Observing the State of the Parties in Election Results: The 2008 Election

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Abstract

Democrats increased their majorities in both houses of Congress, won governorships, and took control of even more state legislatures in the 2008 election. Those results, in conjunction with the election of Barak Obama, gave some a reason to claim that the election was a watershed event. This paper looks at the central tendencies and dynamics of the 2008 election for evidence of its "normality." The assessment assumes that as these features seem typical of recent elections (in which the Republicans prospered), it is unlikely that 2008 was something distinctive but more likely that we observed another house-cleaning of "failed" incumbents. The evidence that follows indicates that 2008 was a standard anti-incumbent election, without obvious implications for the state of the parties or the party system. Four aspects of the electoral dynamics of the party system support this conclusion: turnout levels, the role of party affiliation, the stability in the party loyalties of groups that define the contemporary party coalitions, and the issue concerns that shaped the vote.

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Election results are the first measure of the state of the parties in all electoral party systems. There are many examples of the commentariat's (and some academic) penchant for finding the seeds of a party system transformation in an election outcome (see Crotty, 2005). Richard Nixon's win in 1968 produced ruminations about an emerging Republican majority. Carter's win in several southern states, on his way to victory in 1976, generated conclusions about the re-emergence of the New Deal party coalitions. Reagan's win and the GOP capture of a majority in the Senate in the 1980 election encouraged commentators and optimistic Republicans to see a 218 majority in the House in 1982 (it was an unofficial chant for some at the NRCC during 1981). Bush's win in 1988 led to "insights" about an electoral college "lock" that would seriously handicapped Democratic hopes to win the presidency for years into the future. The GOP sweep in 1994 produced confident assertions (and rebuttals) about the final emergence of the new Republican majority. Most recently, Barak Obama's win, the surge in Democratic victories across the nation, and drops in the Republican vote in some high-visibility groups encouraged confident Democratic commentary about the "declining Republican base" (Balz 2009).

I submit that we should be cautious about the commentariat's tendency to extrapolate from electoral outcomes to the state of the parties. It is easy to understand our focus on election results.[1] Which party won and by how much is particularly salient in the United States –though not only the United States – because our office-seeking party system, compared to most others, downplays ideology, programs, and organizational structure in favor of electoral success. Many reasons for the electoral emphasis have been proposed but the structure of the presidential election has helped to forge two diverse parties where the mass base of supporters and would-be office-holders share a party allegiance with diverse and often conflicting beliefs, perceptions, and programmatic intentions. Sometimes winning power seems to be the only thing on which office-

[1] A certain tolerance needs to be maintained since the academic concept of a "critical election" has legitimized related popular commentary.

holders of the winning party share a viewpoint. Examples of this state of affairs are common. The struggle among the majority Democrats to construct a different health care system in the United States is a handy current example and virtually identical re-play (so far) of events in the first years of the Clinton presidency, where an inability of the majority Democrats to agree on a bill doomed a similar proposal to change central features of the U.S. health care system.

But to whatever we might attribute the almost total office-seeking focus of American parties; the prominence of election outcomes in evaluating their condition is almost indisputable. Office-holders view it very pragmatically (as one said: "You can't do anything if you don't win") and given that policies and programs change with government control and that we believe (with occasional uncertainty) that election outcomes register the electorate's state of mind (Stimson 1999), closely examining election outcomes for what they portend for the future of party control and policy makes substantive. The literature on realignments, party system eras, and the society's "agenda" is partly dependent on a standard set of election outcomes. So, for academics, looking for changes in the "standard set" justifies inspecting an election outcome and the 2008 election, like previous ones, has been examined for what it might indicate about a change in the standard outcomes.

Some observers have seen a break from the previous equilibrium in the 2008 results and certainly the aggregate 2008 election outcome, compared to the results of 2004, seems significant. Following the 2004 election, Democrats were a minority in the House and Senate, had governors in only 22 states, and controlled fewer state legislatures than the GOP. All this was reversed after the 2008 election. A Democrat was President, Democrats enjoyed commanding majorities in both houses of Congress, controlled a majority of both house in the state legislatures, and held almost 3/5s of the governorships. Subsequent commentary about a "declining Republican base" only made the defeat of McCain and these across-the-board Republican defeats seem more dramatic and, perhaps,

marked the 2008 election as a watershed moment for the party balance that had been established in the 1980s.

Table 1: A Democratic Surge in 2008

	Election results for:		
	2004	2006	2008
Presidency	R	R	D
Democrats in the House	202	233	257
Democrats in the Senate	44	51 (2)*	59 (2)*
Democratic Governors	22	28	28
State legislatures controlled by:			
Democrats	19	22	27
Republicans	20	15	14
Split control	10	12	8

*Note: The totals include two independents (Lieberman and Sanders) who caucus with the Democrats.

The 2006 outcomes take some of the drama out of the 2004-2008 comparison since both houses of Congress and a majority of governors fell into the hands of the Democrats in 2006. Still, the Democrats increased their majorities in both houses of Congress in the 2008 election and took control of even more state legislatures. That trend, in conjunction with a five point swing in the presidential vote and the election of Barak Obama, gave the 2008 election a plausible claim to being a watershed event. But was 2008 more than a lost election, a response to an election environment that with a strong pro-Democratic short-term force – economic difficulties, an ineffective response to a natural calamity, political scandals, unpopular military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan – and how can you tell?

This paper looks at the central tendencies and dynamics of the 2008 election for evidence of its "normality." The assessment assumes that as they seem typical of recent elections in which the Republicans have prospered, it is less likely that 2008 was a distinctive event for the party system but, rather, another house-cleaning of "failed" incumbents. The

evidence indicates that 2008 was a standard anti-incumbent election, without obvious implications for the future. Four aspects of the electoral dynamics of the party system support this conclusion: turnout levels, the role of party affiliation, the stability in the party loyalties of groups that define the contemporary party coalitions, and the issue concerns that shaped the vote.

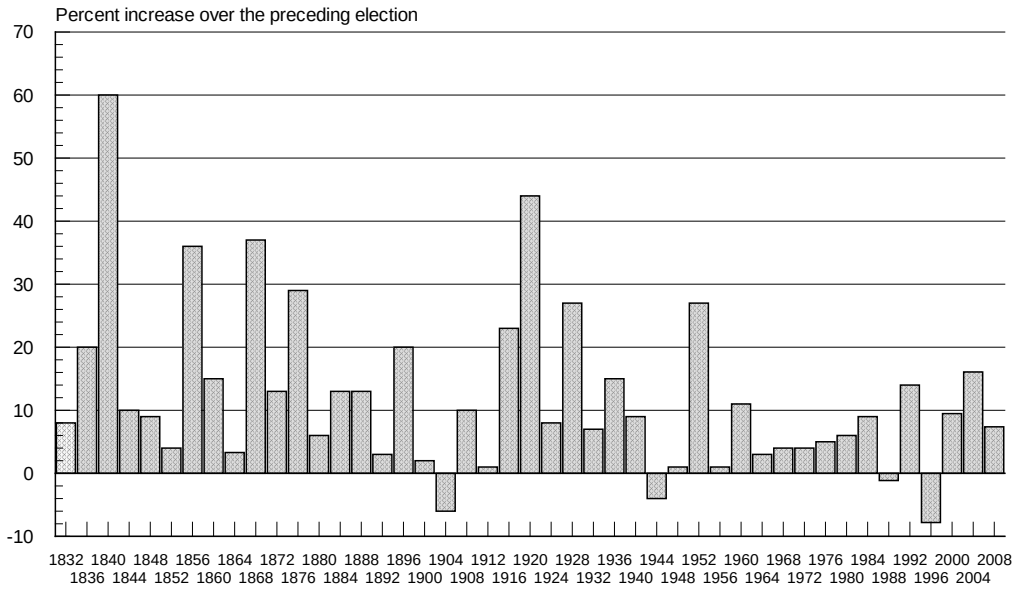
Turnout in 2008: Electoral Mobilization and Party System Change?

