



Electoral Continuity and Change, 1868–1996

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This article examines theoretical and historical issues raised by Donald Stokes's classic 1960s articles on "Party Loyalty and the Likelihood of Deviating Elections," "On the Existence of Forces Restoring Party Competition," and "Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces." I use presidential election returns from 1868 to 1996 and a simple regression model to measure partisan, national, and sub-national forces in each election. My analysis suggests that the contemporary American electoral system is significantly more nationalized than the electoral system of a century ago, but no less partisan, no more volatile, and no less subject to competitive reequilibration. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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Confronted with the limited configurations of the present, the survey analyst will more and more be tempted to search for similar phenomena in the nearer and farther past. Far from being necessarily antihistorical, as they are sometimes supposed to be, survey studies can provide a fresh stimulus to historical analysis. (Campbell *et al.*, 1966, 159)

The study of electoral politics has been revolutionized in the last fifty years by the availability of massive amounts of high-quality survey data providing unprecedented access to the attitudes and perceptions of prospective voters. Much of that information has been gathered by the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960) and by their successors in what have come to be called the American National Election Studies. Not surprisingly, easy scholarly access to this treasure-trove of data has done a great deal to shape the contours of the field. The modern scholarly literature on electoral politics is primarily about presidential elections rather than state and local races (or primary elections, or elections in other political systems), primarily about individual political psychology rather than elite behavior or mass-elite linkages, primarily about voting behavior rather than aggregate election outcomes, and primarily about the present rather than the past—all, at least in significant part, because that is where the best data are.

While this scholarly development has produced an unusually rich and technically sophisticated body of political research, it has also encouraged a sort of provincialism, in which the totality of electoral politics is sometimes too readily equated with the psychology of voting behavior in the dozen U.S. presidential elections since 1952. Apparent changes within this fairly narrow compass are taken as reflections of momentous social or political transformations, while apparent continuities are taken as evidence of the way things have always been and will always be. What is one to make of a scholarly literature in which successive decades have witnessed the unveiling of *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), *The Changing American Voter* (Nie *et al.*, 1976), *The Unchanging American Voter* (Smith, 1989), and *The New American Voter* (Miller and Shanks, 1996)?

In view of these developments, it is well worth recalling that the authors of *The American Voter*—and Donald Stokes perhaps foremost among them—clearly recognized the limitations of the contemporary survey data on which their classic work was based, and strove in a variety of ingenious ways to produce a more complete and nuanced understanding of electoral politics than could be afforded by those data alone. Their efforts to extend the scope of electoral research beyond the reach of national opinion surveys are reflected in the cross-national collaborations of Campbell and Valen and of Converse and Dupeux (both reprinted in Campbell *et al.*, 1966), in the classic works on representation by Miller and Stokes (also reprinted in Campbell *et al.*, 1966), and in Stokes's work with David Butler on the British political system (Butler and Stokes, 1969); they are also reflected in a somewhat different way in the series of historical essays by Stokes considered here, which represent the core of his scholarship in the decade separating *The American Voter* in 1960 and *Political Change in Britain* in 1969.²

Within two years after the publication of *The American Voter*, Stokes was consciously attempting to project the framework and findings of that work onto a broader canvas. "The contemporary voting studies," he wrote (Stokes, 1962, 689),

have disposed of many questions whose answers could only be guessed a few years ago. Yet any such cumulation of findings brings to the fore a number of 'second-generation' problems that could hardly be stated except in terms of the theoretical ideas evolving out of current work. This has especially been true in the voting studies as interest has extended from the population of voters to a population of elections; concepts that could explain a good deal about individual choice inevitably spawned additional questions about elections as total social or political events.

Given the limitations of contemporary survey data, an interest in 'elections as total social or political events' impelled Stokes to examine the historical record of aggregated electoral data, primarily but not only in the United States. In the process, he organized previously fugitive election returns,³ developed innovative statistical models and methods for analyzing historical electoral data,⁴ and played a major role in defining as well as resolving the 'second-generation' problems" posed for the broader field of electoral studies by the findings of contemporary survey research.

My aim here is to revisit the issues of electoral continuity and change raised by Stokes in three important works from this period (Stokes, 1962; Stokes and Iversen, 1962; Stokes, 1967), applying models and methods he would (I like to think) have applied himself had he written these works thirty years later, and using the intervening thirty years' data both to shed additional light on the broad sweep of American electoral history and to shed some light on our current political circumstances. That the specific questions Stokes formulated seem as theoretically and historically relevant in the 1990s as they did in the 1960s is, I submit, a testament to his remarkable intellectual vision.

Components of the Vote

The data for my analysis consist of state-level presidential election returns for the 33 elections from 1868 through 1996.⁵ I focus here on the Republican popular vote margin in each state, defined as the difference between the Republican and Democratic percentages of the total vote cast for president. I prefer this measure to the Republican share of the two-party vote because the latter measure tends to overstate the winning party's dominance in elections with strong third-party showings.⁶

I make no concerted effort to analyze support for third-party and independent candidates, largely because that support has been so sporadic and ephemeral in the period covered by my analysis. The total vote cast for candidates other than the Republican and Democratic nominees has averaged only five percent in these 33 elections, and the half-dozen cases in which it reached ten percent or more (1912, 1992, 1924, 1968, 1892, and 1996) have displayed rather little continuity in voting patterns.⁷

The Republican vote margins in the 33 presidential elections from 1868 through 1996 are shown as dots in Fig. 1. The figure also shows a moving average through time of the individual election outcomes, which provides a clearer visual representation of historical shifts in party dominance.⁸ By this moving average measure, the Republican party was dominant (at the presidential level) from the Civil War until the accession of Franklin Roosevelt, and again from Eisenhower through Bush—albeit at times only narrowly, and with reversals in specific elections, most spectacularly in 1912 and 1964. It is also interesting to note, however, that despite these long periods of Republican dominance, the median vote margin is exactly zero, and 20 of the 33 margins are smaller than ten percentage points.

The election outcome in each state in each election year may usefully be thought of as a sum of three distinct components: a partisan component reflecting standing loyalties carrying over from previous elections, an election-specific component reflecting the shifting tides of national electoral forces, and an idiosyncratic component reflecting new sub-national electoral forces at work in the specific state. I propose to measure these three distinct components of the vote by regressing state election outcomes in each election year on previous election outcomes in the same state plus a constant. The regression model is

$$R_{st} = \alpha_t + \beta_{1t}R_{st-1} + \beta_{2t}R_{st-2} + \beta_{3t}R_{st-3} + \epsilon_{st}, \quad (1)$$

where R_{st} represents the Republican vote margin in state s in election year t , and R_{st-1} , R_{st-2} , and R_{st-3} represent the Republican vote margins in the same state in the three immediately preceding elections. α_t , β_{1t} , β_{2t} , and β_{3t} are election-specific parameters to be estimated, and ϵ_{st} is a stochastic term reflecting state-specific idiosyncratic forces in election year t ; I will assume for purposes of estimation that ϵ_{st} is drawn from a probability distribution with mean zero and election-specific variance σ_t^2 .

The parameters of this regression model correspond directly to the three components of the vote distinguished here: the parameters β_{1t} , β_{2t} , and β_{3t} on lagged state votes reflect standing partisan loyalties carrying over from previous elections, the intercept parameter α_t measures the overall vote shift attributable to national electoral forces in a given election, and the stochastic variance parameter σ_t^2 measures the magnitude of new sub-national forces in a given election.

Estimates of these parameters for each of the 33 presidential elections examined here are presented in Table 1. Each row of the table represents one regression, with the number of

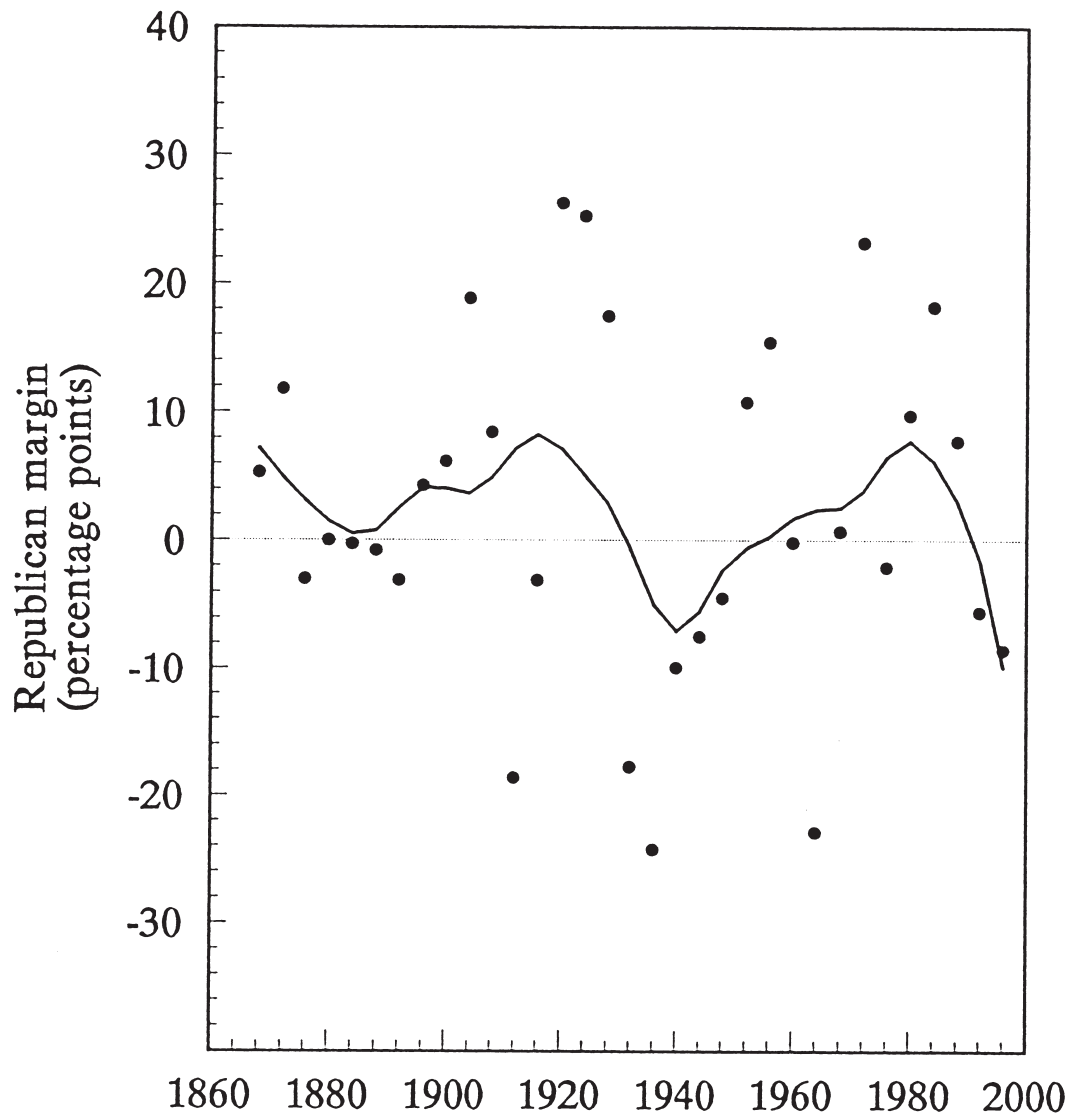


Fig. 1. Election outcomes, 1868–1996

observations corresponding to the number of states voting in that election year.⁹ In order to reflect national voting behavior, all of the data are weighted by the number of votes cast in each state in each election year, so that more populous states receive more weight in the regressions.

