

Political Parties in a Critical Era¹

by

John H. Aldrich

Duke University

Prepared for delivery at "The State of the Parties: 1996 and Beyond," Bliss Institute Conference,
University of Akron, October 9-10, 1997

Democracy, we often forget, is a process, and thus is continually in the making. It is not, as we usually like to think of it, an outcome. The central questions to ask about this process concern, first, the relationship between the beliefs and actions of citizens and of those whom they choose to govern them. The second question concerns the consequences of elite actions, that is, the policies and other outputs of the political system. This relationship between the mass and elite evolves over time, and as a result so does the pattern of policy produced by the government. That evolution is, indeed, the consequence of democracy being a process and not an outcome.

Richard Niemi and I (Aldrich and Niemi, 1990; 1996; Aldrich, 1995) proposed a slight generalization and redefinition of V.O. Key's concept of a critical election (1955). We also offered a method for demonstrating at least some of the features of what we called "critical eras" and the period of stability (perhaps even equilibrium) in between. In our view, the 1960s were a critical era, and the 1970s and 1980s were a period of stable alignment.² We dubbed the stable era that of the "candidate-centered party system," due to the importance of candidates and their assessments in shaping citizens' choices, of the individual impact of incumbency on elections, and of related aspects of candidate-centered elections that so mark this period. Whatever it may be called, it is the sixth such party system since the American Founding. We concluded by noting that, while there is no full explanation for the regularity for the occurrence of critical eras, continuation of their empirical regularity would lead one to guess that a new critical era should be expected during or at the end of the 1990s.³

In that spirit, I look in this paper at the remarkable events of the 1990s in light of their potential to mark at least the beginnings of a new critical era. The empirical evidence so far available suggests that we could, indeed, be in the midst of such a critical era. If so (and the evidence is suggestive but necessarily incomplete), the "bridge to the twenty-first century" would be one that is marked by the dramatic change of a critical era. The bridge would then end in a new, seventh stable alignment, the contours of which are almost literally unknowable. We can be confident, however, that it will mark the seventh major pattern of relationships between the citizens and their government, and we can be nearly as confident that our political parties will be central to this relationship (hence, a seventh party system) and that the role they will play in this patterning will differ from its six predecessors, just as each of them differed from all others.

If the 1990s are a critical era, its outcome in a seventh party system is unknowable because both parties' (new) leadership can realistically imagine, and will do all they can to secure, winning control of the next party system. It may be that partisan realignments are the form the critical era takes when there is a great asymmetry between the two parties during that era. It may, for example, take a great tragedy such as the Civil War or the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s to so taint one party that it cannot compete effectively for control over the emerging party system.⁴ In other critical eras, such as the 1960s and, if it is to be one, the 1990s, no one party is asymmetrically burdened, so that the contest for control between the (new) elites of the parties will be in much closer balance. The 1960s, for example, looked initially as if it were to be a major realignment toward the Great Society Democrats, but the Republicans were able to recover strongly from the disaster of 1964 (and, conversely, the Democrats were never so disadvantaged as to be non-competitive either). In short, winning and losing was in the balance in the 1960s and, presumably, it will be so in and after the 1990s.

If the 1990s are a critical era, we should be able to observe it as it happens, perhaps by using the method Niemi and I did to locate the critical era of the 1960s. Niemi and I focused our method for identifying the existence and the boundaries of a critical era on the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the mass public (and much less completely on their reflections of and in the behavior of elites). We argued, however (see esp. Aldrich, 1995), that public attitudes constituted but one of the three major dimensions of change in a critical era. Another dimension is the identity, beliefs, and actions of political elites. Quite possibly, this dimension is the most important one, because it is, I believe, the driving force generating the critical era in the first place. The third dimension involves changes in institutions and the rules of conduct of politics in a republican democracy. I argued (1995) that three of the critical eras were most noted by changes in the coalitional makeup of the parties; the classic partisan realignments of the 1850s, 1890s, and 1930s. Three more were most noted by changes in the structure of partisan, electoral, and governing institutions; the critical periods of 1790s, 1830s, and 1960s.⁵ Given the drama of the partisan coalitional changes, as well as the temporal proximity of the New Deal realignment to scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, it is not surprising that partisan realignments came to be seen as the theoretically most interesting cases of Key's critical elections. It was then but a short step to have partisan realignments become identified as the concept to investigate, in place of the more general concept of critical elections. This well might explain why the critical era of the 1960s was not seen for what we believe it to have been. In any event, it should not be a surprise that institutional design and change are required to solidify a new alignment (and new governing coalition) into a stable political era.