While American turnout rates are low, the history of American Presidential elections through 2008 is one of almost continuous growth in the size of the electorate. There are only four instances of decline in the absolute size of the voting population from one election to the next; the median change is an *increase* of just under 8 percent. Originally, there seemed to be little question about the importance of this growth in fueling party realignments. Key (1955), Schattschneider (1960), and Burnham (1970) included a surge in voter participation on their list of the elements that defined realignments, while Eldersveld (1949), Lubell (1952), and Campbell, et. al. (1960), Andersen (1979), Wanat (1979), Petrocik (1981), Wanat and Burke (1982), and Campbell (1985) have all documented a strong link between the rise of the New Deal and the partisan mobilization of new cohorts and previous nonparticipants. Figure 1, which graphs changes in the total size of the electorate for all 45 pairs of presidential elections between 1828 and 2008, illustrates the link between changes in mobilization rates and commonly acknowledged realignments.[2] Explosive growth (exceeding 20 percent) marked eleven pres-

[2] A line above the zero point indicates an increase over the preceding election in the number of votes cast: the longer the line the greater the percentages change. Lines extending down indicate a decrease in the number of votes cast compared to the preceding presidential contest. The total number of votes cast for president from one election to the next has declined only four times in 160 years, and in one of those instances the country was at war. The change in turnout between 1860 and 1864 is calculated with the Confederate states removed in 1860 and with Kansas, Nevada, and West Virginia removed in 1864. Without this adjustment, there is a substantial turnout decline between 1860 and 1864 that is an artifact of the difficulty that many (especially soldiers) encountered when trying to vote during the Civil War.

idential contests. Seven of the eleven spikes in the figure coincided with major realignments. Three occurred during the period from 1828 through 1840 - the years of the formation of the Jacksonian Second Party System; two occurred between 1856 and 1872, the birth years of the Third Party System; one was in 1896, a surge which established the dominance of the Republicans; and the seventh occurred in 1928, just as the New Deal era was being created.[5] The connection between turnout changes and party system eras is not peculiar to the United States (Przeworski 1975, Przeworski and Sprague 1986).

Figure 1: Electoral Mobilization and Demobilization
The United States: 1832 - 2008



The logic of this mobilization-realignment correlation is generally agreed upon: A party system with a large number of chronic nonvoters (the United States) is more susceptible to change through mobilization, whether the mobilization occurs through extending the franchise or the "sudden" turnout of chronic nonparticipants because a surge incorporate groups whose interests were not well represented by the existing parties (Rokkan 1970: chapter 7; Schattschneider 1975, Przeworski 1975). An 80 percent participation rate almost always produces a demographically

different electorate than one with a 50 percent participation rate, with clear implications for the median policy and party preferences of the citizenry and the likely policy and programmatic orientation of the parties (Lijphart 1997).[3] These considerations led both academics and the political commentariat to suggest that the predicted high turnout for 2008 might be a marker for an enduring change in the party system.

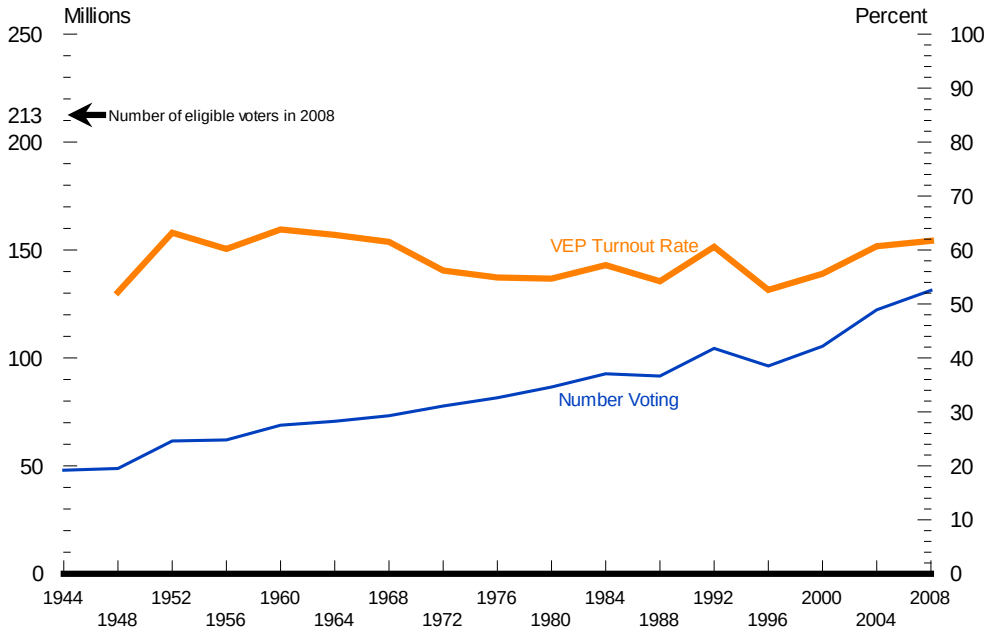
Whatever might have happened had there been an unusual and permanent mobilization spike, the turnout increase over 2004 was a modest 7.4 percent, about on par with the historical election-to-election increase and below the increases observed for 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2004 (the latter generated the largest election-over-election increase in almost 50 years). The turnout *rate* in 2008 (Figure 2) increased about 1 percentage point over the turnout rate for 2004 (which was 60.7 percent of the voter eligible population) but neither the change from 2004 nor the total turnout rate was exceptional in any manner.[4] The total number of voters increased in 2008 over 2004, but that reflects the ever growing population and, as Figure 1 indicates, we expect to see more voters election-over-election. But, as the VEP turnout rate in Figure 2 documents, turnout did not surge. The 2008 election turnout rate represents a continuation of a post-1988 return of turnout to the high levels of 1960 (63.8% of the voter eligible population) and 1964 (62.8%). There was no surge in 2008; no indication of an unusual spike in mobilization. Some

[3] This generalization may not be stated with sufficient qualification. There is evidence that nonvoters in the US are essentially identical to voters with regard to candidate preference and policy preferences. This suggests that the discrepancy is probably limited to situations where the nonparticipating population suffers from some structural exclusion – segregation, immigration effects and so forth. The relative consistency of the relationship between electoral growth and the party balance has not precluded controversy about it. The causal linkage has been disputed with particular energy, with both factual and methodological objections keeping alive the plausibility that conversion has been the major feature of realignments (see Niemi, et. al. 1980, Erikson and Tedin, 1983), although the data do not lend much *prima facie* support to the conversion thesis.

[4] These data are drawn from Michael McDonald's *United States Elections Project* website at http://elections.gmu.edu/. The following estimates are calculated from data available on McDonald's website. All references to turnout rates are based on using the voter eligible population, not the voter-age population) as the appropriate estimate of the maximum number of possible voters.

groups did have atypically high turnout rates. Both African-Americans and those under 30 years of age (including whites under 30) turned out at a higher rate. Older voters may have voted less. On the whole, however, nothing in the turnout rate points to an election that was a departure from the status quo of the last few decades.