The first column of Table 1 shows the square root of the estimated stochastic variance of sub-national forces in each election year (σ_t) in percentage points; the second column shows the estimated national partisan swing (α_t) in percentage points (with positive values indicating Republican swings, negative values indicating Democratic swings, and standard errors of the estimates in parentheses); the third, fourth, and fifth columns show the estimated persistence of previous state-level outcomes in each election year (β_{1t} , β_{2t} , and β_{3t}); and the sixth column shows the sum of these three lagged partisan effects (again, with its standard error in parentheses).¹⁰

For example, the parameter estimates for the 1996 election presented in the first row of Table 1 show that the state-level voting pattern in 1996 basically replicated the pattern in 1992,

Table 1. Components of the Presidential Vote, 1868–1996

Election Year	σ_t (Sub-National Forces)	α_t (National Forces)	β_{1t} (4-year Lag)	β_{2t} (8-year Lag)	β_{3t} (12-year Lag)	$\Sigma\beta_t$ (Partisan Loyalties)
1996	5.755	−5.198 (3.610)	1.087 (0.187)	−0.060 (0.184)	0.164 (0.178)	1.191 (0.092)
1992	4.518	−15.664 (1.963)	0.404 (0.153)	0.379 (0.191)	−0.016 (0.097)	0.767 (0.073)
1988	4.298	−9.975 (1.491)	1.085 (0.088)	−0.240 (0.135)	−0.085 (0.119)	0.760 (0.074)
1984	3.884	1.026 (1.345)	0.582 (0.101)	−0.029 (0.109)	0.467 (0.044)	1.020 (0.071)
1980	5.233	9.991 (1.797)	0.742 (0.098)	0.036 (0.074)	0.322 (0.114)	1.100 (0.095)
1976	7.658	2.871 (4.636)	−0.274 (0.132)	0.712 (0.134)	−0.043 (0.087)	0.395 (0.107)
1972	8.141	30.323 (2.366)	0.686 (0.229)	0.356 (0.086)	−0.324 (0.225)	0.717 (0.144)
1968	5.293	6.250 (1.295)	0.234 (0.058)	0.782 (0.102)	0.009 (0.091)	1.024 (0.122)
1964	12.613	−7.988 (3.111)	0.927 (0.299)	−0.708 (0.283)	−0.385 (0.355)	−0.165 (0.234)
1960	6.444	−3.435 (2.058)	−0.350 (0.142)	0.798 (0.138)	−0.019 (0.094)	0.429 (0.097)
1956	6.683	10.572 (2.123)	0.595 (0.122)	0.123 (0.109)	0.098 (0.087)	0.816 (0.104)
1952	8.311	14.679 (1.532)	0.101 (0.136)	0.488 (0.367)	−0.101 (0.329)	0.488 (0.111)
1948	8.555	2.078 (3.432)	0.104 (0.394)	0.207 (0.361)	0.136 (0.179)	0.446 (0.089)
1944	3.269	2.368 (1.406)	0.820 (0.061)	0.055 (0.095)	0.004 (0.056)	0.879 (0.031)
1940	7.703	10.841 (3.124)	1.113 (0.159)	−0.189 (0.136)	0.193 (0.083)	1.117 (0.089)
1936	7.388	−12.256 (3.663)	0.703 (0.099)	−0.030 (0.088)	0.021 (0.080)	0.694 (0.077)
1932	10.683	−28.393 (3.100)	−0.150 (0.147)	1.070 (0.215)	−0.496 (0.210)	0.424 (0.129)
1928	10.751	13.994 (4.381)	0.976 (0.164)	0.767 (0.202)	0.047 (0.178)	0.257 (0.090)
1924	9.851	3.675 (5.181)	0.879 (0.127)	0.144 (0.174)	0.134 (0.150)	1.157 (0.098)
1920	9.480	19.478 (4.250)	0.249 (0.184)	0.046 (0.160)	0.904 (0.187)	1.200 (0.093)
1916	8.105	−3.216 (3.644)	0.247 (0.124)	0.946 (0.176)	−0.192 (0.121)	1.001 (0.080)
1912	9.832	−25.556 (2.014)	0.557 (0.270)	0.049 (0.144)	0.083 (0.252)	0.689 (0.095)
1908	5.678	−1.383 (1.212)	0.311 (0.095)	0.620 (0.206)	0.028 (0.083)	0.958 (0.062)
1904	8.192	9.864 (1.499)	1.617 (0.204)	−0.446 (0.123)	0.291 (0.107)	1.462 (0.080)
1900	5.726	3.171 (0.994)	0.471 (0.058)	0.079 (0.130)	0.504 (0.202)	1.053 (0.074)
1896	16.688	4.130 (2.866)	−0.825 (0.335)	2.573 (0.719)	−0.648 (0.630)	1.100 (0.206)
1892	8.273	−2.798 (1.376)	1.167 (0.271)	−0.289 (0.370)	0.243 (0.200)	1.121 (0.101)
1888	4.923	−2.124 (0.900)	1.019 (0.146)	0.392 (0.181)	−0.395 (0.148)	1.016 (0.063)
1884	6.032	1.022 (2.019)	0.764 (0.171)	0.069 (0.217)	−0.117 (0.116)	0.715 (0.070)
1880	6.294	6.863 (2.075)	1.112 (0.142)	−0.357 (0.126)	0.096 (0.075)	0.851 (0.084)
1876	4.765	−7.501 (1.706)	0.541 (0.103)	0.230 (0.131)	0.009 (0.106)	0.780 (0.082)
1872	7.295	6.712 (2.318)	0.428 (0.192)	−0.151 (0.188)	0.365 (0.091)	0.642 (0.117)
1868	6.410	−2.286 (2.077)	0.740 (0.104)	0.136 (0.075)	0.235 (0.072)	1.111 (0.110)

but with an across-the-board shift of five percentage points toward Clinton. (The national shift is reflected in the intercept of −5.198, while the stability of relative support from 1992 to 1996 is reflected in a coefficient close to one for four-year lagged votes and coefficients close to zero for eight-year lagged votes and twelve-year lagged votes.) Sub-national forces are captured by the standard error of this regression, which gauges the extent to which the 1996 outcome in specific states deviated from the overall pattern. (For example, Clinton did notably worse in Kansas—Robert Dole’s home state—in 1996 than in 1992, and considerably better in several northeastern states than the overall regression relationship would suggest.) The estimated magnitude of these sub-national forces was slightly larger in 1996 than in the previous four election cycles, but smaller than in most of the elections before 1980.

The results presented in Table 1 provide the basis for the analyses in the next three sections of this paper, each focusing on a single aspect of American electoral history. The first of these

sections deals with the persistence of partisan loyalties, the second with the magnitudes of national and sub-national electoral forces, and the third with the identification of ‘critical elections.’ Subsequent sections on the dynamics of party competition and on the volatility of election outcomes are based upon national-level rather than state-level analysis of the same election returns.

The Persistence of Partisan Loyalties

One of the most widely accepted generalizations in the whole scholarly literature on voting behavior and elections is that party loyalties count for less in contemporary American politics than they did a generation or more ago. For example, Wattenberg (1990, 1991) has used data from the National Election Studies and other sources to document *The Decline of American Political Parties* and *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics*, while Burnham (1989, 24) has referred more colorfully to ‘a massive decay of partisan electoral linkages’ and to ‘the ruins of the traditional partisan regime.’ These developments have sometimes been taken to imply that the whole theoretical framework presented in *The American Voter*, with its emphasis on the causal priority of long-standing partisan loyalties, has become increasingly irrelevant in the contemporary American context.

Characteristically, Stokes expressed curiosity about the extent and causes of temporal and spatial variation in the strength of party identification even before contemporary survey data began to register noticeable departures from the levels of partisanship documented in *The American Voter*. ‘The reality which parties have as objects of mass perception,’ he wrote (Stokes, 1967, 183),

is the more remarkable in view of the actual fragmentation of party structure and the diffusion of authority produced on all levels of government by the doctrine of separated powers. Indeed, the ambiguity of parties as stimulus objects suggests that the focus of partisan attitudes may vary a good deal and that the modern American experience may differ from that of other liberal democracies or earlier periods of our own politics.

Lacking direct measures of party identification from contemporary surveys in most ‘other liberal democracies or earlier periods of our own politics,’ it seemed reasonable to Stokes—and still seems reasonable today—to look for evidence of party loyalties in the continuity of partisan voting patterns over time. To the extent that successive elections with different candidates, issues, and political conditions produce essentially similar voting patterns, it seems safe to infer that these patterns somehow reflect the organizing force of partisanship. Of course, whether that organizing force is manifested through party machines, party symbols, parental socialization, or other specific mechanisms may vary from time to time and place to place, and the mere fact of continuity does nothing to illuminate the actual workings of the relevant electoral processes. Nevertheless, the mere fact of continuity in partisan voting patterns over significant periods of time *does* seem to provide *prima facie* evidence of the importance of partisanship in one form or another.

The logic of this inference is nicely captured by Stokes (1962, 691) own example:

we may suppose that any one judging the candidates according to the dominant values of American culture, rather than in purely partisan terms, would have found Grover Cleveland a more estimable man than James G. Blaine in the campaign of 1884. Yet we can be sure that the public’s actual response to these new presidential personalities

was colored almost completely by its prior partisan loyalties, as the smallness of the vote swing from 1880 to 1884 suggests.

Of course, the national vote swing from one election to the next might be small for a variety of reasons having little to do with the public's partisan loyalties. For example, positive responses to Cleveland's personality in some parts of the country might (despite Stokes's assessment of the candidates) have been counterbalanced by positive responses to Blaine's personality in other regions, or by defections from the Democratic platform planks on silver, regulation, or other policy issues of the day. However, the same pattern of countervailing election-specific deviations would be much less likely to occur simultaneously in each state than in the nation as a whole. Thus, the fact that more than three-quarters of each state's partisan popular vote margin in the election of 1880 persisted in the election of 1884—despite the intervening assassination of President Garfield, the recession of 1884, and the emergence of Cleveland and Blaine as their parties' nominees—seems to provide considerable support for Stokes's inference that voters' responses to the immediate candidates and issues were strongly colored by their partisan loyalties. Nor is Stokes's example historically atypical; the estimates of lagged partisan effects for 11 of the 32 other elections in Table 1 are even larger, and the *average* combined effect of the three most recent past elections (in the last column of Table 1) for the entire 130-year time span is 0.825. Clearly, party loyalties have produced a good deal of continuity in presidential voting patterns at many points in American electoral history.

While the magnitude of partisan effects evident in Table 1 is impressive, the variability of these effects is also impressive. There is far more election-specific variation in the estimated strengths of party loyalties than could be attributed to random fluctuation in the parameter estimates themselves. The historical evolution underlying this election-specific variation is indicated by the locally weighted regression trend line drawn through the plotted party loyalty estimates (the sums of 4-year, 8-year, and 12-year lagged effects from the last column of Table 1) in Fig. 2.

Two aspects of the historical evolution shown in Fig. 2 may be surprising. First, the persistence of partisan loyalties appears to have declined throughout the first half of the 20th century from the very high level of the Gilded Age. The first half of this decline is largely attributable to the election of 1912, in which a long-standing Republican majority was fractured by the split between William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt. However, the second half of the decline reflects a series of elections in the New Deal era in which pre-existing partisan loyalties were significantly eroded. The first two of these, in 1928 and 1932, mark the end of the Progressive era party system and the beginning of the New Deal era itself. Whereas the election of 1896 superimposed new sub-national forces on a basically stable party system (as evidenced by estimated partisan persistence levels in Table 1 of 1.12 in 1892, 1.10 in 1896, 1.05 in 1900, and 1.46 in 1904), the New Deal realignment erased much of the existing party system (as evidenced by estimated partisan persistence levels of 0.26 in 1928, 0.42 in 1932, and 0.69 in 1936). Moreover, what Sundquist (1983) has referred to as the aftershocks of the New Deal, especially in the South, produced a great deal of further reshuffling in 1948, 1952, 1960, 1964, and 1976 (with estimated partisan persistence levels of 0.45, 0.49, 0.43, – 0.16, and 0.40, respectively). It seems fruitless to argue about which one of these elections marked the end of the New Deal party system, when the evidence suggests that the system was in considerable partisan flux almost throughout its existence.

