of this turn out the way it did? Why, in other words, did Bush encounter so little trouble with the problem of legitimacy in the aftermath of such a hotly contested, highly controversial victory? To begin to answer these questions, one might turn to a more recent election for a second point of comparison.

In 1992, Bill Clinton won a classic plurality election. With a comfortable majority in the Electoral College, the Arkansas governor was the first Democrat to win a presidential election in sixteen years. After more than a decade in the presidential wilderness, many Democrats anticipated a productive era of harmonious unified government. Lost amid the celebration was the essential characteristic of Clinton's triumph: he carried only 43 percent of the popular vote. Like other plurality presidents before him, such as James Buchanan (45 percent in 1856), Abraham Lincoln (40 percent in 1860), Woodrow Wilson (42 percent in 1912), and Richard Nixon (43 percent in 1968), he won in spite of his party's continuing weakness in presidential politics. More to the point, his election confronted him with three related dilemmas.

First, Clinton encountered an abstract dilemma of legitimacy. This is admittedly an expansive concept, and it lacks clear empirical referents, but Bob Dole, the Republican Senate minority leader, seemed to know it when he saw it. As soon as the day after Clinton's 1992 election, Dole offered a telling interpretation of that victory. "Fifty-seven percent of the Americans who voted in the Presidential election voted against Bill Clinton," Dole intoned from the Senate chamber, "and I intend to represent that majority on the floor of the U.S. Senate" (from Tumulty 1993). Dole soon adopted a more conciliatory tone (in his public rhetoric, at least) after critics objected to his "rancorous" partisanship, but one can scarcely imagine a more resounding declaration of plurality politics.

Second, Clinton faced a practical dilemma of governance. Notwithstanding his lifelong ambitions, Clinton ran in 1992 for reasons larger than his own power prospects. He had in mind a number of ideas for improving the performance of the national government and, of course, the lives of American citizens. But he recognized that the constitutional system separates institutions and distributes lawmaking authority horizontally among branches and vertically between the federal government and the states. He hoped to enact measures that might give practical meaning to his rhetorical vision, but his limited victory rendered that task uncertain. How would Clinton make this fragmented system do what he wanted it to do? If nearly every member of Congress won a larger share of the popu-



lar vote than he did, how might he lead the national legislature with any authority?

Third, Clinton confronted a political dilemma of reelection. Perhaps he ran for reasons larger than simple ambition, but the old congressional maxim that one needs to save one's seat before one can save the world also applied to Bill Clinton as he assumed the presidency. Clinton clearly intended to run again in 1996, but he could not assume that the peculiar circumstances of his initial victory—especially the significant minor-party insurgency of Ross Perot—would repeat themselves in his bid for reelection. Clinton had to wonder: if he won only four in ten voters the first time, how might he expand his support on the road to reelection?

Though each of these dilemmas related to a specific dimension of presidential politics, they combined to encourage Clinton—just like most of his plurality predecessors—to swim upstream against the prevailing ideological and rhetorical currents of his party. In Clinton's case, of course, this incentive structure confirmed the incoming president's inclination to pursue the identity of a "New Democrat." One should note, of course, that Bill Clinton was present at the creation of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in 1985, later chaired the group, and invoked the New Democrats' holy trinity of opportunity, responsibility, and community as a central theme of his 1992 candidacy (Baer 2000). In a sense, then, the election of 1992 did not turn the incoming president into a New Democrat, but what it did was hugely important: it made a would-be New Democrat the incoming president, placing him at the vital center of the American party system. In addition, it set the stage for an intraparty struggle between Clinton and his centrist allies on the one hand and an array of unreconstructed liberals in Congress and their supporters on the other (Price 2002).

Contrast Clinton's treatment after the 1992 election—outright claims of his illegitimacy from conservatives who could not abide the new president and an uneven welcome from liberals who were unmoved by all the talk of New Democratic politics—with the reception George W. Bush received after his victory in 2000. In the latter case, the incoming president encountered congressional Democrats who were relatively docile and congressional Republicans who were both deeply supportive and broadly unified. Why the difference?

First, and most important, Bush encountered a Republican majority in the 107th Congress that was both narrower and shorter-lived than its

Democratic analog of the 103rd. While many congressional Democrats resisted Bill Clinton's reformist party project, in part because they had little reason to suspect in 1993 that their own electoral prospects turned on the success of that project, many Republicans had plenty of reason to believe in 2001 that the preservation of their tenuous congressional majorities would depend on the new president's vindication in office. One might note here that the Democrats had gained House seats in every congressional election since 1994; in the Senate, meanwhile, the Democrats had forged a 50-50 tie by erasing the Republicans' four-seat advantage in the elections of 2000. In this context, what would demonstrate Bush's legitimacy more clearly than a congressional majority rallying immediately to his side?