Figure 2: Turnout for Presidential Elections
1944 through 2008



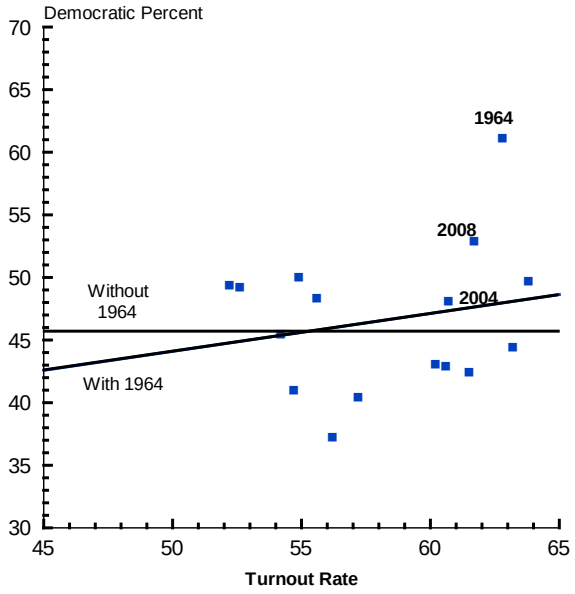
Note: The total voting for president in 2004 was 122.295 million voters. The 2008 presidential vote is estimated as 131.304 million as of September 2009. The 2008 vote represents a turnout rate of 61.7, about one percentage point greater than the turnout rate in 2004.

It would have taken an unusually large surge to believe that anything of moment had happened.[5] The "turnout rate status quo" in the last 60 years has had no implications for election outcomes or the party

[5] The increase in black turnout may be significant, but prudence argues that it probably is not consequential in the longer term. At about 11 percent of the adult population African-Americans do not represent a group that could significantly alter the party balance since almost all are currently stalwarts in the Democratic coalition and a persisting 20 percentage point increase in their turnout (which would equal white turnout) would add less than two percentage points to the base Democratic vote. The surge in young voters and their overwhelming support for Obama may be more consequential, but the unsettled political orientations of the young may preclude the persistence of their 2008 voting choices.

balance. Although it is a convention embraced by that turnout aids Democrats, the oscillation in turnout around it typical level seems to have no influence on elections at either the presidential level or in down-ballot legislative elections (Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw 2008). As Figure 3 demonstrates high turnout elections have produced resounding Democratic wins (1964) and narrow Democratic victories (1960); but overall the Democratic share of the vote is unrelated to the turnout rate. Since 1948, we have had a group of relatively low turnout elections (averaging 55 percent turnout) and a group of relatively high turnout elections (oscillating around 62-63 percent). The inclusion of the 1964 election in the estimation of the relationship between turnout and the division of the vote produces a slightly positive slope because it is an outlier on turnout and the Democratic vote. The relationship between turnout and the vote with the 1964 election removed is exactly zero. The Democratic candidate's share of the turnout is random with and across the two clusters.

Figure 3: Turnout and the Presidential Vote
1948 - 2008



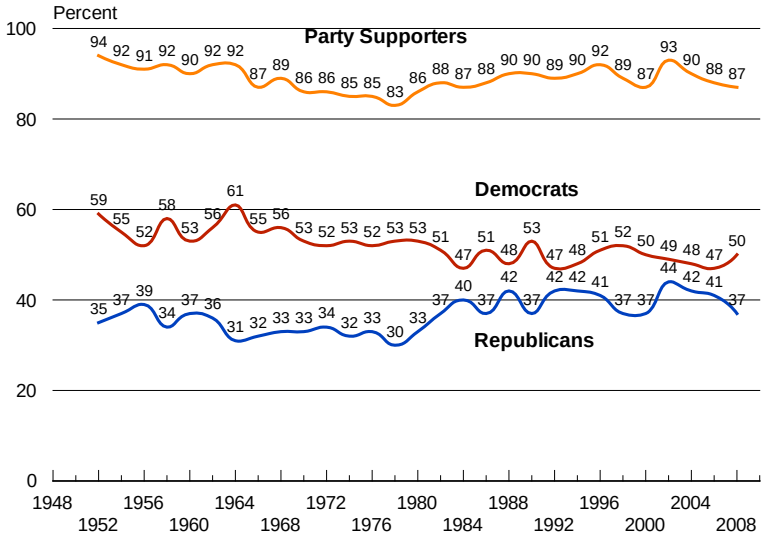
A significant election effect, much less a party system effect, requires large turnout surges, probably surges among distinctive groups, to shift

the election or party system from its equilibrium. Normal turnout oscillation has little implication for the election outcome and in the case of the 2008 election the slight increase in the participation rate was almost certainly not the explanation for the success of the Democrats. Defection from partisanship is where the story lies.

Partisanship in 2008: Stable Rates and Stable Behavior

The party component of the 2008 election was also familiar, but the balance of party identification took a Democratic turn in the ANES survey for 2008. A six point Democratic lead in party identification in 2004 became a 13 point advantage in 2008. This swing may indicate a shift to the Democrats but it is more likely to reflect the pro-Democratic tide of 2008. Party identification is substantially stable for individuals and in the aggregate over long periods, but it does oscillate in response to short-term events.

Figure 4: Party Identification from 1952 through 2008



Source: National Election Studies from 1952 through 2004, plus 2008. The 2006 estimate is from the Polimetrix survey of that year.

Between 1952 when the ANES series began and the early 1980s, the balance of party preference favored the Democrats by about 20 percentage points. It dropped after 1984 to an average that favored the Demo-

crats by about 10 points. But as Figure 4 indicates these are only averages. In the earlier period the difference occasionally favored the Democrats by the much larger margin (30 points in 1964) and a smaller margin (13 points in 1956), following the short-term tides that shaped the election outcome. When the election environment was extremely beneficial to the Democrats, as it was in 1964, Lyndon Johnson not only won, but the softer GOP partisans (and most of the self-declared independents) either disavowed all party preference or declared a Democratic preferences, resulting in a bigger than normal Democratic tilt in partisanship. When the environment aided the GOP (1956, for example) the balance in party identification reduced the Democratic lead considerably. Similar oscillation occurred after the middle 1980s. The Democratic advantage has been as great as 15 points (1996) and as small as 5 points (in 2002). The swing in 2008 is characteristic of the way the balance of partisanship oscillates in response to short-term, election-specific forces. Surveys since the election in November of 2008 show a decline in Democratic identification toward the post-1984 average. Gallup measured a 14 point Democratic lead in early 2009 that shrunk to 9 points by this past June; it declined further, to six points, 48 percent Democrat to 42 percent Republican by September.[6]

President Obama's success and Democratic success in elections at all ballot levels can be attributed to the Democratic majority in the electorate that we have observed since the middle 1980s and, perhaps more important, the favorable short-term environment. Three interesting pieces of data make this apparent.

The first, of course, is just the track in the data on party identification. Through the third quarter of 2009 there is no evidence that anything unusually has happened to the party balance. The enthusiasm for Obama produced a short-lived spike in the direction of the Democratic Party. The second thing to note is the persisting standard relationship between party preference and presidential choice (data not shown).