The other potentially surprising feature of the historical evolution graphed in Fig. 2 is the

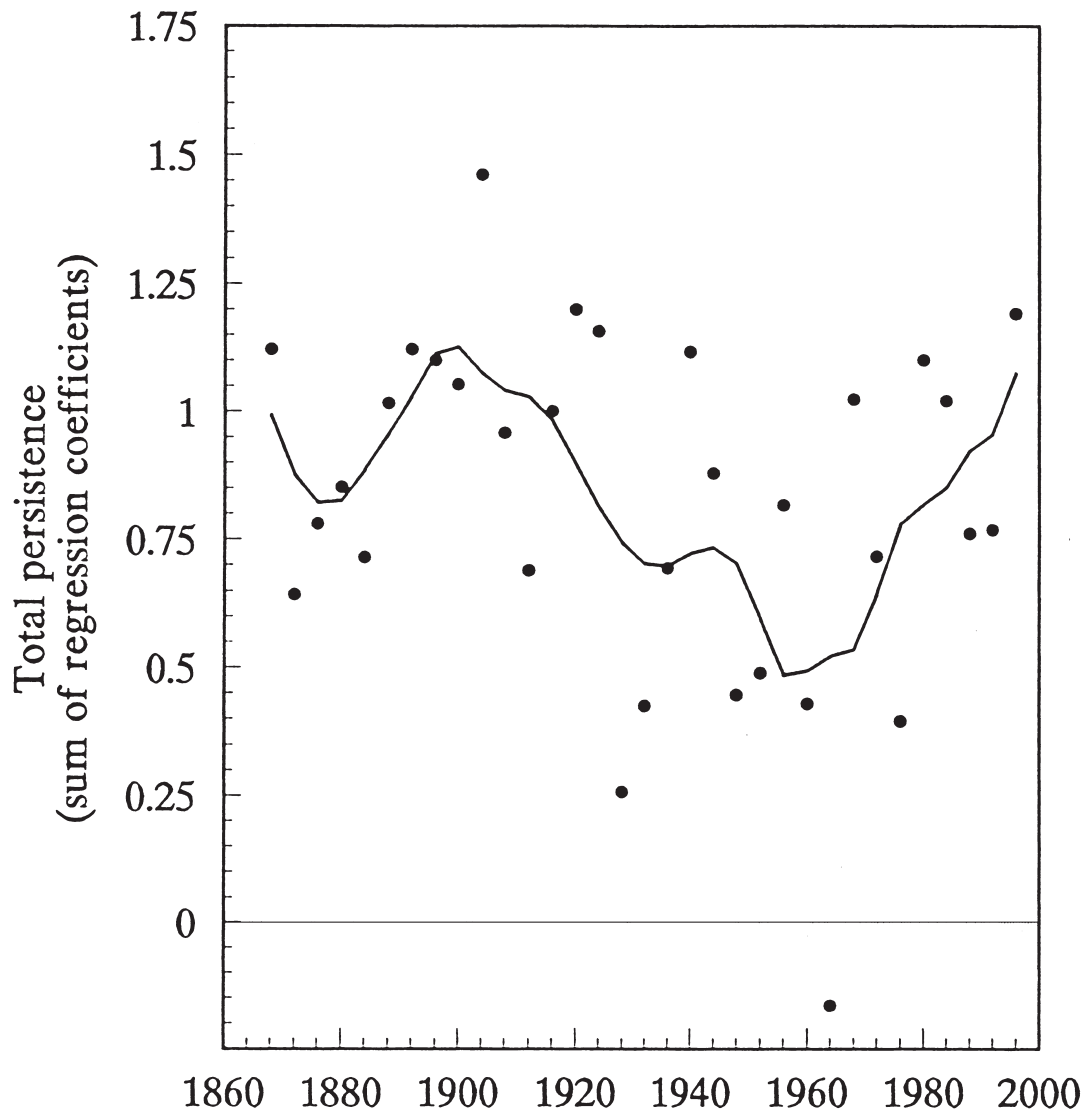


Fig. 2. Partisan forces, 1868–1996

notable resurgence of partisan forces in the last 20 years. The five most recent presidential elections have been characterized by a persistence of party loyalties unsurpassed over any comparable time span since the turn of the last century. The strong correlation between state-level election returns in 1984 and 1988 adduced by Bartels (1992) to illustrate the continuing relevance of party identification in presidential elections appears from the parameter estimates presented in Table 1 to be fairly typical of the whole period. Whatever prospective voters may say in response to survey questions, and whatever academics may write and believe, actual presidential election outcomes suggest that we have been living through an era marked by unusually strong partisan continuity in state-level voting patterns.

The revival of partisanship evident in Fig. 2 is even more striking in Fig. 3, which tracks the persistence of partisan voting patterns outside the South.¹¹ Whereas Fig. 2 shows a fairly steady decline in the persistence of partisan voting patterns through the first six decades of the twentieth century, Fig. 3 shows a shorter and sharper decline, followed by a longer and

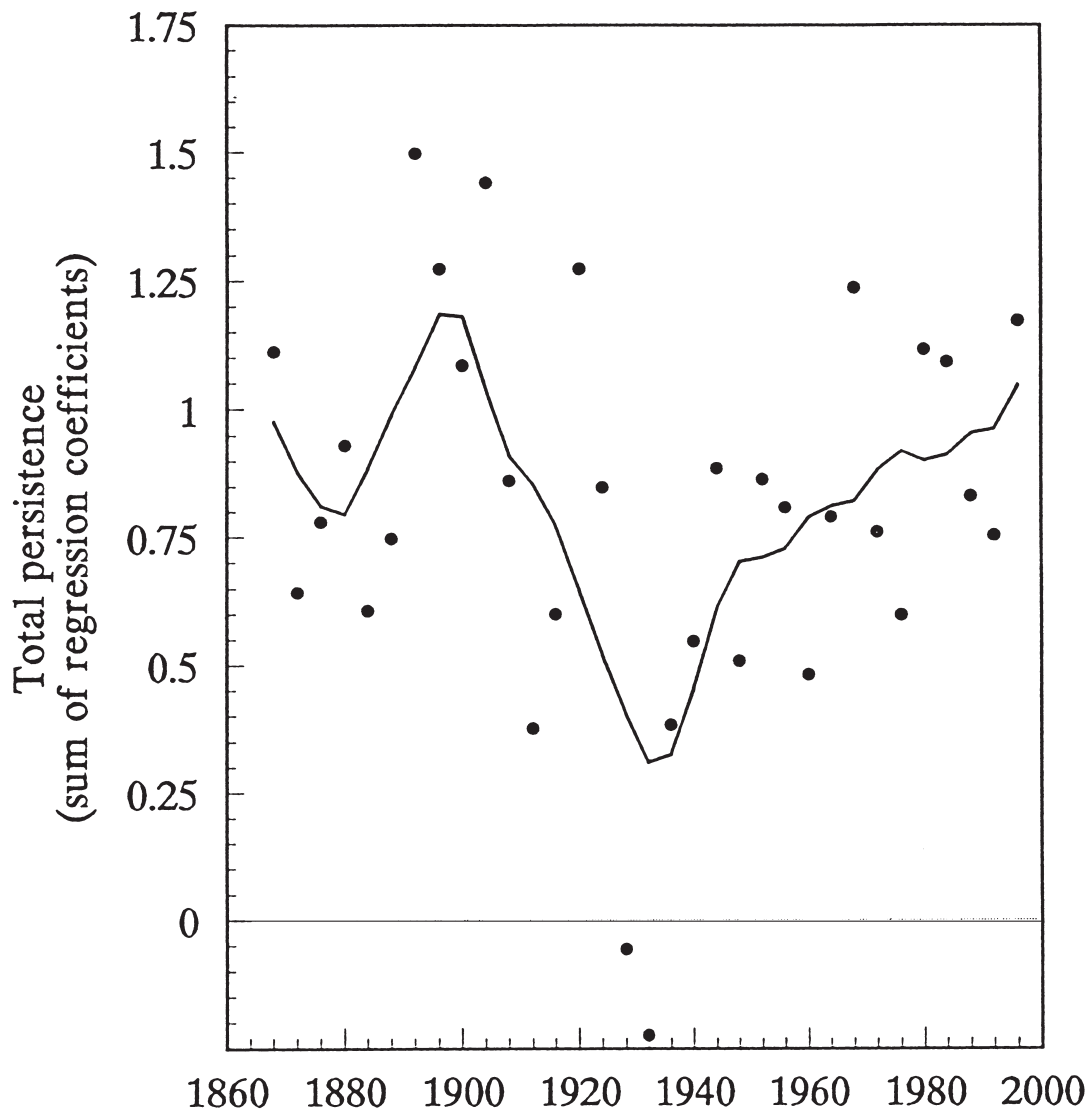


Fig. 3. Partisan forces, Non-south

even more impressive increase in the strength of partisan forces over the last sixty years. The difference between these patterns reflects the fact that Democratic loyalties in the ‘Solid South’ survived the New Deal realignment intact, but began to erode significantly in the 1950s and 1960s, when the rest of the country was already in a period of historically typical partisan persistence. It seems clear, however, that the unusually high- and still increasing-levels of partisan persistence in recent presidential elections are no mere artifact of the breakup of the Solid South, since they appear clearly even in an analysis limited to non-southern states.

National and Local Forces

Stokes’s interest in ‘Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces’ stemmed primarily from his interests in legislative behavior and political representation. “Many influences affect the solidarity of a legislative party,” he wrote (Stokes, 1967, 184),

but the members' perception of forces on their constituents' voting behavior is surely among them.... If the member of the legislature believes, on the one hand, that it is the national party and its leaders which are salient and that his own electoral prospects depend on the legislative record of the party as a whole, his bonds to the legislative party will be relatively strong. This is the situation posited by the model of responsible party government. But if the legislator believes, on the other hand, that the public is dominated by constituency influences and that his prospects depend on his own or his opponent's appeal or on other factors distinctive to the constituency, his bonds to the legislative party will be relatively weak.

Stokes set out to measure the influence of national and local forces on turnout and voting behavior in legislative elections, not only in the contemporary United States, but over a 90-year span of American history (from the 1870s through the 1950s) and in Britain as well. He found a substantial and fairly regular decline in constituency-specific variation in turnout in congressional elections, and a somewhat later decline (first evident in the 1930s) in local influences on the partisan vote division in congressional races. "If the nationalization of political forces has carried less far in America than in Britain," he concluded (Stokes, 1967, 202), "it seems nevertheless an outstanding aspect of our elections for Congress over the life of the modern party system."

My own historical analysis of presidential election returns allows for a roughly parallel analysis of changes over time in the extent to which voting behavior has been dominated by national or local forces. Indeed, the absence of cross-sectional variation in the identity of the competing candidates makes presidential elections especially useful for gauging changes in the extent to which the electorate itself has become more or less homogeneous in its voting behavior.

A natural measure of the magnitude of national forces in presidential elections is the absolute value of the α_t coefficient reflecting overall shifts in the presidential vote in each election year. These absolute values are charted in Fig. 4. The three highest values shown in the figure, each corresponding to a national vote shift of 25 to 30 percentage points, represent the Republican debacle of 1912, the repudiation of Herbert Hoover in 1932, and the Nixon landslide of 1972. The national vote shift in a typical election year is, of course, much smaller in magnitude—about nine percentage points. Even this modest historical average was not reached in any of the nine elections between 1868 and 1900. However, the magnitude of national forces increased markedly over the first three decades of the 20th century, reaching a peak at the beginning of the New Deal era before subsiding to a fairly consistent average of ten percentage points for the remainder of the century.

An equally natural measure of the magnitude of sub-national forces in each election year is the standard deviation σ_t of state-specific political shocks. These sub-national forces, graphed in Fig. 5, display much less temporal variation than the national forces graphed in Fig. 4. There are notable outliers of 17 percentage points in 1896 and 13 percentage points in 1964, but relatively constant averages of eight percentage points over the whole period from 1868 through 1928 and seven percentage points over the whole period from 1932 through 1996. It is interesting to note that the pattern of local forces in presidential elections shown in Fig. 5 is roughly similar to the pattern Stokes (1967) 195, found in congressional elections, with a gradual increase from the 1870s into the 1920s followed by a decline from the 1920s through the 1940s. It is also interesting to note that the eight most recent elections have clustered near the lower end of the historical distribution, suggesting that the decline in the magnitude of sub-national effects may have resumed in the last twenty years.