Niemi and I did note, but we did not stress as strongly as we might have, that there is a fourth

dimension of change in a critical era. Critical eras are associated with, even often identified by, major changes in the policies and related outputs of government. Whether stable eras are actually named for the new policy directions, as with the Civil War and New Deal alignments, or named for their leader, as with the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ages, central to their makeup is a new agenda and an associated set of policies. In this light, the 1960s' critical era and the sixth party system may be marked by the Civil Rights Movement, the Great Society, the Nixonian-period expansion of affirmative action, entitlements, and environmental policies, the end of the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy, and the McGovern brand of Democratic tax-and-spend liberalism, feminism, and gay rights. Perhaps also, the stable era's end will be marked by Clinton's claim that "the era of big government is over" in his 1995 State of the Union address, the ending of welfare as an entitlement, and the bipartisan budget agreement that promises to balance the budget for the first time since, of all years helpful to my argument, 1969. I take up these dimensions in the remainder of this paper.

Elite Transitions: A New Generation of Leaders

Presidential Transitions: A central component of the new electoral arrangements that define a critical era and new stable alignment is the coming to power of new elites (a point made most fully by Burnham, 1970). At the presidential level, the generational transition of the 1990s is almost too complete and perfect. But the transitions in congressional and party leadership are also substantial and significant.

The 1960s opened with competition between the first presidential candidates of a new generation. That was the generation that fought in World War II as young men, and having been a veteran, better yet a

combat veteran, and better still a decorated combat veteran, was typical of candidates. This generation dominated presidential politics throughout the sixth party system, ending either with election of decorated veteran George Bush or, if you prefer, with the defeat of Robert Dole, surely the last heroic, decorated, combat veteran of World War II to be nominated by a major political party. Thus replacing the World War II generation was not a continuous evolution of those with slightly later birth dates, but it was the sudden, discontinuous skipping of a generation, from World War II veteran, to baby-booming, mostly Vietnam War avoiding, candidates in both parties. As Nixon signaled the nearing arrival of the World War II generation through election as Vice President in the 1950s, so too did Dan Quayle signal the coming of the Vietnam-avoiding generation with his election as Vice President in 1988. By the presidential elections of the 1990s, both parties' nominations were contended primarily by baby boomers, plus Bush and Dole. It is difficult to see anyone but near or actual baby boomers on the current presidential horizon. Indeed, the remarkable durability of the World War II generation is matched, in so far as I can recall, only by the dominance of the Revolutionary generation from the Founding to 1824. This dominance was also followed by a discontinuous, generational jump, from John Adams and his peers to John Quincy Adams and his peers. And while that critical period led to the Jacksonian party system, and while Jackson was not a full chronological generation removed from the Revolution, his leadership and those who supported and opposed it were indeed of a new generation – indeed a wholly new era -- in politics.

Congressional transitions: While the generational shift in Congress was not as dramatic (largely because the World War II generation began to give way more slowly and sooner), there has been a dramatic transition in power in the 1990s. There are three aspects to this.

The most obvious power transition, of course, is party control. Pundits considered the Republicans to have what seemed to be a “lock” on the presidency in the sixth party system, but Clinton won relatively easily (but without a majority) in both presidential elections in the ‘90s. The Republicans broke the real electoral lock by ending the 40 year run of the Democrats as the majority party in Congress.⁶ Indeed, it is taken as likely that the Republicans will expand their majority in the 1998 midterm elections (as usual for the out party). It is also taken as likely that, if they hold on in the House through the 2000 elections, they will be nearly as secure in their majority status as the Democrats were in theirs. Many see the Republicans in the Senate as already securely in control, and for those uncertain, they expect the Republicans will be after 1998. Thus, the greatest electoral “lock” in American history, that of the congressional Democrats over the last forty years, and the less certain “lock” of the GOP on the presidency over the last twenty years, seem, at least of this moment, to have exactly reversed.