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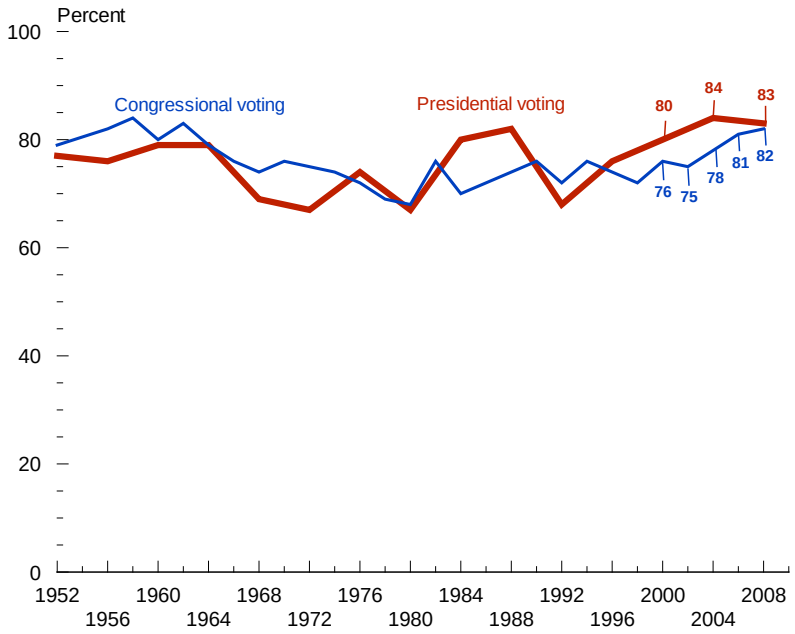
[6] http://www.gallup.com/poll/123362/Independents-Lean-GOP-Party-Gap-Smallest-Since-05.aspx?CSTS=alert

Americans are party voters. A proper model of the vote always identifies party identification as the major influence on candidate choice, trumping issues and efforts by candidates to escape their party affiliation. However, the short-term tilt in partisanship toward the Democrats, the greater loyalty of Democrats to their party preference, and the Democratic votes from Independents helped Democratic candidates "sweep" the field in 2008.

Figure 5: Party Voting in National Elections



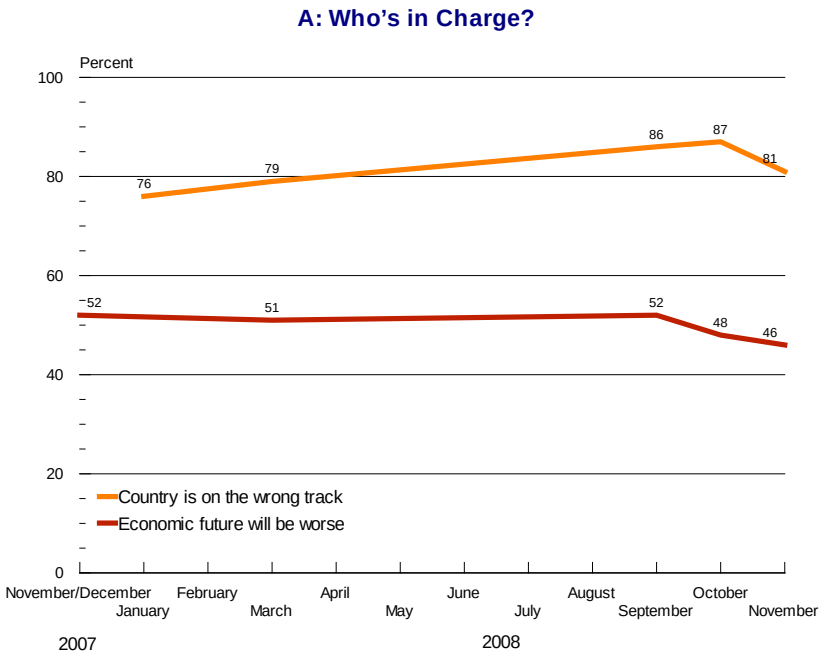
Third, at the end of the day in the 2008 election cycle, the net partisan basis of the vote placed 2008 among all recent previous elections (see Figure 5). Eighty-three percent of the presidential vote was a party vote (Democratic identifiers voting for the Democrat and Republican identifiers voting for the Republican), compared to 84 percent in 2004 and 80 percent in 2000. About 9 percent of the 2008 presidential vote was contributed by Independents (60 percent of whom voted for Obama) and another 8 percent of the 2008 presidential vote came from defectors – a majority of whom were Republicans who defected to Obama. The 2008 House elections produced a similar amount of party voting, although the net was slightly lower reflecting incumbency effects (incumbents draw

weak challengers because most incumbents are in safe districts, the challengers are underfunded as a result of their weakness and widely anticipated defeat, and so forth).

The World According to Party Preference

Traditional party loyalties also shaped perceptions and expectation. Figure 6A reports answers to a question about the economy in the future and the overall direction of the country, with most respondents answering negatively over the course of the election year. The responses took a positive turn in October and later.

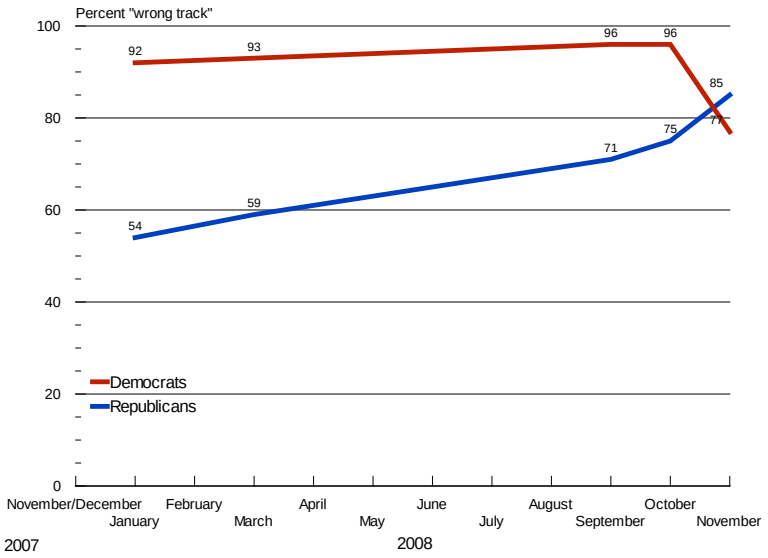
Figure 6: Party and the State of the Nation



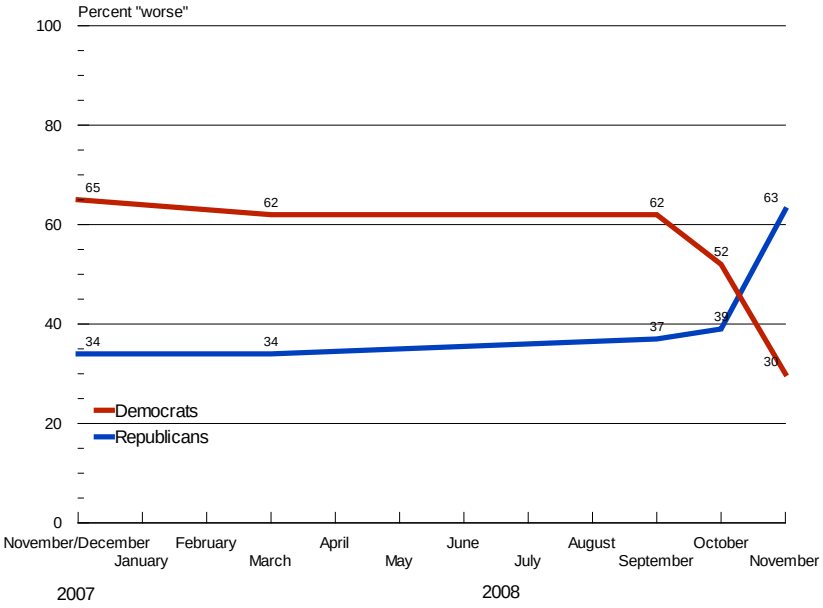
What is going on is apparent in panels B and C of the figure, which divide respondents by their party identification. Democrats, more than Republicans, thought the country was on the wrong track until Obama's victory, at which point they were less likely than Republicans to see the country heading on the wrong track. Perceptions of the future of the nation's economy were even more dramatically affected by the election outcomes. Democrats were twice as likely as Republicans to believe that things were going to be worse throughout the year. Expectations of "happy times" surged among Democrats when Obama's victory was

apparent, while glommy economic expectations became the norm for soon-to-be-defeated Republicans (panel 6C).