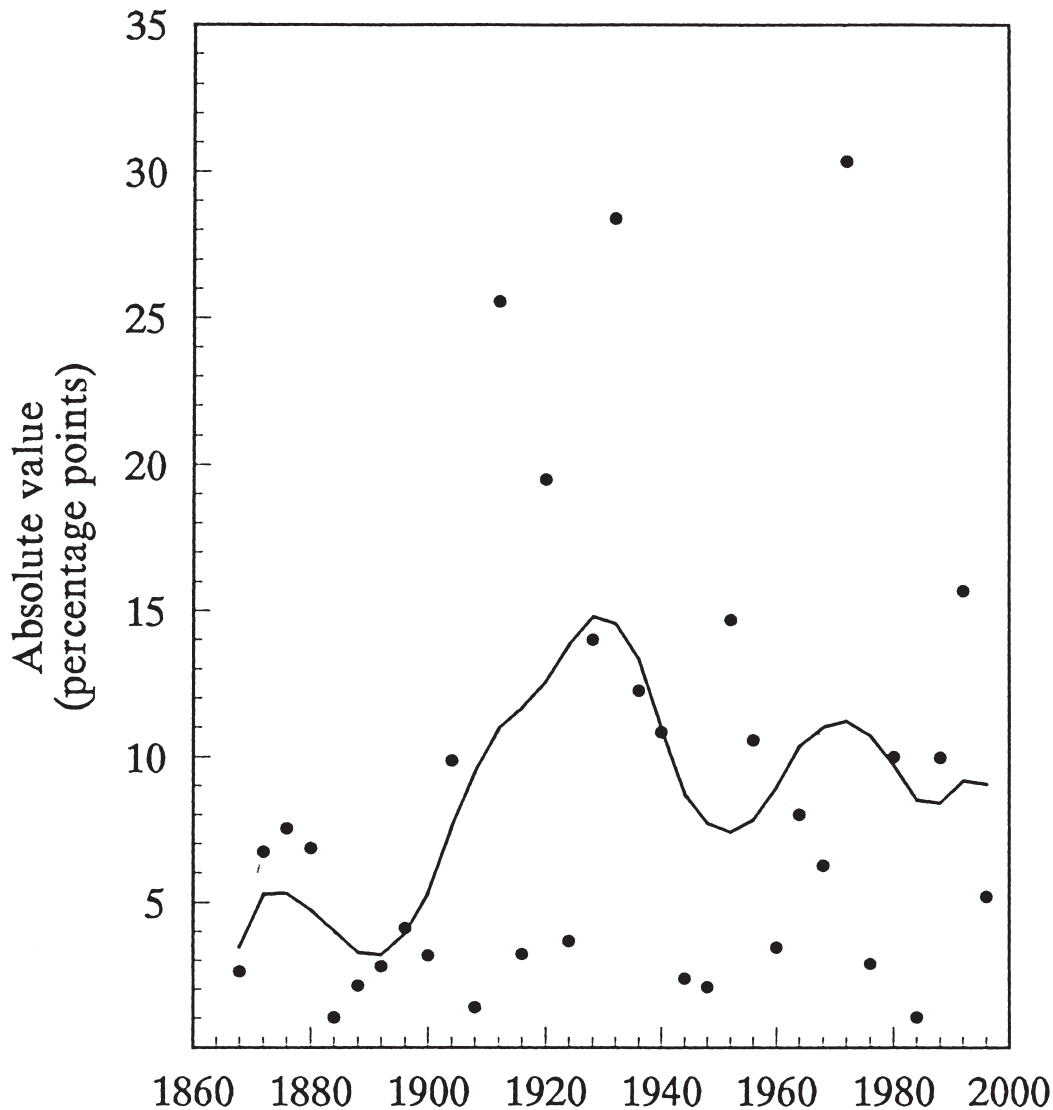


Fig. 4. National forces, 1868–1996

The national and sub-national forces charted in Figs 4 and 5, respectively, are directly comparable in the sense that both are measured on the same scale of percentage point changes in the popular vote. Thus, it is possible not only to assess fluctuations in the magnitude of each force over the 13 decades covered by the figures, but also to assess the relative magnitude of national and sub-national forces at any given point, in much the way Stokes (1967) did for congressional and British parliamentary elections. Fig. 6 displays the relative magnitude of national forces—represented by the ratio of national variance (the square of the national tide coefficient α_i in Table 1) to national variance plus sub-national variance (the square of the state-specific shock coefficient σ_i in Table 1)—in each election year.

The pattern of relative nationalization in Fig. 6 suggests that national and sub-national forces have been relatively evenly balanced throughout most of this century, but with the balance tipping toward national forces at the beginning of the New Deal and in the most recent elections and toward sub-national forces during the racial sorting-out of the 1950s and '60s. By contrast,

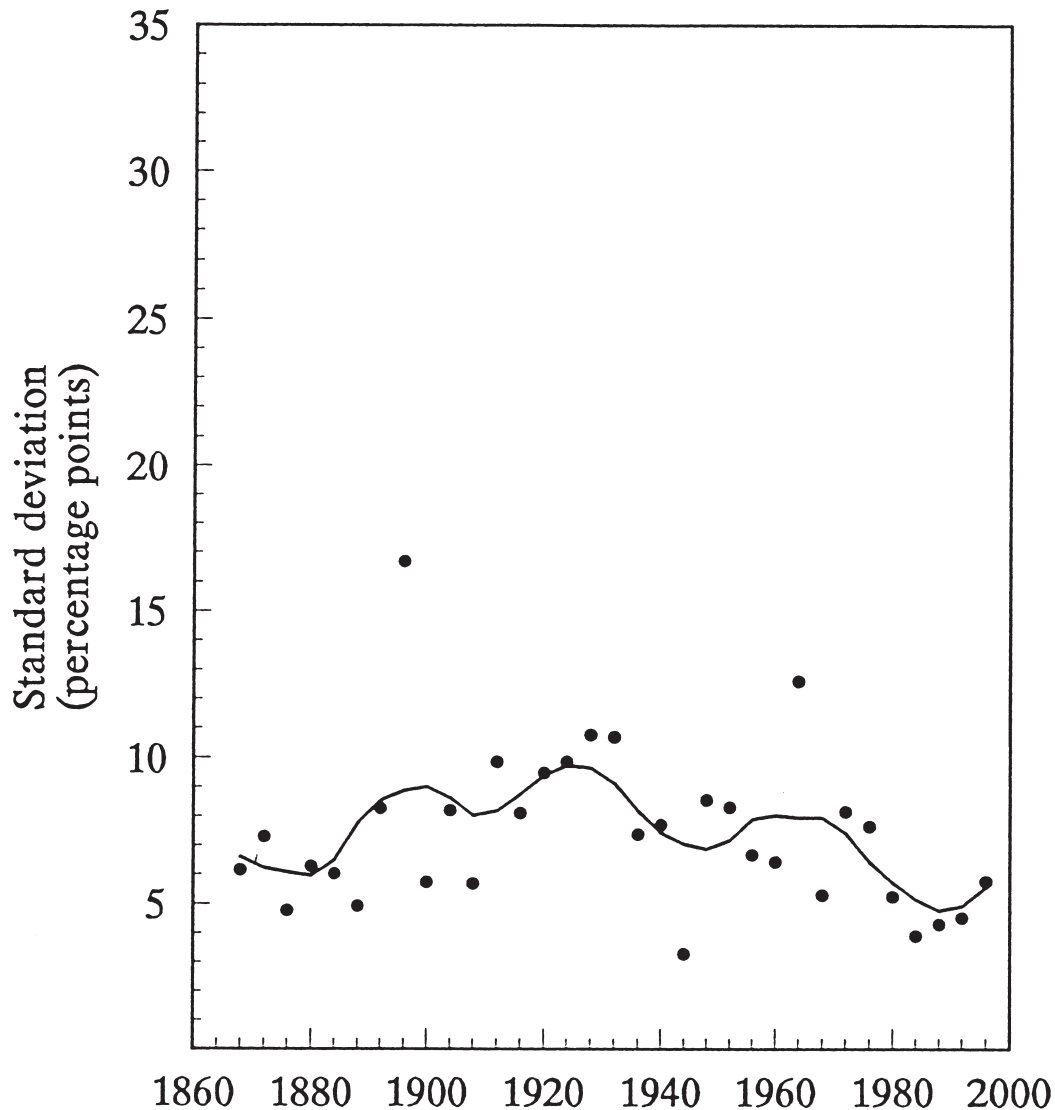


Fig. 5. Sub-National forces, 1869–1996

sub-national forces were predominant through most of the late 19th century, with national variance exceeding sub-national variance in only two of the first nine elections shown in Fig. 6. On a broad historical scale, Fig. 6 might be read as a reflection of long-term nationalization of the mass media and of American political culture more generally. However, the notable reversals of this long-term trend evident in the 1880s and '90s and again during the New Deal era suggest that technological and social forces producing greater nationalization have, at least at times, been stymied by deep sectional political cleavages.

The political significance of the most important such sectional cleavage is evident from comparing the pattern of nationalization in Fig. 6 with the corresponding pattern in Fig. 7, which is based upon parallel calculations of national and sub-national forces derived from regression analyses omitting the southern states. The general pattern in Fig. 7 suggests a more consistent nationalizing trend than in Fig. 6, with the trough following Reconstruction and the peak marking the advent of the New Deal party system both considerably smoothed. While