The second substantial change is in the identity of congressional leaders in both parties and in both chambers. One way to show this is by comparing the 103rd and 104th Congresses, that is, by looking at changes in the briefest of political moments. To illustrate this change, I looked at the party leadership positions in both chambers, and the party leaders of the six most important committees in the House.⁷ In each of these categories and in both parties, at least half who held the leadership position at the start of the 103rd did not at the start of the 104th. All four top party positions changed hands (Foley, Michel, Mitchell, and Dole to Gephardt, Gingrich, Daschel, and Lott). These four changes were almost as dramatic in generational terms as at the presidential level. Perhaps as surprising was the 50 percent change in committee leadership positions in each party in the House. The reasons for these changes run the full gamut; death, retirement, electoral defeat. Some portion of the changes is more directly political. Most

interesting was Gingrich's unilateral decision to break seniority in three cases (all three of the changes were in the committees considered here, that is to say in the important committees, see Aldrich and Rohde, forthcoming). The net result was a dramatically different leadership in all aspects.

The third aspect of leadership change in the Congress (and elsewhere) was primarily Republican. That was the rise of the South in Republican politics. At the end of the 1960s critical era, the GOP was merely beginning to make inroads into the South, largely due to Goldwater's (relative) successes there in 1964 and continuing implementation of Nixon's "southern strategy" in 1968 and thereafter. As the South became an increasing stronghold for Republican presidential candidates, their congressional representation only slowly increased. As Figure 1 demonstrates for the House and the Senate, it was not until 1994 that the GOP held a majority of the southern House seats for the first time. It is perhaps even more striking that, even though the GOP lost seats overall, their southern delegation actually expanded in 1996. Republican leadership became southern in 1994 as well. In the 103rd Congress, non-southerners were minority leaders in both chambers as well as the assistant leader in the Senate, and northerners were ranking members of five of the six key committees. In the 104th Congress, southerners held the top three leadership positions in the House (only Paxson of NY, who recently resigned under pressure, held a major post and was not southern). In addition, two of the top three leaders in the Senate (and all three if one counts Oklahoma) were southern, and the southern GOP delegation increased its holding from one to three of the six major committee leadership positions in the House. There is then a consistency in public voting, such that Republican candidates for all national offices fare especially well in the South. I will explore the related consistencies below. Similarly, the GOP elite has increasingly turned to southerners for its leadership. It is harder to measure, but it is certainly just as true, that southern GOP sensibilities have also

taken over leadership in the party's agenda setting and policy making.

[Figure 1 about here]

Public Beliefs and Actions

The “methodology” that Niemi and I employed for selecting the variables to study was to consider those measures that other scholars of public opinion and voting behavior had examined in detail at least in the 1960s, if not more generally. That is, we retrospectively reexamined those variables that scholars had found most worthy of intense consideration. This method implied a selection bias of two sorts. The first is a bias towards those variables that are theoretically most important (e.g., partisan identification). The second bias is towards variables that changed in the period. This methodology may be a good way to isolate the forces (assuming them measured at all) most central to a critical era. It is effective only in retrospect (perhaps, as in our case, only long in retrospect). It decidedly does not follow, that is, that there is any reason to believe that the variables will reveal a coming critical era simply because they revealed an earlier one.

With this caveat in mind, I review in this and the following section the variables included in our earlier work, indicating which among them have and have not changed. I also indicate, among those that have changed so far, those that might have changed in ways that are consistent with the 1990s being a new critical era. There are two obvious questions. The first is whether there are patterns of change among these variables. The answer is that there is virtually every type of change imaginable, as we will see. The

second question is, amidst this sea of confusion, whether there are signs that point towards the possible presence of a critical era. The answer is yes, and these are especially pronounced in the two areas most immediately implicated if there is to be a critical era; partisan affiliations and voting choices. The later are especially evident in voting and election outcomes, such as the importance of incumbency and split outcomes between Congress and the presidency. I consider these sorts of voting choices as particularly revealing about the connections between the mass and elites and therefore examine them in the next section.

Niemi and I examined a large number of factors in our original study, of which 26 were measured sufficiently frequently over the course of presidential election years (between 1952 and 1988, originally). Some were no longer available for the 1988 election. Even more are no longer collected now, but all the remaining measures will be mentioned here. Many, taken in isolation, do not seem to support a claim of the 1990s as being a critical era, as the 1960s were (but this was true for many individual variables in the 1960s; what mattered was the net, aggregate effect). The extreme, perhaps, is a variable that shows no change over time at all. The example of this case is interest in the presidential campaign, which has shown very little pattern of change in its fluctuations since 1952, and which in the aggregate has fluctuated rather little at all.