B: Partisanship and Direction of the Country



C: Partisanship and Condition of the Economy in the Future



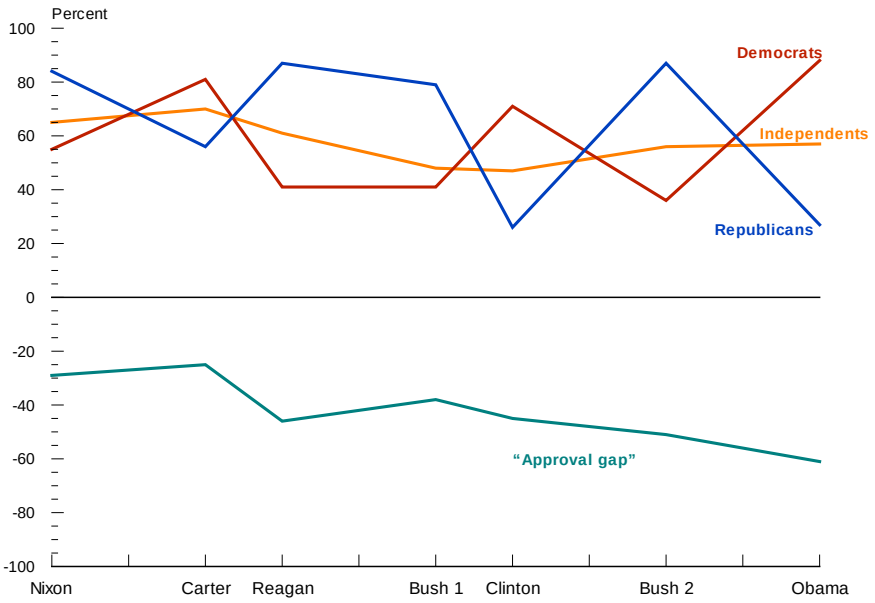
No Change in the Partisan Divide

Finally, not much changed seems to have changed in the "harder" feelings partisans feel toward each party's leaders and symbols after the

election.[7] Division and polarization have been themes for more than a decade. George Bush was identified as a contributor to both (see Jacobson 2008) and Barak Obama promised a lessening of the divide and a period of diminished partisanship. But there is nothing in the evidence to show an improvement. Hard feelings were as much the norm in the early months of Obama's first term as they were in a similar period for most recent presidents.

Figure 7: Growing Party Polarization

Approval Differences by Partisanshipat the start of a President's Term: 1969 - 2009



Source: Gallup Polls

Figure 7 plots (above the zero line in the graph) approval data of the job performance of the incumbent in March or April of the new president's first term. The top part of the figure plots the simple percent who approve among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. The bottom part of the figure plots what is identified as the "approval gap," which is the percentage points which the partisan of the loosing candidate are less approving the the partisans of the new incumbent. A

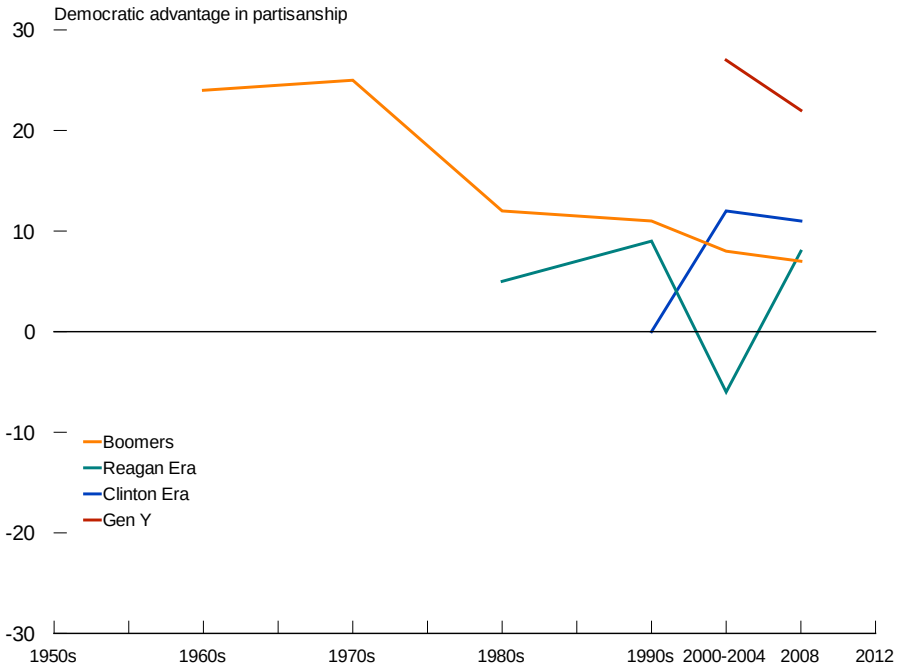
[7] The assessment of polarization has emphasized issues and policies but there is good evidence that symbols are infused with polarization and conflict far more than substantive policy differences. See Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw (2008).

couple of things stand out. First, of course, is that the incumbent's partisans are always more approving. Moreover, there appears to be some symmetry in the approval. That is. The loser's partisans are not noticably farther below 50 percent than the winner's partisans are above 50 percent. Second, the gap has been increasing: the winner's partisans tend to express a bit more approval over time; looser partisans express more disapproval. The results is that the approval gap has been increasing for over 30 years. Barak Obama began his presidency without interrupting the partisan divide that has been standard. Geroge Bush does not seem to have started it and through this spring Barak Obama has done noting to reverse it.

A Caveat

The enthusiasm of youngest cohort for Barak Obama might portend changes in the coming years. Political science has unresolved questions about the extent to which party regimes are reshaped by the mobilization of new voters (young native cohorts, immigrants, etc) as opposed to the conversion of individuals and groups to a different party identification. But however we have examined the question, the distinctive responsivness of young cohorts to short-term forces has been recognized as has the susceptibility of the young to trends or event that exist in their formative youth. Looked at thusly, the youngest cohorts have displayed something of a Democratic surge during the last two – and perhaps three – elections. The "Gen Y" cohort (which became eligible to vote after 1996) has a preference for the Democratic party that is significantly different from the population and their nearest cohort, the "Gen Xers" who entered the electorate in the early 1980s. But even the Gen X cohort seems more inclined than average to identify with the Democrats. Overall, then, while 2008 may not have been a watershed for the balance in party identification, the differential response of the cohorts to the parties and their recent candidates make become a foundation for a future change that erodes Republican support.

