

The Party Base of Presidential Leadership and Legitimacy

Kevin S. Price, University of Washington
ksprice@u.washington.edu

John J. Coleman, University of Wisconsin
coleman@polisci.wisc.edu

Prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association,
Philadelphia, August 28-31, 2003

The revised version of this conference paper will be published in the forthcoming book tentatively titled *High Risk and Big Ambition: The Early Presidency of George W. Bush*, ed. Steven E. Schier, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. The conference version of this paper is posted here with the express permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Elected under controversial circumstances, it is fair to say that George W. Bush entered office with a legitimacy crisis on his hands. A significant proportion of the American public viewed Bush as a false 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 the events of September 11 recast his presidency, but they did not disappear. Just as the president was declaring victory over Iraq in late April 2003, Democratic presidential candidate Bob Graham, U.S. Senator from Florida, was declaring that the legitimacy of the Bush presidency was in question because of the circumstances in Florida in November 2000. Moreover, the broader leadership question encased in the legitimacy questions remained: how can this president lead? His second-place finish certainly, most observers thought, made any claim to a mandate irrelevant. Accordingly, when Bush entered office, these observers expected that the president would have tremendous difficulty enacting his legislative agenda and leading the government.

These analyses, however, ignored the possibilities inherent in the American party system for presidents 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, a president whose own victory was very narrow may face extra leadership challenges when his party's majority is also paper thin, but this situation can also create opportunities.

In these respects, 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 loosening ownership of issues by the Democratic party—were not unfavorable for establishing 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,” but his situation was sufficiently different from theirs that he had advantages that they did not. Therefore, despite some similarities of their election victories, Bush started his term in a stronger position. This is not to minimize the challenges Bush faced, but rather to say that we should not exaggerate them either. The ingredients were in place for Bush to establish both legitimacy and leadership, even without the intervening events of September 11.

The Republican Ascendancy

President Bush inherited a party system that was well situated for his leadership efforts. Although Bush did not have an electoral mandate, the trends in the party system were largely, though not entirely, favorable toward his party and his presidency. First, although this is a matter of some controversy (Mayhew 2002), it is plausible to say that the party system has realigned in a manner favorable to Republicans.

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. 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. Whichever 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 after the cumulation of small, incremental, gradual developments. This variety of realignment is known as secular (i.e., 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 blacks 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 were still voting for Democrats at their traditional level, Democrats would not have lost control of Congress, state legislatures, and governorships in the 1990s. Still, Stonecash (2000) and Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani (2003) have shown that class-based divisions between the parties were on the upswing in the 1990s, so the idea that Republicans represent the better off economically and Democrats the less well off still rings true. And certainly the groups that one would think of as typically Democratic have not necessarily become majority Republican—they have become less Democratic but, for the most part, still lean Democratic.

In the 1990s, the New Deal coalition could no longer cement Democratic victories, and that works 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 a candidate who found that he did well with these traditional New Deal coalition groups—and most Democratic candidates did do reasonably well with them—would find that he needed to reach outside this cluster to ensure victory (Bartels 1998). This provided an opportunity for Republicans in general and George Bush in particular. Although Bush fared miserably among African Americans, he defused some of the Democratic advantage with other groups, such as women, and defused some of the issues that were typically seen as owned by Democrats, such as Social Security and education. 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 didn't have the key to future Democratic victories, Bush seems 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 Davies (2003,

146) puts it, 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.”

The old New Deal coalition is not dead, but it is not sufficient for Democratic victories, and with secular realignment, Republicans are at worst co-equal with the Democrats or arguably the clear majority party. It has been a long time since Republicans controlled the presidency, House, and Senate simultaneously, and an even longer time since they have won and maintained control of Congress for five consecutive elections. Bush’s presidency, though the result of an unusual election, has benefited from falling at this point in history. His fellow partisans in Congress have proved willing to let him lead. This does not mean that he has the unconditional support of his party, nor does it mean he hasn’t faced trouble from the more moderate members of his party. It does mean that, unlike Bill Clinton, who seemed to many Democrats to preside over and perhaps, in their view, cause the dissolution of the Democratic majority, Bush is seen by his Republican friends as the person who can make the Republican majority durable. To be sure, the Republican majority has been thin by historical standards, but it is nonetheless a majority (Barone 2002; Brooks 2003; Meyerson 2002; Teixeira 2003).