Another pattern seemingly counter to the critical era hypothesis is that of the dramatic change in the 1960s, but little from the stable alignment period of the last two decades in the 1990s. For example, the dramatic decline in the concern over foreign policy relative to domestic policy first appeared at the end of the 1960s' critical era.⁸ The balance remains just as pronounced in favor of domestic concerns in the 1990s as in the 1970s. So, too, is the decline in the percentage of the Democratic voting electorate that

considers itself working class. These two, in particular, remind us that the coincidence of the timing of exogenous and/or broader social changes may accelerate the forces of change in (or help create the conditions suitable for) a critical era. It also reminds us that we may observe the relevance of this or that factor only in retrospect. Were I to entertain seriously a search for new, as well as existing, variables that might describe this potential critical era, I would first examine the changing role of religion in partisan politics. Here, I was not surprised to see that reporting having had the experience of being born again shows just the expected and dramatic pattern of change. Conversely, the difference between being a member of a mainline and evangelical Protestant denomination, which I would have thought might reveal a pattern similar to being born again, in fact did not reveal noticeable change in the 1990s (see Abramson, et al., 1998, esp. Chapter 4, and sources cited therein).

The precise measure of presidential coattails we used has not been computed for a long time. It does appear, however, that after all but disappearing entirely, coattails reappeared in 1980 at a modest but genuine length, and they have remained so ever since (see Abramson, et al., 1998, especially chapter 10). This finding could result from two different forces. “Similar strength” might reflect little change at all. Alternatively, it might reflect a balancing of two factors, the unusual popularity of Reagan as an individual balanced against a potentially longer-term trend of strengthening partisanship, compensating for the weaker pulls of Bush and Clinton (see below).

Another class of variables might prove to be included in the list of changes in a 1990s critical era, but the revealed changes, at least so far, are extension of changes that began in or after the 1960s critical era. Thus, they don’t immediately leap to mind as examples of massive upsetting of the patterns of the old

stable alignment. For example, turnout continues to decline in the 1990s in both presidential and congressional contests (and the 1992 uptick might, indeed, illustrate the power of a substantial third presidential choice to mobilize the electorate, just as Lowi argued, 1985). Native white southerners continue to desert the Democrats, reaching such an extent that this must be considered a substantially realigned segment of the public, in classical party realignment terms. This change might in the end prove similar to the realignment of black partisan loyalties that happened in two steps, one in the New Deal and the other in the critical era of the 1960s.⁹ Finally, the decline in the various aspects of confidence and trust in government, or the rise in alienation and cynicism, continues in the 1990s. In a way similar to the potential for mobilization by a new, third party or candidate, the size of the disenchanted electorate might signal the opportunity for massive readjustment in the system. Of course, that has been the claim with respect to the decline of both turnout and confidence/trust since the early 1970s.

The final set of changes, and final set of mass-level measures we originally considered, show the kinds of change one might anticipate if they are heralding the end of the candidate-centered party system. As noted, these come in two major classes. Partisanship, especially among whites, is considered here. The next section is devoted to changes in mass-elite relationships and, in particular, to changes in the effect of incumbency and apparently partisan voting across offices.

The key change in partisanship in the 1960s critical era, especially among whites, was the decline in the strength of partisanship, the consequent rise in independence, and in related aspects consistent with the increasingly candidate- and decreasingly party-centered nature of elections. It was common to refer to the post-1960s period as one of electoral volatility. In fact, it was not unusually so. In terms of (national)

outcomes, this was the period we earlier noted as being described as having a Republican lock on the presidency and an even clearer Democratic dominance in control of the House, if not the Senate. “Lock” and “partisan dominance” are not the language used to describe electoral volatility. And certainly the volatility in presidential voting from 1964-72 was massive and clearly greater than from 1972 through 1988 or 1992. “Volatility” was also not a good description of aggregate partisanship over this period. The increase in independence and decline in strong partisanship effectively culminated in 1972, with remaining variation being about a rather constant mean. The 1990s, however, have so far witnessed a reversal back to the patterns of the late or even mid-1960s. Thus, for example, the proportion of strong partisans among whites in the 1992 and 1996 NES (but also in 1988) is the highest since 1964. The proportion of pure independents among whites has dropped in the 1990s, with the 10 percent of 1992 the lowest since 1964, let alone the further decline to 8 percent in 1996.¹⁰ The proportion of independents who lean towards a party has declined, but not as much, and therefore the set of all three independence categories has “only” returned to a level comparable to the 1968-70 period. With a shift in the Republican direction in the 1980s, the result is that partisanship has become more symmetrically distributed around pure independence. It has also become more extreme and bipolar, gravitating from the central category of pure independence toward the strong partisan ends of the scale. It remains to be seen if these changes are lasting. But if they are, it is at least possible that they are a reflection at the mass level of the increased partisan divergence among party elites.