Figure 8: Cohorts and Partisanship: Change and Stability



Two caveats must be attached to this caveat about generations. First, the youngest cohorts are the most susceptible to trends and short-term political tides. As the figure shows, the Boomer generation (whose coming-of-age coincided with the Vietnam War gave every indication in the 1960s of being greatly different from the existing electorate – and much more Democratic in their partisanship and liberal in their ideological orientation. They were when they entered the electorate, but are not now. The Boomers, in fact, adopted a partisanship than has arguably made them the most Republican cohort in the electorate – more Republican than the generations that preceded them (data not shown). Second, the 2008 election does not seem to event that turned the young toward the Democrats. The patterns for the youngest cohorts do not even suggest a significant change in 2008. The responsivesness of the youngest cohorts (the "X" and "Y" generations date at least to the 2004 election and perhaps earlier. It is at least plausible that their partisan sentiments may be more linked to a rejection of Bush than any unqiue attractiveness of Obama. Whatever happened, 2008 is not an obvious

watershed for the cohorts – all the campain-period commentary about the young notwithstanding.

Stable Party Coalitions

Table 2 provides a group profile of Democratic and Republican partisans over most of the last 30 years.[8] The shifts that occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s eliminated many of the old key distinctions (especially the regional ones) and created party loyalties along different social cleavages. The partisanship of the resulting groups has been largely stable for the last two decades. No significant changes occured during the 2008 election year. The religiously observant became slightly more Republican; upscale whites expressed less affiliation for the GOP but these were small changes, probably reflecting the election specific oscillation described above. The stable partisanship of the groups produced a vote in 2008 that was almost exactly what would have been expected given these party loyalties. The only group whose vote departed in any signficant degress from their partisan profile of the last two decades was upscale whites, who, despite a clear Republican identification, gave a thin majority of their votes (53%) to Barak Obama.

The 2008 Republican presidential vote declined about 5 percentage points overall from 2004, and by at least that much in many if not most groups in the electorate. Blacks, Hispanics, the young generally, and first time voters (some of these categorizations overlap) declined the most. Standard Republican groups – whites, white males, evangelicals, the religiously observant, upper income – supported McCain at lower rates than they voted for George Bush in 2004. The shift was an across-the-board rejection of Republicans with the flavor of a retrospective, adverse judgment of the moment rather than a rejection of the Republican party.[9] The party balance was effectively unchanged (see the earlier discussion

[8] The categories are exclusive, constructed through a targetting analysis in which groups are identified by social characteristics that maximally differentiate them from other social groups according to their party identification.

[9] The party bias slipped slightly to the Democrats but recovered by the middle of 2009 to its 2008 level and the character and the profile of the party coalitions did not change at all.

about post-election party identification data) and the 2008 vote corresponds to the prior partisan profile of the groups.

Table 2: The Party Coalitions since the 1980s and the 2008 Vote

	Size of Group	Party Identification[1]		The Party Coalitions[2]		2008 Election
		Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	McCain's share of the vote
African Americans	12%	84%	7%	20%	2%	1%
Hispanics	8	53	34	10	6	32
Jews	2	81	18	4	1	16
Union household	8	57	31	14	11	39
Low SES Whites	15	49	37	12	14	35
Upscale Whites	14	43	49	10	17	59
Other Whites	8	43	45	8	10	42
Religiously observant	28	35	58	16	35	71
Other	4	43	46	3	4	25
Totals	99%	49%	41%	100%	100%	45%

1. The party identification columns report the percent identifying with the Democratic and Republican parties. The percentage of the group who think of themselves as Independent is not reported.
2. The party coalition's columns report the group composition of Democratic or Republican identifiers.

The 2000 and 2004 elections produced Republican victories by George Bush, and prior to that Bill Clinton relied on dissatsifaction with the incumbent to produce a win in 1992 and a reelection in 1996. Incumbent dissatisfaction defeated McCain but, as Table 3 documents, the 2008 vote conforms to a structural pattern that reflects the contemporary party coalitions. John McCain received a substantial majority from the religiously observant and, although he carried white voters overall, upper status whites were less supportive of McCain and the vote of less affluent whites shifted to Obama in 2008. McCain did poorly among blacks and Hispanics, and lost voters in union households by a substantial margin (as Republicans frequently do). Jews voted measurably more for the Republican candidate in 2004 and 2008 than in most previous elections. Indeed, the less Democratic tilt of the Jewish vote in 2004 and 2008 is hard to ignore and has few precedents in the last 50 years. It may represent a new state of affairs or first steps in a continuing

movement away from strong Democratic loyalties. These votes may also, however, only be sequential short-term defections (no change in party identification is measurable) that respond to peculiar features of these two elections, including of course, a strong commitment by Bush and McCain to Israel's military security – a salient issue among American Jews.[10]

Table 3: The Contemporary Party Coalitions and the Presidential Vote

	Republican Presidential Vote in:				
	2008	2004	2000	1996	1992
African Americans	1%	10%	8%	1%	6%
Hispanics	32	33	35	20	35
Jews	16	17	8	7	9
Union household	39	42	39	20	30
Low SES Whites	35	54	53	35	30
Upscale Whites	59	63	57	48	42
Religiously observant	71	68	66	63	56
Other whites	42	51	49	31	28
Totals	45%	52%	48%	41%	38%

Note: The relatively low GOP presidential vote among some groups in 1992 reflects Perot's success in 1992.

Overall, however, the voting of the groups in 2008 does not stand out from the four preceding presidential elections. Working class and upscale whites did not vote as heavily Republican in 2008 as they did in 2000 and 2004, a decline which contributed greatly to McCain's defeat. But the general pattern is familiar and in line with expectations. The five point vote swing was larger for some groups than others, and a few resisted it entirely. But the voting story for 2008 is more plausibly an

[10] President Obama's recent pressure on Israel to limit settlement development and expansion in previous Arab areas of Israel may have consequences for the historical preference of Jews for the Democrats. Many GOP programmatic commitments, especially on cultural issues, are not shared by Jews, and that could limit the appeal of the GOP. However, while their party identification may not presage a Republican movement, the presidential voting of American Jews may be more Republican than it has been in the recent past, all depending on future events.

election-specific tale of retrospective voting and not a party system defining event.

Issues and the Party System

It is not common to evaluate party system stability by assessing the similarity of the impact of particular issues on the vote choice across a series of elections; the major focus has been on which party is politically dominate and on the stability of each party's electoral base. However, shifts in the policy agenda of the nation and parties as it is expressed in legislation, campaign programs and promises, and legislative voting has figured prominently in analyses of party system change and realignments going back to Key's (1955) earliest formulations (example would include David Brady 1988 and Everett C. Ladd 1970). Looked at thusly, the 2008 presidential election demonstrates continuity. The evidence of this continuity is the 2008 relationship between the problem concerns of voters and how they voted for president.

The following analysis of issue effects on the 2008 vote uses most important problem (MIP) mentions for the assessment for two reasons. First, although these are not traditional open-ended questions, they are less directive than standard close-form questions because they ask respondents to select problems from a list. Compared to closed questions, this format tends to elicit responses for more salient issues, avoiding confounding results that might occur because the prior interpretations of the analyst are privileged with closed-format questions to which indifferent responses might be provided by respondents (and voters). Second, the MIP responses permit the analysis to identify whether the relationship between the presidential vote and the issue concerns expressed by the voters are consistent with what we would have expected in 2008 under the assumption of party system stability.