Another form of historical change is known as critical realignment. Elaborated most importantly by V. O. Key (1955) and Walter Dean Burnham (1970), 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. Among scholars, the 1800 (Jeffersonian Republicans), 1832 (Jackson and the Democrats), 1860 (Lincoln’s Republicans), and 1932 (Roosevelt and the Democrats) elections fall into 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).

Looking back, 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. 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 strengthened by gaining control of the Senate from 1981 through 1986 and policy moved more clearly still 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, 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.

Unfortunately, history is hardly ever 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, it is fair to describe 1994 as a critical realignment akin to the realignment of 1896. The 1896 realignment did not create a new majority party, but it created a new supporting coalition for the existing Republican majority. Similarly, the 1994 realignment continued the possibility of divided control of government that was typical of the 1968 realignment, but it changed the balance of power within that division. With 1994, the Republican party achieved parity with the Democrats throughout the country and at all levels of government. Although a case could be made for the Republicans as the new majority party, it would be a shakier case than one could make, for example, for the Democrats after the realignment in 1932. The Republicans did not become the undisputed majority party following 1994 but it was a realignment with a clear partisan direction. The period from 1968 to 1994 featured divided government that leaned toward Democratic control at most levels and in most offices; the period after 1994 seems likely to continue the closely contested balance of party power but now with the balance tilting more toward the Republicans. As mentioned above, the fact is that the Republicans through 2003 had remained the majority party in Congress for five straight terms (with a brief deviation following the defection of Senator James Jeffords), something the party had not accomplished in nearly 70 years. Moreover, of the 19 states that had population growth from 1990 to 2000 that exceeded the national average of 13.2%, Bush won 14. Republicans are doing best where the population—and the electoral votes it provides—is growing most. Moreover, albeit from a vantage point more than a year before the election, the chances for Republicans to hold onto Congress in the 2004 races look strong. Democrats have more senators up for reelection than do the Republicans, and more of these appear to be vulnerable seats. Remarkably few House seats appear competitive and, on the whole, Republicans emerged in a solid position after the redistricting induced by the 2000 Census. If the political soap opera in Texas in mid-2003 eventually results in a Republican-leaning redistricting in that state—Republicans, unhappy with a judicially-created redistricting map, opened a special session of the legislature to draw a new map, leading Democratic representatives to flee and go into hiding in Oklahoma, and then New Mexico, in protest—an estimated additional seven seats would go to the Republicans, which is a very large number in the current environment.

The 1990s 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, to some degree, 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 the percentage (14%) was the lowest 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%, was at its lowest level since 1952. To be sure, these trends are just one side of the story. Voting turnout continues to be low

and the strong showing of third party presidential candidates in 1992, 1996, and to a lesser extent 2000, suggest an electorate that is not fully satisfied with the options presented by the major parties. And even if voting is highly partisan within a particular election, there might be a share of voters who split their votes in one election but not the next, or who might even vote straight party but for different parties in different years. The point here is not that the partisan electorate of the nineteenth century, or even the 1950s, has been restored, but that the continuing dealignment feared by some scholars has been stemmed and partially reversed.

Both in the sense of secular and critical realignment, then, 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 the majority governing party on a stable basis. 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 victory would suggest. His ability to exercise leadership, his Republican colleagues realized, would enhance his legitimacy credentials.