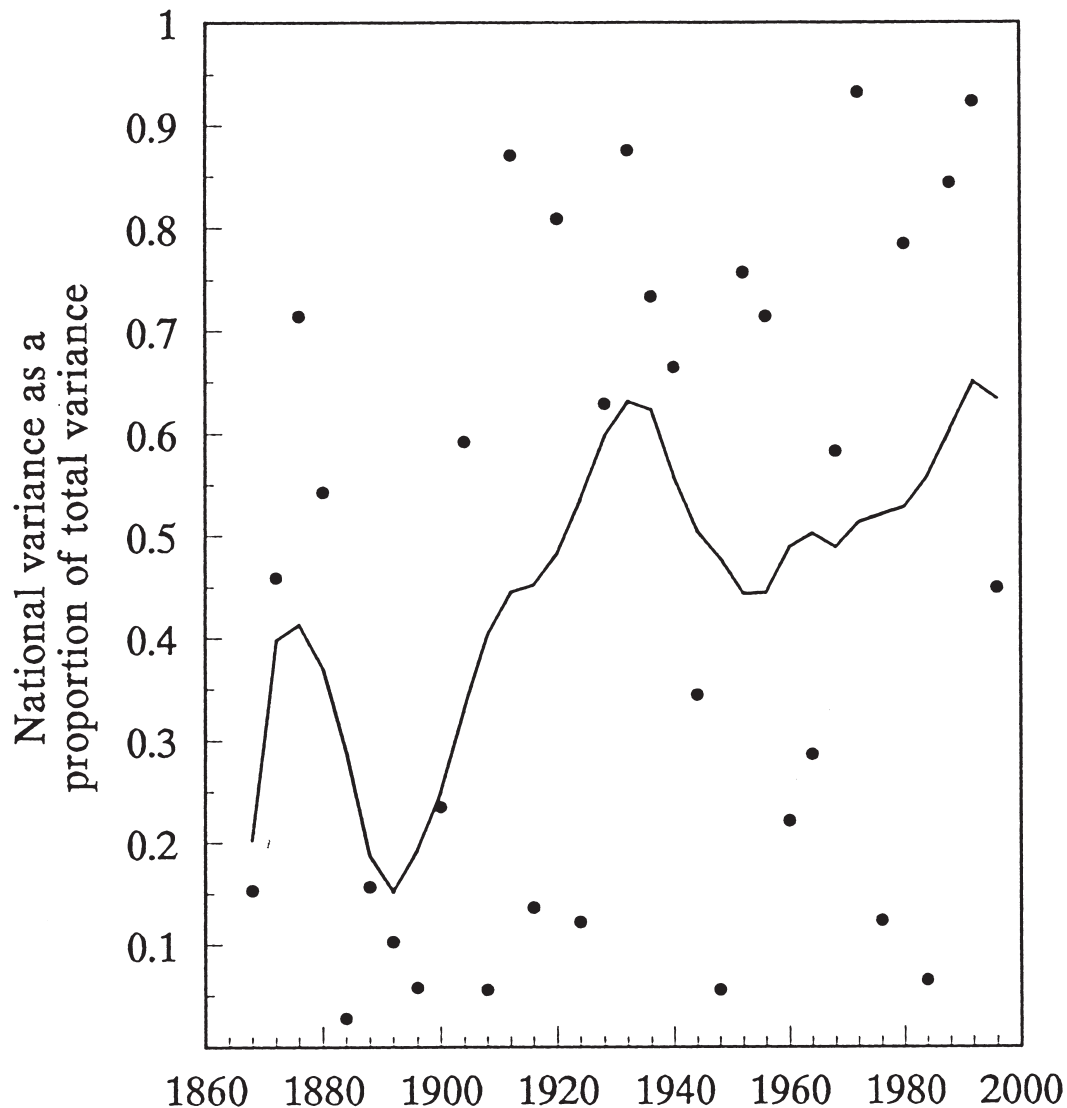


Fig. 6. Relative nationalization of electoral forces, 1868–1996

there are still substantial ebbs and flows in the nationalization of electoral forces evident in Fig. 7 (marking, for example, disparate reactions in the various non-southern states to the political changes of the 1960s and '70s), the contemporary period stands out even more clearly than in Fig. 6 as a period of unprecedented electoral nationalization.

Critical Elections

In addition to shedding light on the magnitude of partisan and short-term electoral factors or national and sub-national forces in any given election or historical period, the decomposition of election outcomes presented in Table 1 provides a framework for assessing the long-term impact of each election on the subsequent movement of the party system. Each election outcome may have direct effects 4, 8, and 12 years later, and indirect effects over an even longer time horizon.¹² These direct and indirect effects constitute the historical legacy of a specific election. When they are unusually large and persistent, it seems reasonable to refer to the

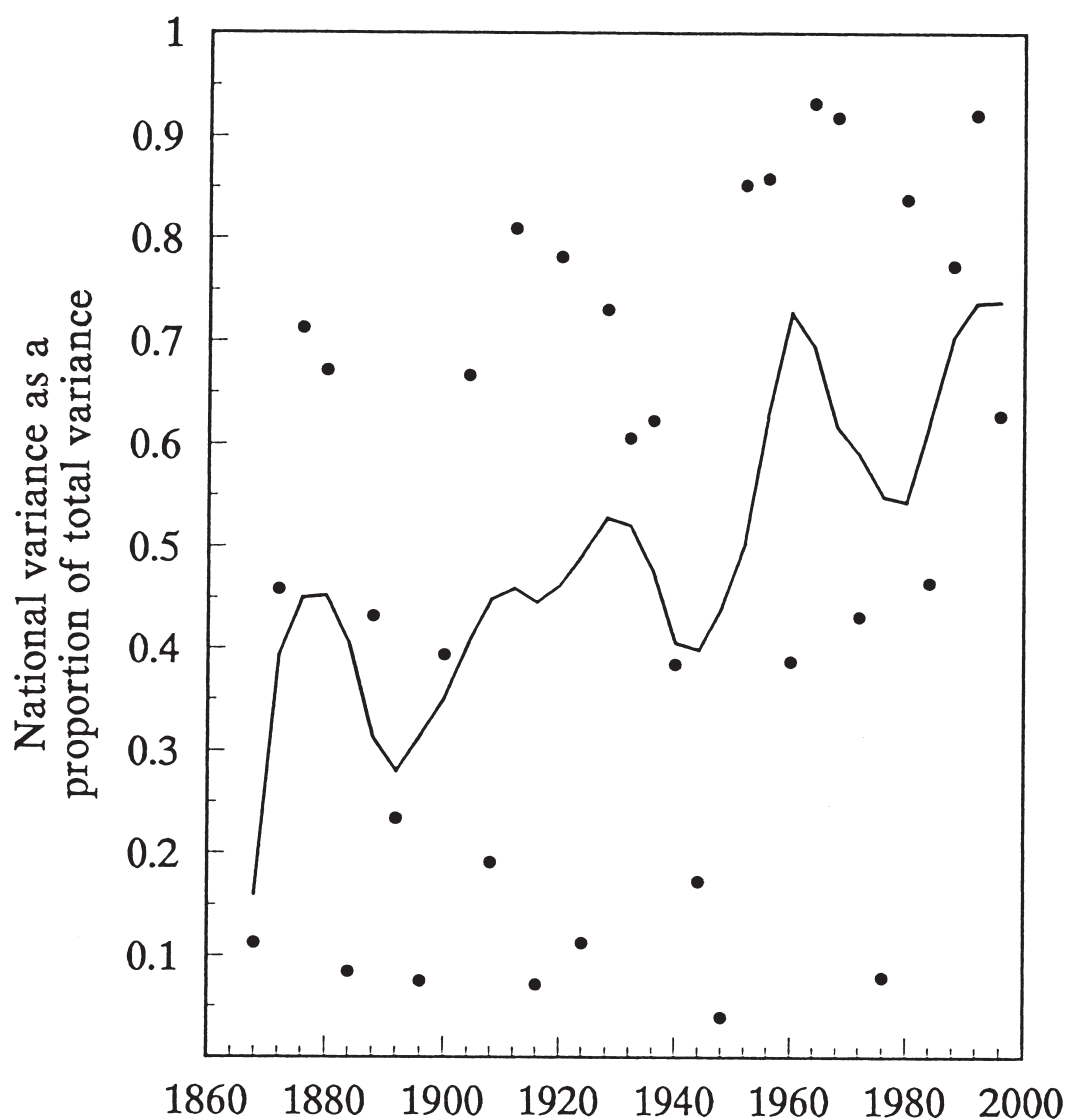


Fig. 7. Relative nationalization of electoral forces, Non-south

election as a ‘critical election’ in the sense developed by Key (1955, 1959), Burnham (1970), Sundquist (1983), and others.

My calculation of the long-term impact of each election takes into account the magnitude of new national and sub-national forces in that election (reflected by the estimates of α_t and σ_t , respectively, in Table 1) as well as the persistence of those forces in subsequent elections (reflected by the estimates of β_{1t} , β_{2t} , and β_{3t} for subsequent elections in Table 1). More specifically, I average the immediate impact of new national and sub-national forces in each election (represented by the square root of the sum of α_t^2 and σ_t^2), the direct impact four years later (consisting of the immediate impact multiplied by β_{1t+1}), the total impact eight years later (consisting of the immediate impact multiplied by β_{2t+2} plus the fourth-year impact multiplied by β_{1t+2}) and so on, over a total of seven elections spanning a quarter-century.¹³ The long-term effects calculated in this manner for each election from 1868 to 1972 are shown in Fig. 8, which displays the average impact of each election over a 24-year horizon.¹⁴

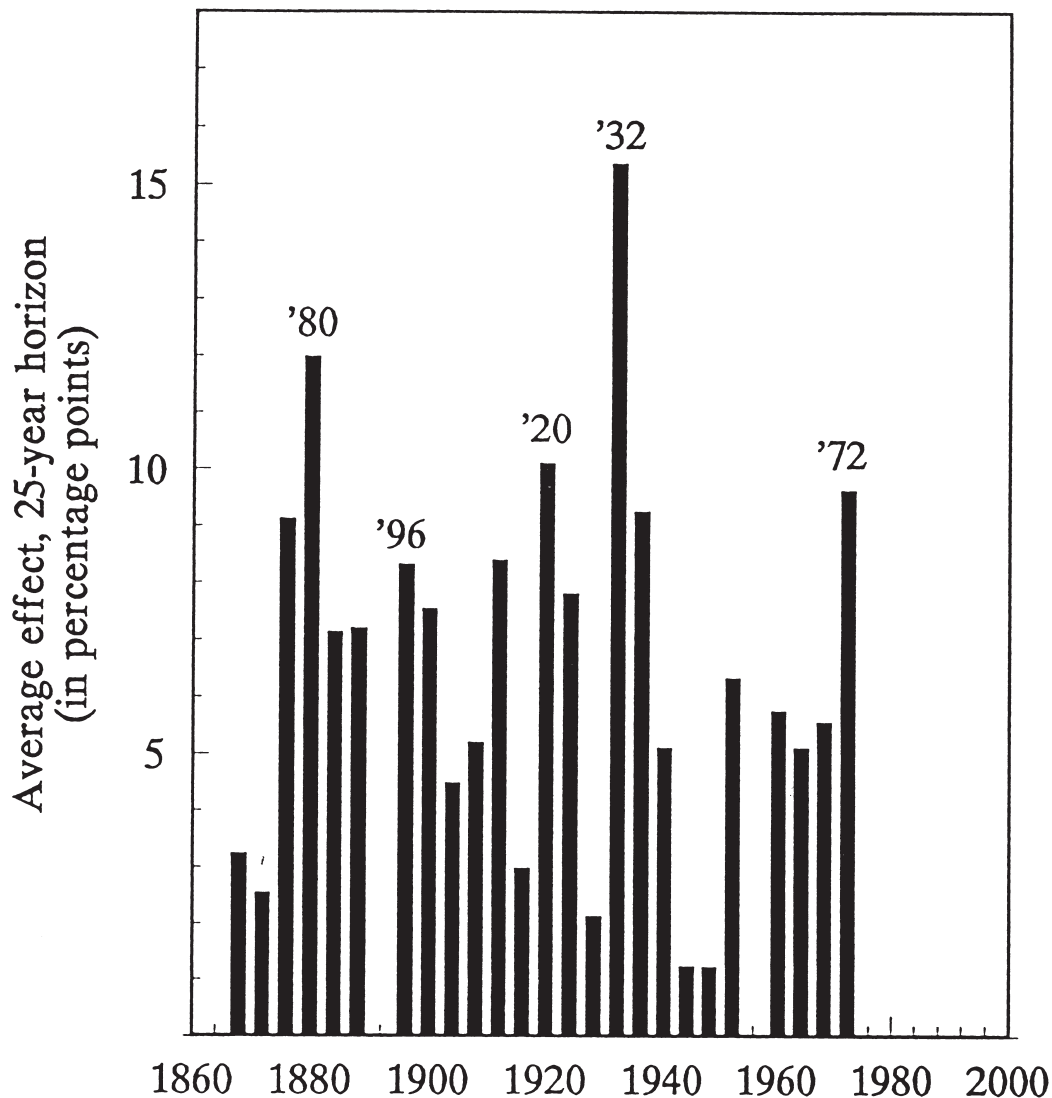


Fig. 8. Critical elections, 1868–1972

The estimates of the long-term impact of each election represented in Fig. 8 conform in some respects to expectations derived from the scholarly literature on critical elections. Most obviously, the election of 1932 stands out as the most influential single election of the entire 100-year period, with an average impact over a quarter-century of more than 15 percentage points. This was a critical election by any reasonable standard, and the calculation on which Fig. 8 is based nicely captures that fact.

In some other respects, however, the results presented in Fig. 8 must be regarded as strongly counterintuitive. For one thing, the distribution of long-term effects seems a good deal more diverse than one would expect from a scholarly literature so strongly fixated on the electoral significance of a handful of critical elections. Rather than consisting of a few great peaks separated by broad plateaus reflecting long periods of political stasis, the distribution of long-term effects in Fig. 8 reflects a complex intermixture of large, medium and small effects.¹⁵

What is more, the long-term importance attached to specific presidential elections in Fig. 8 is in several cases quite out of keeping with the estimates of previous political observers. A

sense of the nature and bases of these discrepancies may be provided by considering in some detail two specific elections. One of these, the election of 1896, has been considered “one of the decisive elections in American history” by Schattschneider (1960, 76) and many subsequent analysts. The other, the election of 1880, has not figured at all in the literature on critical elections, but appears in Fig. 8 as the second most important election of the century following the Civil War.