While public attitudes and beliefs reveal a diversity of changes, it is particularly suggestive that partisanship is changing. It is, after all, not only the central concept in most theories of electoral behavior, but it is also the disposition that should be the key reflection of a change consistent with a critical era in the

public. It must also be remembered that the list of variables under consideration is drawn from that which, in retrospect, mattered most in the 1960s' critical era. The single example of religious experience noted briefly above may be multiplied many times over in future retrospectives on the 1990s. But, even more revealing of a potential critical era in the making than the changes in partisanship is the changing relationships between candidates and electorate as revealed in the patterns of behavioral choices made by the public.

Changing Relations between Mass and Elite

As noted in the introduction, critical eras lead to changes in partisan and governing coalitions and to changes in the institutional arrangements of parties and governance structures. Those that have been more associated with the former are also called partisan realignments, while no label has been attached to those eras associated with institutional changes. In fact, however, both sorts of critical eras have both coalitional and institutional changes. The 1990s are also associated with both kinds of changes, or at least serious portents of changes that might reasonably be expected to come.

We have already presented evidence about one, and so far the most evident, sort of coalitional change; the shift of the South toward the Republican party at levels beyond presidential voting. Figure 1 above presents the relevant data for the U.S. House and Senate over recent elections. The central point of that figure was the rise to majority status of Republicans (or, as in the figure, the decline from majority status of the Democrats) in the southern delegation. Moreover, the Republicans have made serious inroads in state and local elections in the South. The region appears to be becoming a serious two-party region for

the first time since the Democrat-Whig era, with the Republicans appearing likely to become (if not already be) the majority party. This seems to suggest that the southern realignment that Philip Converse wrote of in 1966 and/or sunbelt realignment that Kevin Phillips anticipated in 1969 may be coming true at last. On the last point, the Abramson, Aldrich, Rohde series (see especially 1998) has documented this transition of the South to a Republican congressional majority. We found this a transition that seems to be due in nearly equal parts to the reapportionment from the 1990 census and to the Republicans capitalizing on their opportunities effectively in the 1994 and 1996 congressional elections. While the reversal of the South from the strongest Democratic to the strongest Republican region is the most dramatic change in electoral coalitions at the congressional level, the Democrats have gained strength in the Northeast.

While the nature of critical eras is that voting patterns are up for grabs, and the resulting stable coalitional alignments are unknown until the intense elite partisan combat is resolved, there are other crucial aspects to elite-mass linkages. The sixth party system, for example, was characterized by the relative independence of individual candidates from their parties. It was this aspect that led Niemi and me to call this the "candidate-centered party system." At the national level, there were two central components to this candidate-centered system, both of which appear to be in flux, if not altered already.

The first was the separation of votes for the various offices. The critical era of the 1960s ended over a century of party-centered elections (or so I claimed in Aldrich, 1995). In the move from party- to candidate-centered choices, the overall level of split ticket voting would, naturally, increase. In general, if voters make choices based on the characteristics of individual candidates, the choices will be statistically independent if the characteristics of the candidates are unrelated to their party label, but they will be

statistically related if the candidates of one party tend to be alike on dimensions that affect voters' choices. Thus, it is not logically necessary to observe high levels of split-ticket voting in candidate-centered eras. Still, split-ticket voting in that transition from party- to candidate-centered elections in the 1960s should be expected to increase sharply, and it should be expected to be likely to decrease as parties have become more internally homogenous and more differentiated from their opposition at the elite level. That is, the party label will be more meaningful to voters and they will therefore be less likely to cast split-ticket votes.