We will mention other features of the historical trajectory—political time, economic conditions, changing issue ownership, and social trends—only briefly. First, Bush's leadership benefited among Republicans because of his place in political time. As is explained elsewhere in this volume, Bush's presidency is one of the politics of articulation or the orthodox innovator. Expectations are relatively low for this kind of president and his ability to lead is also tied to the perceptions of the presidency he is linked to. In Bush's case, that would be Ronald Reagan. The reverence for Reagan among Republicans is substantial, and Bush found himself 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 bona fides to both groups.

Second, Bush inherited an economy that had grown strongly for years and generated budget surpluses. This allowed him to make the case for his tax cuts 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 that once seemed to be economically unnecessary 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 2002 and 2003. Obviously, at some point the president would need economic conditions to improve, but he was able to leverage those conditions in pursuit of his ideological beliefs in a manner most satisfactory to his base. And even if those outside his base thought tax cuts unnecessary, it is difficult to mobilize strong opposition among the public to the idea of keeping more of its money.

Third, Bush also 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 helped 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 when Bush took office. The same was true of Social Security, though the collapse in the stock market prevented Bush from making any 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 September 11, in particular, provided a means to reinforce Bush's

arguments during the campaign that American military and security readiness needed to improve. Lastly, Bush entered office at a time when many important indicators seemed to be pointed in the right direction. Over the last part of the 1990s, crime was down, educational achievement was moving up, out of wedlock births were declining, the abortion rate was dropping, and so on. Simply put, Bush inherited a very favorable policy environment. He did not take office in an environment swirling with crisis—other than the crisis of the circumstances surrounding his election.

Close Matters . . . But Isn't the Whole Cigar

We believe that “close matters,” but it does not fully determine presidential success and public acceptance. For most Americans, President Bush's legitimacy will depend on his ability to achieve some measure of policy success. That success will depend on his ability to master the difficulties inherent in his controversial victory. Even post-September 11, it was not obvious or inevitable that Bush would escape from 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 disinterested 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 overtime selection of their next president would be very consequential indeed (Dionne and Kristol 2001).

As subsequent events have made abundantly clear, the 2000 contest was not a *Seinfeld*-style “election about nothing.” Indeed, the effort to resolve the controversy in Florida raised a number of significant concerns: the effectiveness of our voting procedures, not only in Florida but around the country; the effects of the Electoral College on campaign strategies and outcomes; the role of state and local governments in conducting federal elections; and the role of courts in answering explicitly political questions. In addition to all of that, one problem raised by the election of 2000 was truly fundamental: the political and constitutional legitimacy of an incoming president.

Politically submerged by the many remarkable developments of the Bush years, the problem of our 43rd president's legitimacy has now receded beyond recognition. Our purpose is not to judge the legitimacy of the Bush administration; after all, reasonable people can disagree about the post-election process that yielded the Texan's narrow victory in the Electoral College. Instead, the point is to explain the rapid disappearance of legitimacy as a politically contentious characteristic of the Bush presidency. Credible questions of legitimacy could have plagued this president in the early months of his administration, perhaps even throughout his term. That they did not requires an explanation that situates George W. Bush in the ongoing flow of American party politics.

Plurality Presidents

We begin with the simple notion that elections provide political information to winners and losers alike.¹ 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 post-mortem 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 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 president that we refer to as the 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, a plurality winner has indeed triumphed, and he is thus entitled to use the authority of the presidency, but the unconvincing nature of his victory compels him and his team 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. Moreover, 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.² 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 multi-party elections. Third- and fourth-party insurgencies have played significant roles, but other notable multi-candidate 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.³ We do not regard Truman as a plurality president because the minor-party candidates who held him short of a majority broke from the Democratic orbit.

A president like Truman won *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 can succeed even when his party suffered two breakaway movements, he may perceive electoral vindication for the orthodox Democratic formulas of the New Deal and Fair Deal. Such a victory 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.⁴ 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 multi-candidate campaigns, neither is it a simple consequence of close races. The more relevant question is, what does a close election 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 it does not necessarily indicate that the winner prevailed in spite of his party’s persistent electoral weakness. In turn, it does not necessarily recommend that the winner and his 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. Does 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 remains competitive, if not dominant, in national politics. In addition, continued Republican control of Congress suggested that the party remained 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 willful departure from the Democratic fold. The presence of Pat Buchanan in the race further complicated matters, but his limited impact rendered his candidacy more or less irrelevant in most observers’ post-election interpretations. During the campaign of 2000, at least, 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.