The voting pattern of 1896 was unusual in being marked by a set of sub-national shocks more than twice as large in magnitude as those observed on average in the other 32 elections examined here. These shocks reflect the regional reorientation of the party system precipitated by the Democrats’ nomination of William Jennings Bryan on a Populist platform, which drove much of the industrial Northeast and Midwest strongly into the Republican camp. Thus, in an immediate sense, the election of 1896 marked an important shift in the existing party system.¹⁶ However, when we consider the combined effect of national and sub-national forces, the election of 1896 appears to have had a good deal less immediate impact than the elections of 1912, 1932, or 1972, which produced less sub-national reshuffling but much larger national shifts;¹⁷ it ranks in immediate impact with the elections of 1920, 1928, 1936, 1952, and 1964.

This short-term calculation alone seems to shed some doubt upon the conventional classification of 1896 as a critical election. However, the longer-term calculation reflected in Fig. 8 sheds even more doubt upon that classification by indicating that the electoral pattern established in 1896 was much less durable than previous scholarship has suggested, despite the persistence of the Republican majority—with one eight-year interruption—for another generation. According to the calculations presented in Table 1, the electoral impetus of 1896 was diminished by half within four years; the state-by-state voting pattern in 1900 reflected the divisions of 1888 (with a coefficient of 0.504) as much or more than those of 1896 (with a coefficient of 0.471). Moreover, the direct carryover of the 1896 voting pattern was actually negative in 1904 (with a coefficient of -0.446), and negligible in 1908 (with a coefficient of 0.028). Thus, if we focus not only on the extent to which the electoral pattern of 1896 was discontinuous with those of the immediate past, but also on the extent to which the distinctive electoral forces that emerged in 1896 persisted into the future, it seems difficult to sustain Schattschneider’s (1960, 76) characterization of this as “one of the decisive elections in American history.”

By contrast, the election of 1880 appears in Fig. 8 as the second most significant election of the entire 100-year period, despite its virtual invisibility in the scholarly literature. The immediate impact of the election of 1880 amounted to 9.3 percentage points—about half the immediate impact of the election of 1896, and a third that of 1932. This immediate impact was roughly evenly divided between a national shift toward the Republicans (counteracting the Democratic tide of 1876) and a reshuffling of sub-national voting patterns reflecting the end of Reconstruction. For example, Louisiana and South Carolina reported Republican majorities in 1872 and 1876, but reverted to Democratic control as soon as federal troops were withdrawn in 1877, and supplied Democratic popular vote margins of 25 and 31 percentage points, respectively, in 1880. In an important sense, this was not a *new* partisan alignment, but a reconstitution of the *status quo ante bellum*.¹⁸

What made the election of 1880 so significant, at least by the calculations summarized in Fig. 8, was not its short-run impact but the persistence of the renewed partisan cleavages it reflected. Having returned to the Democratic fold in 1880, both Louisiana and South Carolina—and most of the rest of the South—remained there for 80 years. Moreover, even outside the South, the period of stable partisan competition following the settlement of 1876 perpetuated

the electoral pattern established in 1880 for the next three decades, despite the interventions of populism, depression, and a colonial war. Thus, for example, while the impact of the election of 1896 had declined by my calculations from eight percentage points in 1900 to six by 1908, the impact of the election of 1880 had nearly doubled from seven percentage points in 1884 to almost 14 percentage points in 1908.

It is worth noting that the electoral pattern of 1880 persisted despite the apparent absence of any significant ‘realigning issue.’ According to one historian (Hicks, 1949, 162),

both parties were completely bankrupt. The issues that divided them were historical merely.... The platforms of the two parties in 1880 revealed few real differences of opinion as to policies and no real awareness of the problems that confronted the nation. Neither Democrats nor Republicans seemed to sense the significance of the vast transformation that was coming over business, nor the critical nature of the relationship between labor and capital, nor even the necessity of doing something definite about civil service reform, the money problem, and the tariff. The Republican Party existed to oppose the Democratic Party; the Democratic Party existed to oppose the Republican Party.... With issues lacking, the campaign turned on personalities.

Here, clearly, was an election bearing few of the hallmarks of the ideal-typical critical election envisioned by political scientists and historians. Nevertheless, the distinct electoral pattern established in 1880 persisted longer and more powerfully than that of all but one of the 32 other presidential elections examined here. That fact is a testament to the intensely organized partisan struggle of the Gilded Age, but also to the limitations of a theoretical perspective that strains to find in the complex historical record of partisan struggles a stately procession of more or less static issue-based party alignments.

The Dynamics of Party Competition

One of the most striking features of the time series of presidential election outcomes displayed in Fig. 1 is that the Republican popular vote margin never strays very far or very long from the competitive equilibrium represented by an even partisan division of the vote. There are few instances of 20-point vote margins, and no instances of 30-point vote margins, in this 130-year period.¹⁹ Only once has either party maintained even a 10-point vote margin for three successive elections, and this impressive 8-year run (by the Republicans from 1920 to 1928) was immediately followed by the Democrats’ most impressive 8-year run (from 1932 to 1940).

In their piece ‘On the Existence of Forces Restoring Party Competition’ Stokes and Iversen (1962, 159–160) suggested a variety of possible explanations for this regularity:

Restoring forces have been seen in such diverse factors as the tendency of interest groups to remember the favors an administration has dispensed less than the favors it has not; the ability of the party out of power to make more flexible and extravagant promises of future benefit whereas the party in power is limited by what it can actually deliver; the greater motivational strength of the public’s negative response to an administration’s mistakes than of its positive response to an administration’s successes; the liability of the party in power to disastrous splits as its majority grows and its sense of electoral pressure lessens; movements of the business cycle, generating new support for the opposition party in periods of economic decline; the alternating moods of liberalism and conservatism that have marked our national temper; and a vigorous popular belief in rotation in office, which turns the peccadilloes of a party long in power into convincing evidence that the time for a change has arrived.

Stokes and Iversen (1962) demonstrated the reality of ‘restoring forces’ by positing as an alternative a non-parametric ‘random walk’ model in which the partisan division of the presidential vote could move in either direction with equal probability in each election, and showing that the persistent competitiveness of observed election outcomes was extremely unlikely given such a model. They also noted in passing (1962, footnote 7) that “if the division of the vote at one presidential election is correlated with the *change* of the vote from that election to the next, a negative correlation of $-.55$ is obtained. In other words, the greater a party’s share of the vote at one election, the greater is its share likely to be reduced at the next.”

My own analysis of the dynamics of party competition in presidential elections builds upon this latter result, using the observed change in the Republican vote margin in each election year as the dependent variable in a regression with vote margins in the previous two elections as explanatory variables. If equilibrating forces are at work, we should expect previous vote margins to have a negative impact on current changes in the vote margin, producing Democratic shifts following Republican victories and Republican shifts following Democratic victories. The parameter estimates reported in Table 2 clearly conform to this expectation, with each percentage point of the winning party’s vote margin producing direct negative effects of about half a percentage point in each of the two subsequent elections.²⁰

The second and third columns of Table 2 present comparable parameter estimates separately for the periods from 1868 through 1928 and from 1932 through 1996. The separate parameter estimates for the two periods are virtually identical, suggesting that the equilibrating forces explored by Stokes and Iversen have persisted essentially unchanged through several generations of American partisan struggles.²¹ Neither the replacement of traditional patronage-based party machines with modern media campaigns nor the vast expansion of the scope and activities of the federal government in the period covered by this analysis seems to have produced any significant alteration in the appetite or ability of losing politicians to reclaim the reigns of government through electoral competition.

The impact of the equilibrating forces measured in Table 2 is illustrated in Fig. 9, which traces the implied dynamic response of the political system to a typical electoral shock in each of the 60-year periods covered by my analysis. Here, too, the similarity of the two distinct sets of estimates is evident. In each period, half of a typical gain (or loss) of ten to twelve percentage points in the Republican vote margin is likely to persist four years later. But in the next two elections after that, the net effect is reversed, with Democrats actually doing noticeably *better* than they would have in the absence of the original Republican gain (or vice

Table 2. Competitive Equilibration. Parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses) from ordinary regression analyses of changes in presidential vote margins (in percentage points) on previous margins

	1868–1996	1868–1928	1932–1996
Margin _{t-4}	–0.474 (0.156)	–0.438 (0.234)	–0.561 (0.222)
Margin _{t-8}	–0.525 (0.157)	–0.602 (0.261)	–0.496 (0.206)
Intercept	2.59 (1.98)	5.59 (2.86)	–0.10 (2.94)
adjusted R ²	0.47	0.42	0.51
std error of reg	10.90	9.88	12.00
Durbin-Watson	1.97	1.97	1.60
N	33	16	17

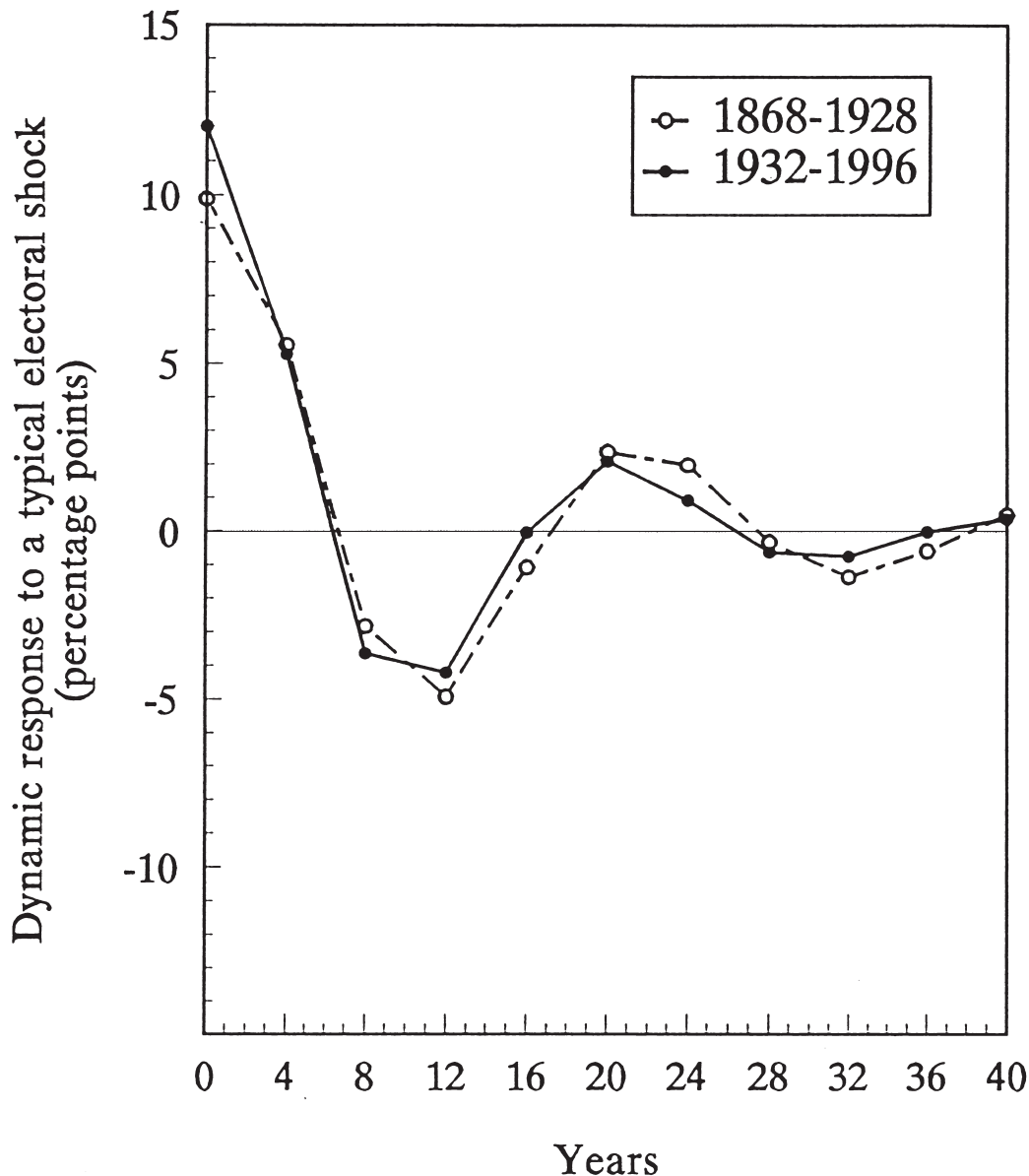


Fig. 9. Electoral equilibration

versa). This reverberation produces its own correspondingly smaller reverberation another decade later, and so on, as the original electoral shock is gradually dissipated.