David Rohde and I (among others) have presented evidence that the parties are more homogenous and differentiated (see Rohde, 1991; Aldrich, 1995; Aldrich and Rohde, 1996; 1997; forthcoming). As a result, we would expect that the incidence of split ticket voting should decrease. Figure 2 illustrates that in fact this is exactly what has happened in the 1990s. From 1952 until well into the 1960s' critical era, split-ticket voting between President and House hovered around 15% of the voting public. After a slight increase in 1968 (and not counting third-candidate presidential voters), the McGovern candidacy led to a dramatic rise in casting split ballots, to 30%. While 1972 was unusually high, the decline was relatively slight over the next four elections; the level dropping only to about 25 percent. It dropped noticeably in 1992 (again, discounting Perot voters) and dropped even more in 1996, back to the level reached in 1968 (with its comparable third-party vote). Of course, the actual extent of split-ticket voting between Republicans and Democrats, if there is yet a number typical of the post-sixth party system period, will not be evident until (and unless) there is no significant third-candidate presidential vote. Even so, the decline so far revealed, if sustained, does reveal the end of at least one of the major patterns that typified the candidate-centered party system.

[Figure 2 about here]

Perhaps even more fundamental to our understanding of (at least congressional) elections in the candidate-centered, sixth party system was the rise of incumbency effects. From first observations by Erikson (1971) and then Mayhew (1974) and others, to the extensive work of Jacobson (e.g., 1989; 1997a), the study of congressional elections in the last two decades has often been the study of one aspect or another of incumbency advantages. Alford and Brady (1988), through their "slurge" measure, point to the 1960s as the origin of an incumbent advantage in U.S. House and Senate elections for the first time in history, at least an incumbency advantage that was something different from being the candidate of the majority party in the district. The call for term limits was predicated precisely upon the apparent insulation of incumbents from electoral concerns (regardless of their Jacobsonian tendency for "running scared").

The incumbency advantage appears to have waned considerably in the 1990s (Jacobson, 1997b, makes many of these points, and more). Two of the most important indicators of incumbency advantage are the previously cited "slurge" measure and the apparent ease with which incumbents have been winning reelection. Several other observations are noteworthy. One is the dramatic turnover in House membership. At the opening of the 104th Congress, a majority of Republicans had first been elected to the House in either 1992 or 1994. The defeat of a sitting Speaker, and a variety of other indications (e.g., the decline in uncontested seats) reinforce the point of decreased security for any incumbent.

The vanishing marginals originally observed by Erikson (1971) and Mayhew (1974) launched a cottage industry to describe and evaluate the enhanced safety of incumbents, presumably by virtue of

effective use of the very fact that they were incumbents. Indeed, considering an outcome to be marginal if the candidate won with less than 60% of the vote reflected how very few Members any longer were reelected by what we might otherwise think of as a close outcome (e.g., 55%). But 60% was also favored in part because of its demonstration effect for the incumbent, potentially scaring off some of the strongest challengers (who were strongest in part because they had the most to lose if they lost, e.g., a state legislative seat). As can be seen in Figure 3, the marginals vanished during the 1960s critical era. They reappeared somewhat in the 1970s, only to fall to new lows at the end of the 1980s. The three elections that might be a part of a 1990s critical era, however, show a rebound of marginality to levels of 1966, that is, to a time in the middle of the 1960s critical era.

[Figure 3 about here]

The Alford-Brady “slurge” measure was their concoction to demonstrate the rise not just of electoral security, which could in principle be due to any of a number of sources, but also the rise of an incumbency advantage that could seemingly be traced only to the holding and use of an office by an individual. Their measure is a combination of two factors. One is “retirement slump,” or the expected loss of support for a party’s candidates in a district from which a Member retired, reflecting the loss of the personal attractiveness of that retiree to voters. The second is “sophomore surge,” or the vote gain for candidates in their first reelection, reflecting their ability to use the office in ways that the voters reward. What is interesting about this measure is less the actual average “slurge” score in any given election than it is the relative comparisons. In Figure 4, we can see that the slurge measure increased sharply from an average of 2 percentage points in the 1950s (1954-60) to 6 points in the 1960s. It increased another point

in the 1970s and still another in the 1980s. In the two elections available for consideration in the 1990s, slurge declined to a bit under 6 points, or to a level essentially the same as in the 1960s.