Two Points of Comparison: The Elections of 1824 and 1992

To get a clearer sense of Bush’s legitimacy and leadership situation in historical perspective, we briefly 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.⁵ 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 extra-constitutional 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 by the intervention of a coequal 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 post-election 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 16 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, he won in spite of his party's continuing weakness in presidential politics.⁶ More to the point, his election confronted him with three related dilemmas.

First, he encountered *an abstract dilemma of legitimacy*. This is admittedly an expansive concept, and it lacks clear empirical referents, but Republican Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole 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." 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, he 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 means to improve 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 popular vote than he did, how might he lead the national legislature with any authority?

Third, he confronted *a political dilemma of re-election*. 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 applied nicely 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 prevail during his bid for re-election. Clinton had to wonder: If he won only four in 10 voters the first time, how might he expand his support on the road to re-election?

Though each of these dilemmas related to a specific dimension of presidential politics, they combined to encourage Clinton—and each 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.

The relationship between Bill Clinton and the Democrats on Capitol Hill is thoroughly fascinating—and worthy of a searching examination—but here we will simply recount the story in outline form in order to motivate the ensuing discussion of the Bush presidency. As Clinton set out to forge a New Democratic identity, a stable of decidedly Old Democrats—including but not limited to congressional barons such as Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, Speaker of the House Tom Foley, and House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt—had a rather different party project in mind. On political reform, welfare, trade, and crime, among other issues, the established center of Democratic gravity complicated Clinton's reformist effort. Given the institutional characteristics of the Democratic majorities on Capitol Hill, this is not particularly surprising. After all, Democrats had been winning congressional majorities—often very large ones—for decades. With the exception of the six-year break in the Senate during the early 1980s, the Democrats had enjoyed uninterrupted dominance in Congress since the Eisenhower years. In light of those simple facts—the size and the durability of the Democrats' congressional majorities—it is not hard to understand the difficulty Bill Clinton encountered as he sought to push his party toward a new formula for electioneering and governing (see 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 2000 victory. 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. Where 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 key 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 through 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 only turn to a divided (in some ways downright recalcitrant) party in 1993, George W. Bush found in his fellow Republicans just what he needed in 2001.

Second, one might reasonably suspect that Republican elites endowed Bush with the legitimacy that flows from unified partisan support in part because the outcome of the 2000 was so indeterminate, because the Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore* was likely to be perceived as baldly partisan, and because the entire episode had manifested such willful 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 in a magnanimous spirit of reconciliation. Why were the Democrats so reluctant to depict president-elect Bush—once he officially became such, that is—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 decide 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" equals "a lot." Such Democrats had little trouble in deciding that 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 Nebraska, Tim Johnson of South Dakota, and Max Baucus of Montana had more to lose than to gain from aggressively partisan charges of illegitimacy against the new administration.

Finally, one must consider a third explanation for the opposition's official reticence after *Bush v. Gore*: Might Democrats simply not play hardball politics as energetically or effectively as Republicans? Consider the aggressive tactics of Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay, whose nickname—"The Hammer"—just about says it all. In the Clinton years, these Republican leaders not only issued explicit and implicit charges of illegitimacy against the president, but exercised iron-fisted leadership of their fellow partisans in the House of Representatives as well. We do not want to make too much of this distinction, but it seems that contemporary Democrats simply do not operate with the same tooth-grinding determination. Whether this is a function of the political cultures in the two parties, of idiosyncratic personalities of partisan leaders in the last several years, or some other set of factors, it strikes us as plausible that the Republicans would have taken a different, much more aggressive approach if *Bush v. Gore* and the recount process had produced a Gore presidency. In that counterfactual event, The Hammer and his allies may not have hesitated to play the legitimacy card for all it was worth.