Issues and Party System Stability

In the aggregate, in a stable party system, the electorate perceives stable differences between the parties' in their ability to "handle" prob-

lems and issues.[11] This handling perception reflects the parties' constituencies and the governing history of the parties, which confer on each party a reputation for being able to resolve issues, effectively making them "owners" of the issue. Issue ownership is a major asset to a candidate's effort to garner votes because party association is a dominant indicator (albeit not the only one) of a candidate's ability to formulate policies and implement programs to handle current problems. The imputed ability matters because a significant determinant of candidate choice is the *problems* (medical care needs, high taxes, improve national security, and so forth) that voters want the government to address, not what *policies* the candidates promise to pursue.[12] An electorate mostly concerned with problems that are viewed as better handled by Democrats reinforces Democratic identifiers, provokes defection among Republicans, and a Democratic tide among independents. Concern with issues regarded as better handled by the GOP has the opposite effect.[13] The direct electoral effect of this issue agenda variance is the critical difference *among* elections because most policy preferences are substantially stable between and among elections but the problems needing attention will vary greatly (Petrocik 1996). The voter's susceptibility to be persuaded that a problem deserves attention provides the candidate with the opportunity to create a winning plurality.[14] It also gives candidates their electoral strategy be-

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[11] *Handling* is a reputation for being more skilled at dealing with an issue. It is a reputation produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these issues. The reputation leads voters to believe that the party's candidates are more sincere and committed to doing something about them. See Petrocik (1996, 2003). Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1998), in their "A Directional Theory of Voting" have similar notions about the importance of commitment.

[12] See tables 5 and 6 in Petrocik (1996).

[13] The proposition behind this analysis is that campaigns influence the perceptions and behavior of voters, and the outcome of elections. Two papers by Daron Shaw (1999a and 1999b) provide compelling evidence that campaigns influence voters. Christopher Blunt's unpublished dissertation (2002) shows that campaigns increase salience and increase the consistency between candidate choice and policy priors. The debate about campaigns can be sampled in Gelman and King (1996) and Thomas Holbrook (1996).

[14] A key empirical underpinning of the theory of issue ownership is that what the electorate believes to be the most important problems change in response to what they believe is happening in the world while their core attitudes and related policy preferences change slowly. The long-term stability of attitudes and preferences is well documented in Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro

cause sincerity, internal party imperatives, and strategic calculations lead them to emphasize issues owned by their party.[15]

Issue-handling reputations are not invariant. Short-term circumstances (policy failures) can change the issue handling advantage a party enjoys. Performance issue reputations (who can assure a strong economy, for example) can be gained and lost in short periods of time (in concert with, for example, changes in the economy). But constituency-based issue reputations are more stable, although events and personalities can induce some shifts, because they are reflections of the party alignment. Stability in these constituency reputations indicates stability in the party system.

The stability exists because constituency pressures within and between the parties, constant party rhetoric, and recurring policy initiatives reinforce issue reputations and keep them intact over long periods of time. As a result, Republicans are viewed as likely to protect traditional American values, keep taxes low, government small, and national security strong. Democrats are expected to help the elderly, protect Social Security, reduce employment, protect the environment, and ensure fair treatment of minorities.

A candidate or a party can temporarily lose their generally perceived superiority on an issue because dissatisfied voters will be inclined to deny the party or candidate with whom they are unhappy any "redeeming" qualities. Conversely, a popular candidate may be viewed as able to handle a problem that is not usually an issue-strength of his (or her) party.[16] Finally, a party can lose an advantage on a constituency-based issue when major shifts occur in the party coalitions. But there is a stable and

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(1992) and William G. Mayer (1993). Mayer observes more change, albeit over a lengthy time period.

[15] A candidate can own an issue, as, for example, a famous and successful prosecutor might have high credibility of the issue of crime. See Sellers "Strategy and Background in Congressional Campaigns." (1998). Also see William H. Riker (1993).

[16] During the first year of Reagan's presidency, for example, the Democrats and the GOP were viewed as equally good at reducing unemployment, an issue Democrats are normally judged better able to handle. During the 1992 election cycle, Democrats and Republicans were viewed as equally competent at handling crime and taxes (issues Democrats are usually not thought to handle well).

long-term equilibrium to issue-handling reputations absent major changes in the parties' constituencies.

Table 4: The Pattern of Concerns in November, 2008

	Problems facing the country			
	Most	Second	Third	Total
Republican-owned issues				
Terrorism	21%	15%	10%	46%
Spending	8	18	18	44
Values	5	6	9	20
Crime	*	1	2	3
Performance issues				
Economy	47	17	9	73
Iraq	4	11	11	25
Democrat-owned issues				
Health care	3	10	15	27
Social security	2	6	8	15
Standard of living	3	6	5	13
Environment	1	3	6	9
Ambiguous ownership				
Change	6	7	8	20
No problems	1			1
Total	101%	100%	102%	

Source: 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project

Issue Concerns in 2008

Voters had a diverse set of problems on their mind during September and October. The declining economy was mentioned by more respondents than any other. A plurality of 33 percent viewed it as the most important problem and fully two thirds of the CCAP sample saw it as one of the three most important problems. Terrorism was the second most mentioned (at 53 percent), with virtually as many seeing it as the nation's most important problem (31 percent) as saw the economy as our most pressing issue. Government spending was in a virtual tie with terrorism,

in third place only because few saw it as the *most* important problem. Nothing else approached the salience of these issues. Social spending concerns (social security, the standard of living, health care) were mentioned by about 35 percent; cultural issues (values, crime, opportunities for minorities and women) were mentioned by 28; a need for change was offered by slightly less than a quarter of the sample. There were no substantive changes by Election Day (Table 4). The rank order of the issue concerns were approximately the same although health care references made social spending concerns more significant (totaling 55 percent), and a top concern for more than half the citizenry.

As noted above, a stable party system should show continuity in the way issues are connected to the parties and in their influence on the vote. That was the state of affairs in 2008 as the following data demonstrate. There was a strong party bias to these mentions, and in the expected direction. Republicans are the disproportionate source of mentions of problems typically regarded as GOP-owned issues (government spending, values, and such) while Democrats are the primary source of issues historically owned by the Democratic Party and its candidates (see Petrocik 1996 and Petrocik et al 2004). Table 5 has the data. The differences are, as expected, substantial. Three quarters of Republican identifiers selected terrorism as one of the most important problems facing the country, but fewer than 20 percent of Democrats viewed terrorism as important. Government spending shows a similar party tilt: only a quarter of the Democrats thought it was a top problem, two-thirds of the Republicans saw it as a major issue. A concern with the nations "values" has an equivalent party bias.

Issues that traditionally advantaged Democrats showed less party difference in mentioning by Democrats and Republicans but the differential is in the expected direction. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to select traditional Democrat-owned issues as the most important problems facing the country, but the partisan difference was less than the partisan difference for GOP-owned issues. Health care was the only issue to present a big difference by party identification among Democrat-

owned issues: 40 percent of Democrats thought this was one of the most important problems facing the country but only 12 percent of Republicans placed it among the top three MIPs.

Table 5: The Issue Concerns of Democrats and Republicans in 2008

	Party Identification		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Republican-owned issues			
Terrorism	17%	50%	75%
Spending	25	41	65
Values	7	17	40
Crime	2	7	4
Performance issues			
Economy	79	68	70
Iraq	44	21	5
Democrat-owned issues			
Health care	40	29	12
Social security	14	11	14
Standard of living	19	22	8
Environment	18	5	2
Ambiguous ownership			
Change	31	29	5
Total	101%	100%	102%

Source: 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project

Performance issues were mentioned inconsistently, relative to party. One might have expected more interparty agreement about performance issues – the economy and the lengthy, costly, and deadly military involvement in Iraq – but they did not. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents agreed, by huge majorities, that the condition of the economy was a major problem. However, they viewed the continuing military involvement in Iraq differently. A near majority of Democrats saw it as a major problem; a fifth of Independents selected Iraq as a major problem, only 5 percent of Republicans took that position.