Of course, these long-term equilibrating movements would not be directly observable in any actual sequence of election outcomes, since each election overlays new shocks on the dissipating electoral forces inherited from the past. Nevertheless, the pattern of equilibration identified by Stokes and Iversen accounts for the marked tendency of the electoral system to produce fairly regular alterations between Republican and Democratic possession of the White House—and thus, arguably, for the remarkable persistence of the two-party system itself through the last thirteen decades of American political history.

Electoral Volatility

Stokes's studies of electoral politics (Stokes *et al.*, 1958; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Stokes, 1962; Stokes and Iversen, 1962; Stokes, 1966; Butler and Stokes, 1969) are marked by an intense recurring interest in the balance and interplay of long-term and short-term political forces. As he put it in one of those pieces (Stokes, 1962, 689–690),

By measuring a limited set of political orientations (among which party loyalty is preeminently important) we are able to say with increasing confidence what the behavior of the American electorate would be in any given election if the vote were to express only the influence of these basic dispositions. But the election returns reflect, too, the public's reaction to more recent and transitory influences (think for the moment of candidate personality) that deflect the vote from what it would have been had these short-term factors not intruded on the nation's decision. Therefore, any national election can be thought of as an interplay of basic dispositions and short-run influences. Yet the freedom of these 'disturbing' influences to modify the effects of long-term dispositions is not well understood. Their capacity to do so is not of trivial importance; there have been few presidential elections in a hundred years that we could not imagine having gone to the loser, had the right combination of short-term factors appeared in time. And yet each election is not a fresh toss of the coin; like all good prejudices, the electorate's basic dispositions have a tremendous capacity to keep people behaving in accustomed ways. The freedom of short-run influences to deflect the vote has an obvious bearing on how well long-standing party loyalties are able to explain a total election outcome. Plainly, a closer estimate of the ease with which short-term electoral tides may run to one party or the other would tell a good deal about the importance of party identification in a predictive theory of elections.

Stokes treated the distinction between long-term and short-term forces both as an organizing framework for survey-based research on the components of individual vote choices (Stokes *et al.*, 1958; Stokes, 1966) and as an aggregate-level property of electoral systems. In "Party Loyalty and the Likelihood of Deviating Elections" (Stokes, 1962), he used the observed distribution of presidential election outcomes around their long-term average (calculated alternatively from 1892 through 1928 and from 1892 through 1960) to estimate the probability of what Campbell *et al.* (1960, 531–538) had referred to as a 'deviating' election.

Subsequent analysts who have argued that the long-term stabilizing force of party identification has declined substantially since the 1950s have seemed to assume as a matter of course that the magnitude of short-term forces has increased concomitantly, driven by the reactions of large numbers of unanchored 'independent' voters to candidate images and performance. For example, Wattenberg (1991, 21) argued that 'the focus of the campaign' has turned "from long-term to short-term issues. Being less tied to the patterns of the past, the American electorate is far more volatile compared to three decades ago, and has grown accustomed to looking directly at the candidates through the mass media."

This perception of increased volatility was presumably fueled by the evident variability of presidential election outcomes since the 1950s, with substantial popular vote landslides won by both parties (in 1964, 1972, and 1984) and only one twelve-year stretch of uninterrupted control of the White House by either party (from 1981 through 1993). But how does that level of volatility compare with the level observed at other periods in American electoral history? Fig. 10 displays the time trend of volatility in presidential elections over the entire period of

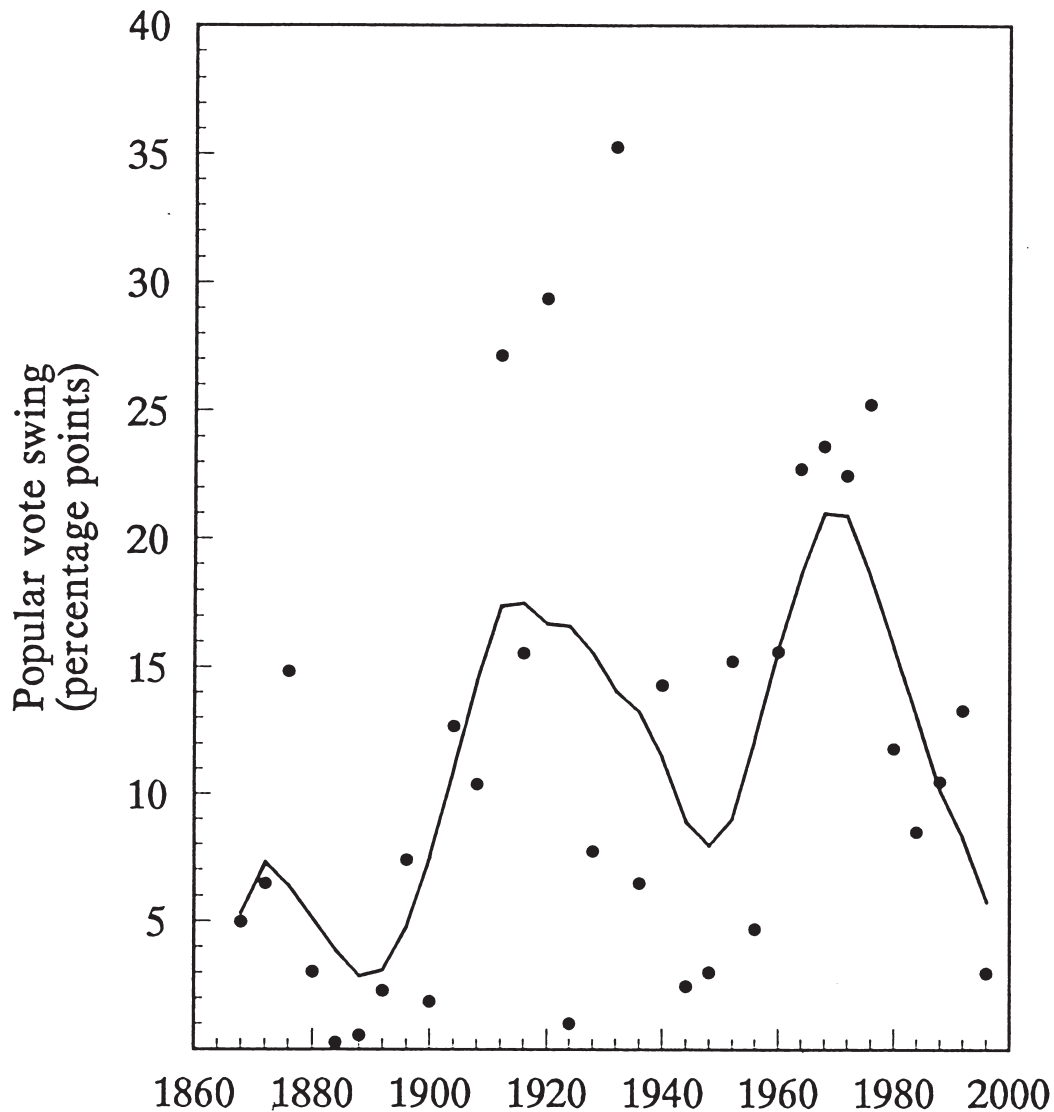


Fig. 10. Electoral volatility, 1868–1996

my analysis, as measured simply by the magnitude of the national popular vote swing in each election—the absolute values of the changes in vote margin analyzed in Table 2.

Fig. 10 shows two clear peaks in the volatility of presidential election outcomes. One of these, of about twenty years' duration, encompasses the break-up of the prevailing Republican majority in 1912, its reinstitution in 1920, and its replacement by the New Deal majority in 1932; the second, somewhat shorter and sharper, reflects the electoral turbulence of the 1960s and '70s, including the Goldwater and McGovern debacles in 1964 and 1972. This second peak of electoral volatility seems to confirm the widespread perception that presidential elections in the television age have become significantly more volatile than they used to be.

Unfortunately, any such simple generalization must collapse in the face of the subsequent time trend of electoral volatility in Fig. 10. Whereas the presidential elections of the 1960s and '70s were highly volatile by historical standards, the five most recent presidential elections have evidenced levels of volatility *below* the long-run historical average. It is certainly not

true now, as it would have been in the 1970s, that “the American electorate is far more volatile compared to three decades ago” (Wattenberg, 1991, 21). It would seem to follow that any plausible explanation for the volatility of the 1960s and ’70s must be based upon specific features of that historical period rather than secular technological or other trends.

Fig. 11 displays an alternative historical record of volatility based upon residual popular vote swings from the analysis in Table 2. This more sophisticated measure reflects the magnitude of the vote swing in each election net of the reequilibrating forces carrying over from previous elections. Thus, it probably provides a better estimate of the extent to which the actual election outcome deviated from the ‘expected’ outcome in Stokes’s sense.

Not surprisingly, the residual vote swings shown in Fig. 11 tend to be considerably smaller in magnitude than the total vote swings shown in Fig. 10. The contrasts in volatility between historical peaks and troughs are also less pronounced. However, the basic pattern in Fig. 10 is essentially replicated in Fig. 11.²² The historically low volatility of the last two decades of