Two Paths Taken?

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 the events of September 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 has only one foot in that category and thus has escaped some of the difficulties facing other presidents who more clearly had both feet in the plurality category. In some ways, Bush seemed to inherit some of the same problems as Bill Clinton eight years earlier, but his election victory was sufficiently different, we argue, that he was able to read different meaning from his victory than Clinton could divine from his.

In general, then, these two historical stories were parallel and reinforcing regarding the party base for Bush's legitimacy and leadership. Over the course of his term in office, however,

they could have pushed Bush down different paths. Were Bush to be more influenced by the realignment story, he might well pursue a bold agenda that seeks to create a solid conservative majority. Certainly one influence here was Karl Rove, Bush's chief campaign strategist and his senior political adviser in the White House. Before the election, Rove was ruminating that the 2000 election could parallel the 1896 election for Republicans. Clearly, he saw signs of potential realignment. By mid-2003, Bush himself was echoing Rove's analysis, telling Republicans around the country that he did not want a "lonely victory" in 2004 but a clear, partisan mandate. Of course, all presidents say something to the same effect, but not all presidents have a chief adviser whose strategy is so guided by the notion of realignment. If he saw himself more in the mold of a plurality president, however, he might be more tempted to straddle party lines, capturing Democratic issues and reshaping his party's identity. Bush's Texas history might push him in this direction. Though clearly conservative, Bush very effectively received support from Democrats on major initiatives and received the votes of many Democrats in his gubernatorial bids. Or he might well attempt both these paths simultaneously.

Surely there are signs that Bush has traveled the first path. The early months of the Bush presidency revealed a president more committed to solidly conservative positions than to the synthetic project he seemed to promise in his campaign. And since the events of September 11, 2001, Bush has pursued a genuinely conservative identity rooted in a worldview grounded in the notion of good versus evil and us versus them, substantially lower taxes, higher defense spending, an increased role for faith-based organizations, the elimination of "partial-birth" abortions, and pushing for market-oriented reforms of regulation. In its essentials, this approach echoes the formula established by Ronald Reagan in nearly every important sense.

Bush has also followed the plurality strategy, taking issues the Democrats had long considered their own and using them to his advantage. This began in the 2000 campaign with Bush's heavy emphasis on the issues of education and Social Security reform. Although the condition of the stock market prevented much movement on the Social Security issue, Bush did sign an education reform bill that received Democratic support, including from Senator Edward Kennedy, perhaps the leading Democrat on this issue. To the consternation of conservatives who denounced it as a huge new welfare-state entitlement program, Bush also energized support behind a version of Medicare reform that, if passed and signed into law, would add a prescription drug benefit to the program. The proposed reform would be the most substantial in the program's history, costing an estimated \$400 billion over ten years, and for the first time Republicans would be seen as leading the effort. This was on top of federal spending that had already been increasing during Bush's tenure—midway through his third year, Bush had yet to veto any legislation, spending or otherwise. "Compassionate conservatism" and a pitch to minority voters jelled when Bush pushed for \$15 billion of assistance to go to Africa to fight AIDS. Finally, in expressing acceptance of two Supreme Court decisions in 2003—one of which upheld the use of race in the college admissions process; the other striking down a Texas law concerning homosexual sexual conduct—Bush again surprised conservatives. 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 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.

Which strategic impulse will carry the day as Bush moves into a fourth year and possibly a second term? Will George W. Bush seek a durable realignment along boldly partisan lines, or will he trim his sails in accordance with our notion of the plurality presidency? We suspect that Bush, Rove, and others at the center of this political project see something like a full-blown realignment as both desirable and plausible. But we expect him to use a variant of plurality leadership to attempt to attain that realignment in 2004 and beyond. In making a few strategic feints to the middle, Bush will not seek to redefine his party as a classic plurality president would—he is certainly not running away from the conservative, Reagan mantle the way Clinton fled from the liberal label—but accommodate the center and left as a tactical means of achieving his strategic partisan ambitions. In this process, as in his successful initial efforts to escape his legitimacy problem in 2001, Bush should enjoy the indispensable, though hardly inevitable, support of a broadly unified, deeply committed Republican Party.