[Figure 4 about here]

The conclusion seems inescapable. The 1990s to this point have seen a reversal of the patterns of voting that typified the candidate-centered era, especially in congressional voting. Incumbents are not as secure as in earlier decades. Turnover is quite high, for a wide array of reasons. Incumbency just doesn't seem to be worth as many votes in the 1990s as in the preceding two decades. And the congressional vote is no longer as independent from other choices. In short, even though based on only two or three elections, it does appear that voting patterns have changed in the 1990s. In many respects they look more like those of the 1960s than of any time since. But that similarity in pattern is likely for very different reasons. In the 1960s, southern Democrats simply didn't face a choice for Congress. In the 1990s, there is almost invariably a choice for all regions and partisans. The similarity in voting, however, is most likely due to the similarity in general ideological stance among all the candidates of one party. And because most, if not all, Republican candidates are conservative and most if not all Democratic candidates are more liberal, voters make a consistent party (and ideological) choice, whether they consciously link their votes, or simply vote for the candidate they like more for each office in isolation. And, if Members no longer have quite as much individual leverage, voting is to that extent based less on district service, and more on what the candidate of a party offers. It may still be candidate-centered choices, that is, but the party and its candidate selection system imposes a reasonable degree of uniformity in its choices, and this similarity appears in that fashion as just described by these data. While for different specific reasons, perhaps the

similarity between the 1960s and 1990s patterns is simply because both are critical eras with significant disruptions of the old patterns.

Conclusion

The major claim that the 1990s might be a critical era swings so far on three things. The first is the clear and substantial change in the leadership of both parties. The second is the changes so far detected in public beliefs and values, the most clear cut indicator being the change in party identification, typically back towards the levels found before the completion of the transition to a candidate-centered system. The third is changing patterns in voting, especially the decline in split-ticket voting and declining value of incumbency, per se. These two show returns to levels last found before the culmination of the candidate-centered party system. The changing of the guard in both parties is irrevocable, but whether southern Republicans and DLC-style Democrats continue to hold sway is not. Both parties will see contesting for power within the party, just as each party will contest vigorously with the other for power in the government. As these battles play out, the actions of the public, both in terms of party affiliation and in terms of the kinds of voting patterns described here, could well change in reaction. This incomplete battle for power affects even more sharply what, if anything, might happen with respect to the two remaining dimensions of change in critical eras.

Institutional changes generally are adopted after the fact of arrival of a new party system. Quite why is less clear. Is it due to the need for the victorious party leadership to cement its dominance in place? Or, is it the case that a new elite arises to dominance in part by its advocacy of institutional change?

Either view is possible, as are others. Indeed, there are signs of both in the 1990s. A great part of the Contract with America was an ambitious set of changes in democratic institutions, from a balanced budget amendment, through line item veto, to devolution of many powers from federal to state and local governments or the private sector. The new Republican majority in the 104th House used their position to change a number of operations of the House: some to reflect better their ideology; some to get rid of those aspects of minority status they found most difficult to live with; and some to make it more difficult for a Democratic party to win through alignment with more moderate Republicans. And certainly, there is no shortage of proposals for changes in the rules of politics, whether that be campaign finance reform, term limits, or whatever. The public's disenchantment with politics as usual could provide the support for a new majority changing the rules of politics in substantial ways. Just what, however, depends upon who wins.

Similarly, the possibility of substantial and sustained changes in policy agenda mixes evidence of already-completed change with unknown potentials for further and perhaps far more dramatic changes. As noted earlier, the Republican transition to southern leadership has coincided with a more southern sensibility on policy, including both agenda (more social issue concern) and position, given agenda (i.e., more conservative). But the above noted changes due to Clinton's leadership of the Democratic party (ending welfare as an entitlement, ending the era of big government, ending the practice of allowing both parties to achieve their budget goals via deficit financing) are also more southern, even if moderate, DLC style southern sensibilities and positions. But here is where the contest for control is most directly joined. For example, will the Democratic party choose the moderation of a Gore or the more traditionally northern-liberal positions of a Gephardt? Will the Republican party continue to move towards its conservative extreme, as in the 104th, or balance that with the greater moderation of the 105th Congress? The lesson of

the 1960s would be that a seemingly dominant liberal Democratic Great Society agenda would control both the party and elections. But the relative moderation of Nixon, even if accommodating the forces that nominated Goldwater, allowed the GOP to reverse the seeming dominance of northern Democrats, and at least balance their power with strength at the presidential level. So too might the seeming transformations of the 1994 elections merely signal one pattern of possible outcomes, while new and old Democrats signal two other options. The public will eventually, and quite possibly be in the process of currently, choosing which direction the nations – and thus the parties – will go, and they will do so through their choice of policy directions.