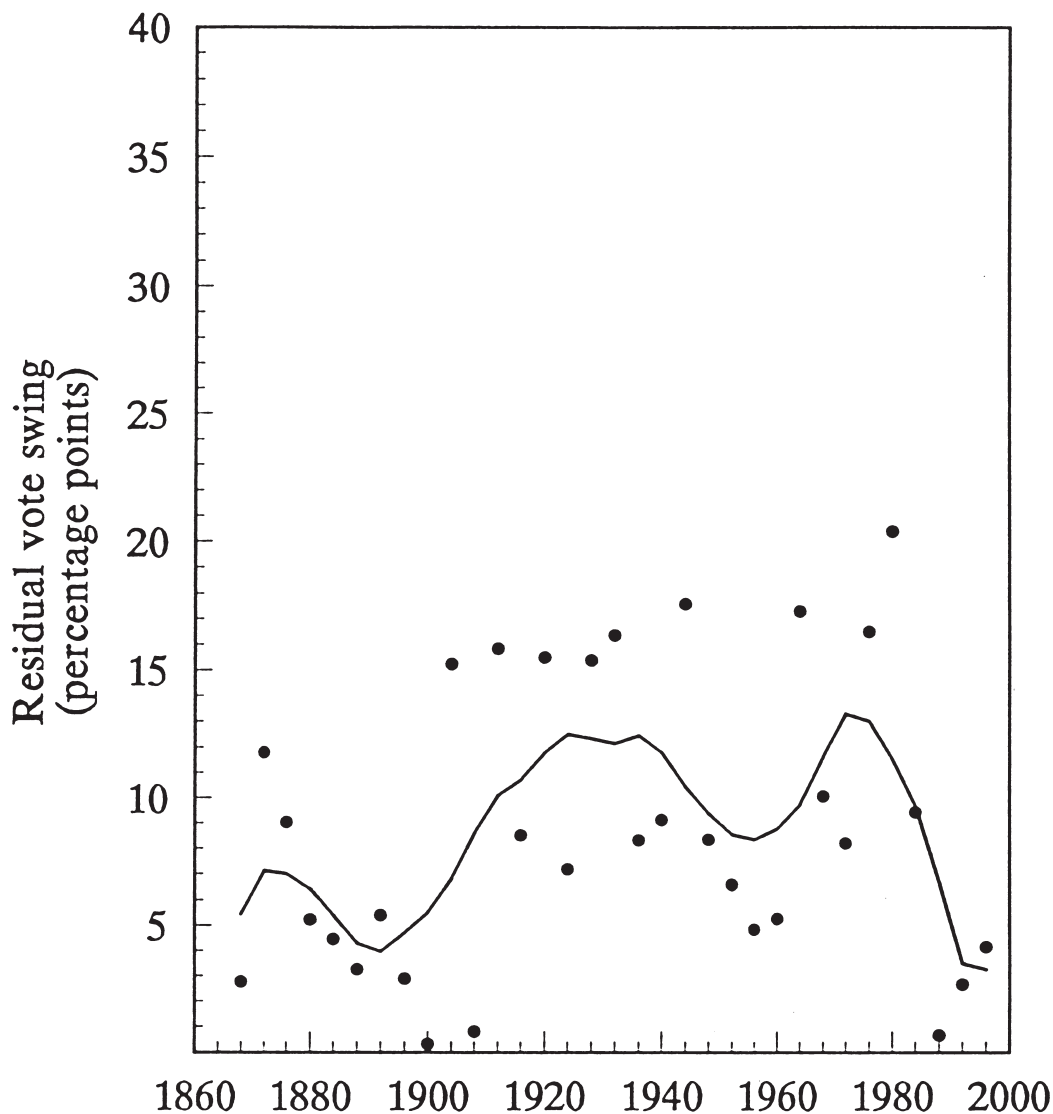


Fig. 11. Residual volatility, 1868–1996

the 19th century and the periods of high volatility from 1912 through 1932 and in the 1960s and '70s appear clearly in Fig. 11, just as they do in Fig. 10. The return to historically low levels of volatility in recent presidential elections also appears clearly in Fig. 11, reinforcing the conclusion that the high volatility of the 1960s and '70s was a temporary phenomenon rather than a sea change in the nature of American electoral politics.

Electoral Change in Historical Perspective

Three decades ago, Stokes (1967, 183) worried that “[t]he very richness of contemporary American survey data poses the danger that conclusions of unwarranted generality will be drawn from the evidence at hand.” That worry seems amply justified by the results reported here, but in a way that Stokes might have found surprising. Rather than mistaking contemporary American political conditions for eternal regularities—as some critics of *The American Voter* and Stokes himself seem to have feared—observers have, in my view, overstated the particularity of contemporary political conditions while overlooking important elements of continuity with previous eras of American electoral history.

Despite the widespread belief among political scientists that the American electoral system is more volatile and unconstrained by partisan loyalties than ever before, systematic analysis of election returns suggests just the opposite: the unusual political turmoil of the 1960s and '70s has given way to a period of partisan stability and predictability unmatched since the end of the 19th century.

No doubt, every generation is tempted to imagine itself unique, and one of the most important uses of history is to dispel the illusion that we live in an era of unprecedented this or that. The historical questions addressed by Stokes in the works I have revisited here continue to serve that purpose very well, providing a bracing perspective on the nature of continuity and change in the American electoral system.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the Donald Stokes memorial panel, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 1997. I am grateful to Princeton University and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for generous financial support for the research reported here, and to Daniel Carpenter, John Zaller, and anonymous referees for helpful reactions to the original version.
2. I have attempted elsewhere (Bartels, 1997) to provide a more detailed assessment of the aims and significance of the whole corpus of Stokes's work on electoral politics.
3. Stokes and Iversen (1962) presented the first time series of national congressional vote percentages going back to the Civil War, a forerunner of the ambitious historical data collection carried out under the auspices of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.
4. Stokes's (1962) use of a normal error model and Stokes and Iversen's (1962) use of a random walk model were both, to the best of my knowledge, unprecedented in political science. Later, Stokes devoted considerable scholarly energy to addressing methodological problems arising in analyses of aggregated data (Stokes, 1969) and developing and applying a 'variance components' model for what are now commonly referred to as hierarchical data (Stokes, 1965, 1967).
5. The data are taken from Congressional Quarterly (1995), updated with 1996 returns from *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*. These data are derived from Scammon and McGillivray (1994), but differ in minor respects from those compiled by Robinson (1934) and Petersen (1963).
6. Including third-party voters in the denominator, as I do, implicitly assumes that they would divide their support evenly between the two major candidates if forced to choose between them; excluding third-party voters implicitly assumes that they would divide their support in the same proportions as

those who actually voted for the two major candidates. Both these assumptions are surely false, but the first is probably closer to the truth than the second, since the major party that loses more of its usual supporters to a strong third-party challenge is likely to lose the election, as the Republicans did in 1912 and 1992. Most of Theodore Roosevelt's supporters in 1912 were surely Republicans, while polling data from 1992 suggest that Ross Perot drew as much or more from George Bush as from Bill Clinton.

7. For example, even with Ross Perot in both the 1992 and 1996 races, the correlation between the total vote shares for third-party and independent candidates in those two elections was only 0.71, while the corresponding correlation between Republican vote margins in 1992 and 1996 was 0.88. Defections from the two-party system in 1996 were also correlated with previous defections in 1980 (0.63), 1968 (–0.63), 1924 (0.59), and 1912 (0.50). However, these correlations mostly reflect the relative appeal of third-party candidates in the South; the corresponding correlations for non-southern states only are 0.23, –0.25, 0.35, and 0.04.
8. The moving averages shown in this and subsequent figures were generated by locally weighted regressions of election outcomes on time using the *ksm lowess* procedure in the Stata software package. Beck and Jackman (1998) provide an introduction to locally weighted regression and related techniques. All of my locally weighted regressions employ bandwidths of 0.3, meaning that 40 years' worth of data are used to calculate the summary value at each point, with temporally proximate observations receiving more weight than those more distant in time.
9. Actually, because lagged election outcomes appear as explanatory variables in Table 1, each state appears in the regressions twelve years after it entered (or, in the case of the former Confederate states following the Civil War, reentered) the electorate. Thus, the number of observations ranges from 20 in 1868 to 51 (including the District of Columbia) since 1976.
10. The sum of the three lagged partisan effects in a given election year is often estimated more precisely than the separate effects themselves. This fact reflects the positive correlations among the three separate measures of past election outcomes, which make it harder to disentangle their separate effects but easier to measure their joint effect.
11. The calculations presented in Fig. 3 – and in Fig. 7 below – are based on regression analyses paralleling those reported in Table 1, but omitting data from the eleven former Confederate states.
12. In principle, the indirect effects of any given election can persist indefinitely or even increase over time. In practice, given the magnitudes of the estimated continuity coefficients in Table 1, the effects tend to decline fairly monotonically, so that the impact of each election outcome gradually fades with the passage of time.
13. Thus, the seven terms in each average are; $\omega_t = (\alpha_t^2 + \sigma_t^2)^{1/2}$, $\omega_{t+1} = \beta_{1t+1}\omega_t$, $\omega_{t+2} = \beta_{1t+2}\omega_{t+1} + \beta_{2t+2}\omega_t$, $\omega_{t+3} = \beta_{1t+3}\omega_{t+2} + \beta_{2t+3}\omega_{t+1} + \beta_{3t+3}\omega_t$, $\omega_{t+4} = \beta_{1t+4}\omega_{t+3} + \beta_{2t+4}\omega_{t+2} + \beta_{3t+4}\omega_{t+1} + \beta_{4t+4}\omega_t$, $\omega_{t+5} = \beta_{1t+5}\omega_{t+4} + \beta_{2t+5}\omega_{t+3} + \beta_{3t+5}\omega_{t+2} + \beta_{4t+5}\omega_{t+1} + \beta_{5t+5}\omega_t$, $\omega_{t+6} = \beta_{1t+6}\omega_{t+5} + \beta_{2t+6}\omega_{t+4} + \beta_{3t+6}\omega_{t+3} + \beta_{4t+6}\omega_{t+2} + \beta_{5t+6}\omega_{t+1} + \beta_{6t+6}\omega_t$.
14. These calculations of long-term effects may be usefully contrasted with the 'real time' approach to the study of political realignments developed by Cavanagh (1997). Cavanagh's calculations using county-level election returns grouped by regions are consistent with mine in suggesting that "the stability of the presidential alignment during the contemporary era from 1980–96 has attained *the highest level in the history of the American party system*" (Cavanagh, 1997, 7; emphasis in original), but his classification of realigning elections based solely on breaks from the recent past—without reference to their subsequent durability—produces results that look more like Sundquist's (1983) than like those presented here.
15. In addition to flying in the face of much of the classic literature on 'critical elections,' these results stand in marked contrast to the statistical results reported by Nardulli (1995, Fig. 1) which display clear peaks in 1896 and 1932 and lesser peaks in 1928 and 1960. However, these discrepancies may reflect the fact that Nardulli's (1994, 1995) analysis is based on an interrupted time-series analysis that "requires the analyst to specify the point at which major, enduring interruptions in long-term electoral trends (critical elections) are hypothesized to begin, as well as the form of those interruptions" (Nardulli, 1995, 11), whereas the approach adopted here incorporates no theoretical preconceptions regarding the timing or nature of critical elections.
16. This discontinuity is perhaps best captured by the simple correlation across states between the Republican vote margins in 1892 and 1896: 0.43. The corresponding correlations between current and immediately preceding vote margins from 1880 through 1892 ranged from 0.91 to 0.94, while those

from 1900 through 1924 ranged from 0.80 to 0.93. In the whole data series analyzed here, the discontinuity apparent in 1896 was only exceeded in 1960 (0.33), 1964 (0.12), and 1976 (0.02). However, even this discontinuity is somewhat more complicated than it appears at first sight; the more detailed regression analysis reported in Table 1 shows that the pattern of vote margins in 1896 combined a strong *negative* carryover from 1892 (-0.825) with an even stronger *positive* carryover directly from 1888 (2.573).

17. Despite the reality of widespread Republican gains in the nation's urban industrial areas in 1896, the Republican share of the total popular vote only increased by eight percentage points (from 43 percent in 1892 to 51 percent in 1896), while the Democratic share remained almost unchanged.
18. For example, the correlation between the Republican vote margins in 1880 and 1856—for the thirty states that participated in both elections—was 0.84. This correlation over a quarter-century exceeds most of the correlations between adjacent elections in the whole period covered by my analysis!
19. Of course, an even longer time horizon would have included the suspension of partisan competition at the presidential level during the Era of Good Feeling following the War of 1812.
20. Allowing for serial correlation in the residuals from this regression would leave the results virtually unchanged; the estimated serial correlation is 0.03 with a standard error of 0.18. The results are equally impervious to adding the vote margin 12 years earlier as an additional explanatory variable (the resulting coefficient is 0.015 with a standard error of 0.181) or adding the number of consecutive years the incumbent party has been in office (the resulting coefficient is -0.111 with a standard error of 0.243).
21. The estimated serial correlations of the stochastic disturbances are -0.22 (with a standard error of 0.26) in the pre-New Deal period and 0.10 (with a standard error of 0.22) in the post-New Deal period. Adjusting the analysis to allow for these serial correlations would change the estimated lagged effects to -0.309 (0.219) and -0.719 (0.257) in the pre-New Deal period and -0.635 (0.224) and -0.491 (0.211) in the post-New Deal period. The dynamics for each period implied by these estimates are quite similar to those shown in Fig. 9.
22. The most notable difference between the patterns in Fig. 10 and Fig. 11 is that the periods of high electoral volatility appear somewhat later and last somewhat longer in Fig. 11. Thus, the first major period of high volatility in Fig. 11 encompasses much of the early New Deal period, as the Democratic majority established in 1932 withstood for some time the usual pattern of competitive erosion; and the second major period of high volatility in the 1960s and '70s is also slightly later and longer, since the Republican gains in 1968 and 1972 are counted in the calculations underlying Fig. 11 as partly predictable reequilibrations following the Democratic landslide of 1964.

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