The primary point here is that the congressional Republicans of 2001 interpreted George W. Bush's 2000 election differently than the congressional Democrats had interpreted Bill Clinton's 1992 election. In the earlier case, Clinton's party was certainly pleased that he had prevailed, but many of his putative allies remained largely unmoved by the New Democratic formula during the 103rd Congress. In Bush's case, on the other hand, Republican elites moved quickly to bolster the new president. One can now place the Bush experience in context alongside these two points of comparison. Where John Quincy Adams had no real party to which he could turn in 1825, and where Bill Clinton could turn only to a divided (and in some ways recalcitrant) party in 1993, George W. Bush found in his fellow Republicans just what he needed in 2001.

A second factor could be that Republican elites endowed Bush with the legitimacy that flows from unified partisan support in part because the outcome of the 2000 election was so indeterminate, because the Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore* was likely to be perceived by some observers as partisan, and because the entire episode had produced such deep cynicism on all sides. Because potential charges of illegitimacy were so plausible, and thus the risk of illegitimacy so acute, Bush and the Republicans moved quickly to nullify such charges before the Democrats could get them off the ground. In the aftermath of *Bush v. Gore*, in other words, the Republicans may have suspected that the Democrats would hammer away at the uncertain legitimacy of the incoming Bush administration. To counter that would-be challenge, they circled the partisan wagons and denied that anyone could question the legitimacy of the outcome without treading on treasonous ground.



But a third element in this story remains to be explained: the fact that neither Al Gore nor the vast majority of elite Democrats questioned, at least publicly or loudly, the legitimacy of the Bush presidency. The only notable elite-level protest of the outcome took place when members of the Congressional Black Caucus walked out on the vote-counting ceremony in the House of Representatives. Unlike John Quincy Adams, who faced a bitterly determined Andrew Jackson and a budding Democratic juggernaut in the 1820s, and unlike Bill Clinton, who faced a conservative movement that simply never accepted his legitimacy, George W. Bush encountered a relatively quiescent Democratic opposition. Democrats had mobilized behind Gore during the Florida recount, of course, but once the Court stopped that process, they folded the battle flag. Why were the Democrats so reluctant to depict President-elect Bush as somehow less than fully legitimate?

When Gore conceded in a nationally televised address on December 13, 2000, he enjoyed a generous reception in the political press. At the conclusion of the wrenching process in Florida, the conventional wisdom suggested that the country could not take any more scorched-earth politics. If the country suffered from "Florida fatigue," this line of thinking went, Al Gore had only one choice once the game was up: concede like a gentleman and move on. Indeed, we suspect that the weight of journalistic opinion, which implied that the only thing less legitimate than a Bush presidency would be an ongoing Democratic protest of same, led Gore and his fellow partisans to choose to simply concede. They decided that playing the legitimacy card would prove more costly than beneficial, in part because establishment opinion simply would not tolerate it.

Another factor in the Democrats' relative quiescence after *Bush v. Gore* was the fact that some congressional Democrats ran and won in states and districts where George W. Bush had done quite well, and with the balance of power in Congress so precarious, "some" often equals "enough." Such Democrats figured they had little to gain from a sustained challenge of the fundamental legitimacy of the Bush presidency. Again, the contrast with John Quincy Adams and Bill Clinton is instructive. In the former case—where Adams won only 31 percent of the popular vote—members of Congress who might challenge the president's legitimacy had little to fear in their own states and districts. In the latter case—where Clinton won with 43 percent of the popular vote—few Republicans hailed from states or districts where Clinton had outpolled them in 1992. In 2000, however, Democrats such as Senators John Breaux of Louisiana, Ben Nelson of Ne-

braska, Tim Johnson of South Dakota, and Max Baucus of Montana had more to lose than to gain from making aggressive, partisan charges of illegitimacy against the new administration.

### Unraveling the Best-Laid Plans

We have suggested that George W. Bush entered office facing significant challenges of legitimacy and leadership. We have argued, however, that Bush was well positioned to make the best of these challenges despite his controversial victory, and, we suggest, this would have been true even without 9/11. Our argument has essentially been that Bush, given his dilemma, benefited from being on favorable historical ground. First, the currents of partisan realignment were favorable to Bush and gave him the kind of support from congressional Republicans that he dearly needed. Second, although Bush's victory resembled those of other plurality presidents, he was able to read a different meaning from his victory than his immediate plurality predecessor, Bill Clinton, could divine from his.