Bibliography

- Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde, 1998, *Change and Continuity in the 1996 Elections*, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Aldrich, John H., 1985, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Aldrich, John H. and Richard G. Niemi, 1990, "The Sixth American Party System: The 1960s Realignment and the Candidate-Centered Parties," Duke University Working Paper in American Politics, No. 107.
- Aldrich, John H. and Richard G. Niemi, 1996, "The Sixth American Party System: Electoral Change, 1952-1992," in *Broken Contract: Changing Relationships between Americans and their Government*, ed. By Stephen C. Craig, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 87-109.
- Aldrich, John H. and David W. Rohde, 1996, "A Tale of Two Speakers: A Comparison of Policy Making in the 100th and 104th Congresses," paper delivered at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Aug. 29-Sept. 1, San Francisco, CA.
- Aldrich, John H. and David W. Rohde, 1997, "The Republican Revolution and the House Appropriations Committee, paper delivered at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Nov. 7-9, Atlanta, GA.
- Aldrich, John H. and David W. Rohde, forthcoming, "Theories of Party in the Legislature and the Transition to Republican Rule in the House," *Political Studies Quarterly*.
- Alford, John and David R. Brady, 1988, "Partisan and Incumbent Advantages in U.S. House Elections, 1846-1986," Working Paper No. 11, Center for the Study of Institutions and Values, Rice University.
- Beck, Paul Allen, 1974, "A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment," in *The Politics of Future Citizens*, ed. by Richard G. Niemi, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Burnham, Walter Dean, 1970, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, New York: Norton.
- Converse, Philip E., 1966, "On the Possibility of Major Political Realignment in the South," in Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, eds., *Elections and the Political Order*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Chap. 12, pp. 212-244.
- Erikson, Robert, 1971, "The Advantage of Incumbency in Congressional Elections," *Polity*, Spring, 1971, pp. 395-405.

Jacobson, Gary C., 1989, "Strategic Politicians and the Dynamics of House Elections, 1946-1986," *American Political Science Review* 83 (Sept.), pp. 773-93.

Jacobson, Gary C., 1997a, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 4th ed., New York: Longman.

Jacobson, Gary C., 1997b, "Reversal of Fortune: The Transformation of U.S. House Elections in the 1990s," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Key, V.O., Jr., 1955, "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (Feb.), pp. 3-18.

Lowi, Theodore, 1985, *The Personal Presidency: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*, Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mayhew, David, 1974, "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity*, Spring, 1974, pp. 295-317.

Phillips, Kevin B., 1969, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Rohde, David W., 1991, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Richard Niemi for his help in compiling some of the data reported in this paper.
2. The 1960s, as used here, refers to the “decade” of 1962 or 1964 to 1972. Similarly, the “1970s and 1980s” refer to some time (shortly) after the 1972 elections to some time in the 1990s, perhaps 1992.
3. The generational explanation offered by Beck (1974) proposes necessary, but not sufficient, conditions.
4. Or, to take another example, the asymmetry may be that of the Jacksonian critical era, when only his new Democratic party had created the institutions of the modern mass party at least for the crucial first few years of that critical era.
5. I also argued that, in or around every critical era, both the coalitional and institutional bases of the parties changed. It was merely that one aspect changed more than the other in any given critical era, and thus came to typify that critical era.
6. The Senate was nearly as solidly held by the Democrats as the House, with the single exception of 1980, and that exceptional outcome was reversed at the first opportunity for the electorate to reconsider that class, in 1986.
7. These six committees are Appropriations, Budget, Commerce/Energy and Commerce, Judiciary, Rules, and Ways and Means. Commerce and Judiciary were included due to the centrality of their jurisdictions to the Contract with America. The party leadership positions are, for the House, the Speaker, majority/minority leader, whip, and chair of caucus/conference. In the Senate, only the party leader and whip/assistant party leader are considered, largely because of the variability in importance of other positions (some being filled by one of the two top leaders, for example).
8. The collapse of concern over foreign problems is presumably due to the waning of the Vietnam War and then to the end of the Cold War.
9. Note, by the way, that the two measures drawn from black partisanship (percent Democratic and percent apolitical) are unchanged in the 1990s compared to the 1970s and 1980s.
10. We need to be careful in relying too strongly on the 1996 NES. Possibly because it is the end of a panel study, some of the figures look unusually participatory, involved, and in others ways “sophisticated.” With respect to partisanship in particular, these figures are more “partisan” than the GSS survey conducted in the spring. It may be the case, of course, that the enhanced partisanship reported in the fall reflects the “mobilization” of partisanship due to campaign effects, but it may also reflect the artifact of panel effects.