From the perspective of the issue ownership model of voting, the rate at which Republican-owned issues were mentioned more frequently than Democratic-owned issues in Table 4 offers some insight into the relative closeness of the presidential election (the presidential vote only shifted 5 points between 2004 and 2008). Almost everybody mentioned at least one of the GOP-owned issues, about twice the rate at which Democrat-owned issues were mentioned. The key facts of the election were (1) the rate at which performance issues were on the minds of everybody regardless of partisanship and (2) that the ownership/handling dimension influenced the vote in exactly the way the issue ownership model would predict.

Table 6 reports data that permit a comparison between the expected vote of those who mentioned each issue with (1) the expressed vote intention (the "September-October" columns) and (2) the reported vote (the Post-Election" columns). The expected vote, which is based on the party identification of those who mentioned the issue, permits a control for partisanship that is obviously needed given the differences in the problem and issue concerns of Democrats and Republicans (Table 5).[17]

The main findings are straightforward. Both the vote intention in September and October and the reported vote (from the November/December interviews) followed the issue concerns of individuals. Republicans were more concerned about Republican-owned issues (it's one of the things that makes Republicans different from Democrats), they were expected to vote for McCain, and they did. But Democrats who mentioned Republican-owned issues voted for McCain at a higher rate than other Democrats. On the other side, those who mentioned Democratic-owned issues voted more for Obama; and independents and Republicans who mentioned Democratic-owned issues supported Barak Obama at a rate higher than we would have expected just given their partisanship and the normal voting choices of Independents and Republicans.

[17] The expected vote is the normal vote projected from the voting behavior of the difference classes of partisans – strong, vs. weak vs. leaning identifiers, and independents. See Converse (1966) and Petrocik (1989).

Table 6: Issue Concerns and the Vote in 2008

	Issue owned by the:	Vote for Barak Obama			
		September-October		Post-Election	
		Intended	Expected	Reported	Expected
Values	Reps	22%	37%	17%	34%
Terrorism	Reps	28	41	22	36
Government spending	Reps	35	44	30	42
Crime	Reps	37	46	33	42
Economy	Perf	56	55	56	55
Iraq	Perf	93	74	93	75
Social Security	Dems	60	60	47	55
Standard of living	Dems	75	66	69	63
Health care	Dems	NA	NA	79	68
Environment	Dems	93	72	95	74
Change	Dems	83	68	86	72
Total		55%	53%	53%	53%

Source: 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project

The prominence of Republican-owned issues (Table 4) trumped the incidence of Democrat-owned issues and the voting choices produced a near-stalemate in the vote intention and reported vote. The determinant of the election or at least the margin of victory by Barak Obama was the prominence of performance issues and the advantage they gave to Obama over McCain. People who mentioned the economy as a major issue in the election voted their party identification, a situation that advantaged Obama given the underlying Democratic majority in the electorate. Those who were concerned about Iraq intended to – and did – vote overwhelmingly for Obama, well above the rate that would have been expected from a simple party baseline. The net effect for the election outcome was a nearly partisan division of the vote that followed party and issue dynamics that have been familiar facets of the contemporary electoral dynamics of the party system.

Conclusions

The election of an African-American to the highest political office in the land made the 2008 election an historical event. But on almost every other dimension, the election invoked familiar processes and did not disturb the electoral dimensions of the party system that has shaped our electoral politics for nearly thirty years.

Turnout, rarely important, was not a significant factor in the outcome of the 2008 election. More people voted in 2008 than voted in 2004, but that was not unusual. The reverse – fewer voters – is unusual and rare. The increase in voters did increase the turnout rate slightly, but at a pace that was below the recent increases in the turnout rate. The turnout of minority voters increased more than the turnout of others but it did not increase their share of the electorate to a fraction that might permanently alter the party balance in a way we have observed during historical realignments in the United States or during major party system transformations in other societies. A heavily Democratic bias among the young in 2008 continued a trend that developed in the 1990s. What that might portend for the parties remains to be seen. New cohorts often reshape party systems but the susceptibility of young voters to short-term forces makes it unwise to extrapolate a couple a data points into the future. Their current attitudes and behavior may shape a new equilibrium but they may only be a deviation from a state of affairs that will be similar to the recent past.

A high level of support for the parties and a 10 percent or so advantage in Democratic identification seems unchanged by the election – notwithstanding some commentary about a "declining Republican base." As we have so often observed in the past, short-term forces not only stimulate turnout but they also cause a short-term change in partisanship in the direction of the winning candidate, commonly in proportion to the magnitude of the winner's margin. Figure 4 has some data illustrating that change (also see the text associated with that figure) but recent data display such perturbation also. George Bush's (narrow) but touted defeat

of John Kerry in 2004 eroded the familiar 8-10 point advantage in Democratic identification to zero in early 2005 Gallup surveys, but it quickly rebounded by the first quarter of 2006. Obama's victory and the excitement it fanned pushed the advantage in Democratic identification to almost 13 points by the end of 2008. But it was short-lived, dropping to 9 points by June and 6 points by September of 2009 – probably in response to wide criticism of the president and his party's economic and social policies and the country's continuing economic difficulties. Partisanship's dominating influence on the vote in 2008 was unchanged from how it shaped the vote in previous elections, providing additional evidence of stability over change.

The social groups that have defined the Democratic and Republican coalitions and electoral bases over that last two to three decades provided support to Obama and McCain in exactly that way their recent votes and expressed party loyalties during the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush presidencies would have led us to expect. Through the election period, there was no change in the political loyalties of these groups nor was there any evidence of a reshaping of party loyalties along new social differences. The social group base of each party's constituency has not changed recently and the familiar groups voted in the 2008 election pretty much as their party loyalties during recent decades would have led us to expect. There were deviations from the baseline, but nothing that has not been observed in previous recent elections, and all can be regarded as deviations rather than harbingers of a new state of affairs.[18]

The most reasonable perspective consistent with these data is that 2008 was a classic retrospective election, which turned out the incumbents for poor performance. However, the issue environment of the electorate was not as homogeneously dominated by economic concerns as

[18] An unusually large vote for Obama among high income voters was reported in the 2008 exit survey. That, in addition to the vote choices of the young and the turnout of minorities was a feature of the election narrative. Whether the enthusiasm of the very wealthy for Obama actually occurred is an open question. No other data that I have studied (the NES survey for 2008 or the 2008 CCAP) show that result. Political observers and consultants with proprietary data have not confirmed that result to me (private conversations).

the commentary would have us believe, although it was the premier concern of voters. Voters were also concerned with familiar and traditional problems and issues are linked to the parties in familiar ways – further indicating that the stability of the party system forged stable problem and issue perspectives among Democrats and Republicans. Issues that usually advantage Democrats (social services, health care) reinforced that advantage Obama enjoyed because of performance failures by Bush and Republicans, especially on matters related to the economy and our persisting military involvement in Iraq. But the conventional quality of the election for voters is illustrated by the fact that one or more GOP issues – terrorism, the scale of the national government and government spending, and traditional values – were a concern to a majority and produced more support for McCain than we might have expected given the state of the economy and a generalized desire for change.

Elections are probably not directly responsible for realigning the party system, notwithstanding popular and conventional wisdom resort to the idea of a "critical election." Presidents shape the politics of an era and the implication that 2008 was a turning point will only be known as we experience the consequences of Obama's programmatic initiatives and policies (Skowronek, 1997).

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