By the time of his second inauguration, in 2005, Bush could look back and see gains for Republicans in the House and Senate. He owned a reelection victory that was more comfortable than his initial victory, though thin by historical standards. Urged on by his chief strategist, Karl Rove, the president thought big, believing he could forge a durable Republican realignment. He unapologetically claimed a mandate and famously noted that he had earned "political capital, and now I intend to spend it." But midway through 2005, observers were already noting that the president seemed to be failing on several policy fronts and that Republicans were growing more restless (Baker and VandeHei 2005). By 2006, Republicans had lost their House and Senate majority. And by 2008, the Democratic presidential nominating contest drew a historically large turnout and Republicans braced for the worst in congressional races. The November election results served up precisely what Republicans had feared: a victory by Barack Obama in many states won by Bush, a drop in vote percentage in nearly all states and among nearly all social groups, the first Democratic presidential candidate to finish with significantly more than 50 percent of the vote since Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and the loss of yet more seats in the House and Senate, bringing the Senate Democrats very close to the magic number of sixty needed to defeat any Republican-led filibuster. The hope for a Republican political era was dashed, and many analysts speculated that the party would be in the political wilderness for some time.

What went wrong? Simply put, virtually all of the political infrastruc-

ture supporting Bush in 2000 disappeared. We highlight several contributing factors.

First, Bush's strategy of straddling Democratic issues and positions—which emerged centrally from his plurality status, as well as from his experience in Texas—led to disappointment among conservatives. In his first term, Bush followed a two-path strategy. He appealed to conservatives with substantially lower taxes, higher defense spending, an increased role for faith-based organizations, the elimination of “partial-birth” abortions, and business-friendly deregulation in some areas. On these issues, Bush needed to hold on to every Republican vote he could in the highly partisan atmosphere in Washington. His successes on these matters pleased Republicans and angered Democrats. Bush's second path was to move in on Democratic turf, on issues such as education, campaign finance reform, and Medicare drug coverage. Conservatives expressed anger about all three policy initiatives—and Democrats were not happy about having to share credit on their signature political issues—the first because it advanced a huge new federal role, the second due to its free-speech implications, and the third because it created an expensive new federal entitlement. That the *National Review*, the stalwart periodical on the right, printed an editorial in its July 23, 2003, issue titled “Left Turn: Is the GOP Conservative?” gives some sense of conservative unease at these developments. The *Review* noted that it never expected Bush to be a solid conservative on issues like small government, racial preferences, or immigration but believed that he would act conservatively on most matters. Granting Bush a passing grade for national security, judicial appointments, and tax cuts, the *Review* viewed him as unable to deliver on the rest of the conservative agenda. Moving into his second term, Bush's compassionate conservatism became, to many, simply “big government conservatism.” The response to Hurricane Katrina weakened the Republican brand label's claim that it was the party not of big government but well-run government. The president's proposed immigration reform seemed to many to be too soft on illegal immigration and went down to defeat. His disastrous nomination of Harriet Miers for a Supreme Court seat perplexed his conservative supporters.

Second, some of the favorable issue ground inherited by Bush shifted, without accompanying shifts by the president or party. While one could certainly make a plausible argument that, in many respects, life in the United States had never been better (Easterbrook 2008), the political reality was that vast swaths of the public felt uneasy and vulnerable to eco-

omic insecurity (Hacker 2006). The positive economic conditions of the late 1990s gave way to more troubled times. Unemployment, inflation, gasoline prices, mortgage foreclosures, and the federal budget deficit mushroomed. Trade deficits grew, while the relative value of the dollar fell. Health care costs continued to climb, while the percentage of the workforce covered by company retirement pension plans continued to decline. Virtually none of these issues elicited a forceful or vocal response, whether market oriented or otherwise, from the president and his fellow partisans. Whether this failure to grasp the shifting landscape was due to preoccupation with the Iraq war, poor political calculations, or some other factor, it surely contributed to the overall public clamor for a change in direction in Washington and to the fact that nearly 80 percent of the population in mid-2008 said the country was on the wrong track.