References

- Aldrich, John H. 1995. Why Parties? The Origins and Transformation of Party Politics in America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baer, Kenneth S. 2000. Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Barone, Michael. 2002. "Who's Majority?" National Review 54 (December 9): 30-34.
- Bartels, Larry. 1998. "Where the Ducks Are: Voting Power in a Party System." In Politicians and Party Politics, ed. John Geer. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Brooks, David. 2003. "Democrats Go Off the Cliff," The Weekly Standard, June 30.
- Burnham, Walter Dean. 1970. Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics. New York: Norton.
- Burnham, Walter Dean. 1996. "Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and Its Implications." In The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.
- Davies, Philip John. 2003. "A New Republican Generation?" Contemporary Review 282 (March): 139-146.
- Dionne, Jr., E.J. and William Kristol, eds. 2001. Bush V. Gore: The Court Cases and the Commentary. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Key, V. O. 1955. "A Theory of Critical Elections." Journal of Politics 17: 3-18.
- Key, V. O. 1959. "Secular Realignment and the Party System." Journal of Politics 21: 198-210.
- Mayer, William G. 1998. "Mass Partisanship, 1946-1996." In Partisan Approaches to Postwar American Politics, ed. Byron E. Shafer. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.
- Mayhew, David R. 2002. Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Meyerson, Harold. 2002. "Dems in the Dumps." The American Prospect 13 (December 16): 22-24.
- Price, Kevin S. 2002. "The Partisan Legacies of Preemptive Leadership: Assessing the Eisenhower Cohorts in the U.S. House," Political Research Quarterly, 55 (September): 609-632.
- Stonecash, Jeffrey M. 2000. Class and Party in American Politics. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Stonecash, Jeffrey M., Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani. 2003. Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Teixeira, Ruy. 2003. "Deciphering the Democrats' Debacle," The Washington Monthly, May.

Notes

¹Formally, one might think of political signals (such as election results) as “informative” when and to the extent that such signals lead a receiver to engage in behavior he or she sees as welfare-enhancing.

² Prospective candidates will come up with more than one such blueprint, of course. Think of the Democratic response to Jimmy Carter’s loss in 1980. In 1984, Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Jesse Jackson represented three divergent impulses in the Democratic coalition, each of which represented some mix of sincere ideology and strategic calculation. Our point is not that the political information provided by elections leads inevitably to a unified party response, but that it encourages individual party elites to select what they consider the most promising response among several plausible alternatives.

³ Truman won 49.6 percent of the popular vote in 1948, Republican Thomas Dewey won 45.1 percent, Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond won 2.4 percent, and Progressive Henry Wallace won 2.3 percent.

⁴ The chronically low turnout in the South may have contributed to Wilson’s anemic popular vote totals in 1912, but the central political lesson of his election—that Roosevelt’s insurgency made his own triumph much more likely—clarified Wilson’s plurality status. Notwithstanding the idiosyncrasies of southern turnout, Wilson won a textbook plurality victory. After all, if Democratic-leaning Southerners did not turn out in 1912, they would provide little assurance to Wilson as he looked ahead to 1916. It is also important to note that Wilson had taken the measure of his political circumstances prior to 1912. In other words, Wilson had begun to develop a progressive identity before he received the information implicit in the 1912 returns, but those returns still played an enormously important role in confirming the political utility of the new president’s reformist ambitions for his party. This is precisely the point: Plurality elections do not reveal startling new conditions in the political system; instead, they crystallize the very conditions that have kept the winning party from winning recent presidential elections.

⁵ The alleged 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.

⁶ One might also include the following presidents (and their respective percentages of the popular vote) in the plurality category: 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.