Third, the very fact of being a plurality president presents some difficult obstacles to establishing a durable partisan victory. Previous plurality presidencies did not end well. James Buchanan, elected in 1856, was the last Democrat elected to the presidency for twenty years. Woodrow Wilson, elected in 1912 and reelected in 1916, carried a Democratic majority with him to Washington, but divided government was in place by the beginning of his second term and a unified Republican government by the end of that term. Richard Nixon, elected in 1968 and 1972, contributed to massive Democratic gains in the 1974 election and the Democrats' return to the White House in 1977 following Gerald Ford's short tenure in office. Bill Clinton's problems culminated in GOP victories in 2000. Standing alone among the plurality group is Abraham Lincoln. Though he met personal tragedy, Lincoln would by most standard accounts be considered a successful president, and his party prospered under the unique conditions of Reconstruction. The point here is not that Bush was doomed to failure but that the plurality presidency is an inherently difficult one. Derailment is all too possible.

Fairly or not, the long, difficult war in Iraq became the centerpiece of Bush's presidency and dramatically affected every other aspect of it. The president's time and attention were focused there, even as the public's focus shifted to domestic matters. Federal spending for the war was not available for other purposes, such as giving voters further tax breaks. Disappointing developments in Iraq combined with economic difficulties to drag down the president's popularity.

All of these circumstances had opposite effects on the two parties. Focused around the president's war and anti-terror agenda, the Repub-

lican Party failed to craft a compelling domestic agenda. The party base recoiled from what it saw as the congressional party's comfort with big government, key constituencies such as social conservatives felt neglected, independents who had supported the party grew tired of scandals involving individual members of Congress, and the increasing unpopularity of the Iraq war sapped the enthusiasm of all but the most ardent party supporters.

For the Democratic Party, however, the war was a singular organizational boon. The war was deeply unpopular among party activists. Like the think-tanks, magazines, and radio talk shows that vaunted conservative ideas in the 1970s and 1980s, the Democrats were winning the battle for Internet supremacy during the Bush presidency. The disputed election of 2000 set the stage for the growth of left-leaning political commentary on the Web. But it was opposition to the war that was the spark that turned these embers into roaring partisan flames. The liberal blogosphere exploded during Bush's first term and continued apace in his second term. Opposition to the war was the glue unifying this movement. Gary Jacobson (2007) shows that support for the Iraq war was more divided by party than was true of any other conflict after World War II. Moreover, opposition on Iraq translated into distrust of and opposition to President Bush on other issues. Perhaps more than at any point since the early 1970s, the liberal political infrastructure had been revitalized. The new centrism of the Democratic Leadership Council had receded to the point that it was nearly institutionally invisible during the 2008 nomination process. Blogs and social networking sites provided forums for policy and political analysis, discussion of candidates, organization around the country, and massive fund-raising. Meanwhile, the Republican Party lagged well behind this new organizational curve.

The net impact of these four factors—dissatisfaction among conservatives and Republicans, a shifting domestic agenda, the inherent difficulties of plurality leadership, and the Iraq war and its attendant revival of the liberal political infrastructure—combined to thwart the president's leadership. To be sure, Bush continued to use the unilateral powers at his disposal, but where he needed congressional cooperation, his leadership stalled. In 2007, the president's support score in Congress was as low as Bill Clinton's in 1995, and both of these were the lowest since *Congressional Quarterly* began computing such scores in 1945.

The four factors also pushed in a Democratic direction. On party identification, Democrats gained nationally while Republican identifiers

declined, and the Democratic gains among those age eighteen to twenty-nine were especially dramatic. Given highly partisan voting—about 90 percent of party identifiers will tend to vote for their party's candidate—this created a stiff headwind against Republican victories. Democrats were favored on virtually every issue by 2008. A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in February 2008 showed Democrats were thought likely to do a better job on the environment, energy, health care, education, reforming government, the economy, taxes, morality, Iraq, foreign policy, and immigration. Republicans led only on handling terrorist threats. These trends continued throughout 2008. Overall, the issue landscape was bleak for Republicans. Democrats once again owned traditional Democratic issues and had muscled Republicans aside on many issues typically owned by Republicans.

Over his two terms, President Bush's leadership overcame potentially debilitating legitimacy concerns but ultimately came apart on the rocks of a rapidly shifting political landscape. With substantial losses in 2006 and 2008, the Republicans' hoped-for durable realignment was derailed, and there was little ground for optimism that it could be revived anytime soon. To many analysts, the electoral crash resembled those of other wayward presidents and parties: Herbert Hoover and the Republicans in 1932 and Jimmy Carter and the Democrats in 1980. Each of those defeats inaugurated a dramatic and lasting shift of public policy in the new presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, respectively, and the early months of the Obama administration suggested to many observers that the new Democratic president was hoping to follow in the footsteps of those role models.