Once upon a time, not so very long ago, the topic of divided government was all the rage in American political science. For 20 of the 24 years between 1969 and 1992, the United States was governed by a president from one political party and a Congress in which at least one house was controlled by the other party. Since this constellation of forces had rarely occurred between 1897 and 1968, a great deal of academic energy was naturally expended in trying to figure out why it occurred and what consequences, if any, it had for the functioning of American national government.\(^1\)

Surprisingly, scholarly interest in divided government has receded in recent years. I say “surprisingly” because divided government still seems to be the “default condition” of American national government. When the current Congress comes to an end in 2014, the United States will have spent almost 14 of the last 20 years under divided government. The more recent experience of divided government, moreover, is not just a replay of what had occurred earlier and thus might have added something new and early 1990s was consciously intended to explain

why the voters kept electing Republican presidents and Democratic congresses – the only form that divided government took between 1952 and 1992. Martin Wattenberg, to take just one example, had argued that Democratic presidential woes were due to the nature of the contemporary presidential nomination process, which made Democratic nomination contests longer and more divisive than those in the Republican Party, and therefore made it more difficult to reunite the Democrats for the general election. However plausible one might have found this theory to be in 1984 or 1988, it didn’t explain why voters chose a Democratic president and a Republican Congress from 1995 to 2000 and from 2011 to 2014. Indeed, of all the major theories that were designed to explain the regular occurrence of divided government, Morris Fiorina’s is the only one I am aware of that provides any purchase at all for understanding why the last two Democratic presidents suffered massive congressional losses just two years into their first term.\footnote{See Fiorina, \textit{Divided Government}.}

This paper attempts to provide both a look back at the divided government of the 1970s and 1980s and an examination of the pattern of more recent election results. I begin by providing a somewhat different interpretation of American electoral politics between 1952 and 1988, an account that focuses less on divided government per se and more on the anomalous nature of presidential elections during this period. I then explain why the system that most observers had come to expect – Republican presidents and Democratic congresses – came apart in the 1980s and early 1990s, and describe the general outlines of the system that has replaced it.

The Two-Tiered Party System
From the early 1950s to the late 1980s, the United States had what may be described as a *two-tiered party system*. Throughout this period, as shown in Table 1, a clear plurality of Americans – a majority if one counts so-called independent leaners as partisans – identified with the Democratic Party. Even after 1966, when there was a noticeable increase in the number of independents and weak partisans, surveys such as the American National Election Studies consistently showed the Democrats with a lead of about 20 percentage points over the Republicans. And as befits a majority party, the Democrats dominated elections at almost every level of government. As the analysts of divided government correctly noted, the Democrats had an iron grip on both houses of Congress. But Democrats were equally dominant in gubernatorial and state legislative elections.

[TABLE 1 about here]

In fact, the only type of election the Democrats didn’t dominate during this period – the exception that makes it possible to speak of a *two*-tiered system – was presidential elections. When choosing the most visible and hotly contested office in American politics – the most powerful elected office in the world – Americans opted for a Democrat on just three of ten occasions. Of the three Democratic presidential victories, moreover, two were quite close (those of John Kennedy in 1960 and Jimmy Carter in 1976). If one defines a presidential landslide as an election in which the winning candidates receives at least 55 percent of the two-party popular vote and 80 percent of the electoral vote, the Republicans had five landslide victories during this period, the Democrats just one.

The consistency with which Democrats lost presidential elections cannot, I believe, merely be chalked up to chance. A useful landmark for evaluating these results is an article that Philip Converse published in 1966, arguing that given the current balance of party
identifications, the Democrats had an expected or “normal vote” of 54 percent in national
elections. As Table 1 indicates, the average vote in House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections
during this period actually comes very close to this figure. But only one of the ten Democratic
presidential candidates between 1952 and 1988 received at least 54 percent of the vote, total or
two-party.

The so-called era of divided government, in other words, was actually a period
categorized by a striking disjunction between presidential elections and elections for every
other office in American politics that was contested on a partisan basis. If divided government
was due to the fact that Americans wanted different qualities and policies from executives than
from legislators, as both Jacobson and Petrocik argued, one might have expected Republicans to
fare reasonably well in gubernatorial elections. In fact, as Table 1 indicates, in the 19 national
elections held between 1952 and 1988, Republicans wound up with a majority of governorships
just four times. On average, Democrats won 60 percent of gubernatorial elections held during
these years, a figure that was, if anything, even higher than the party’s success rate in U.S. House
and Senate elections.

Against that background, the basic question that should have animated electoral research
in the early 1990s was not Why do Americans elect presidents and congressmen of different
parties, but Why can’t Democrats win presidential elections? Why did a party that was so

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3 See Philip E. Converse, “The Concept of a Normal Vote,” in Elections and the Political Order,
ed. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes (New York:
4 Jacobson’s argument is set forth in Electoral Origins of Divided Government. For Petrocik’s
theory, see John R. Petrocik, “Divided Government: Is It All in the Campaigns?” in The Politics
13-38.
dominant in every other sphere of electoral politics – and that had such a commanding lead among party identifiers – so often fall short when seeking the presidency?

My own answer to these questions was developed in a book called *The Divided Democrats* (1996), which got good reviews from the three or four people who read it and otherwise disappeared without a trace. In a purely mathematical sense, I argued, a majority party could lose to a minority party for one of three reasons:

1. It might be that Democrats have a much lower turnout rate than Republicans. If this were true, the sizable Democratic edge in party identifications, which is based on surveys of the adult population as a whole, might translate into a more even balance of strength within the actual electorate.

2. Those who call themselves “independents” might turn out to be less independent than their self-description would imply. Independents might in fact consistently give the majority of their votes to the Republicans.

3. Many self-described Democrats might not actually vote for the Democratic candidate. More precisely, the Democrats might suffer a far higher “defection rate” than the Republicans.

Using data from the American National Election Studies data from 1952 through 1988, I conducted a series of simulations, designed to see how the Democratic presidential vote in each year would have been affected if

-- voter turnout rates among Democrats and Republicans were equal

-- the independent vote had been split evenly between Democrats and Republicans

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-- the percentage of Democratic identifiers who declined to vote for the Democratic candidate was equal to the percentage of Republican identifiers who didn’t vote for the Republican candidate.

As it turns out, all three of these “explanations” for Democratic presidential woes were based on descriptively accurate premises. Self-described Democrats do turn out at lower rates than self-described Republicans; the Republican candidate usually did win a larger share of the independent vote than his Democratic opponent; and Democrats generally suffered a higher defection rate than Republicans did. But the three factors had very different-sized effects on the Democratic presidential vote.

For all the attention that is often focused on low turnout among blacks, the poor, and other Democratic constituencies, Democratic turnout as a whole lags only slightly behind the level of Republican turnout: about 7 or 8 percentage points.6 (The really low turnout group is independents.) Equalizing Democratic and Republican voter participation rates would, on average, have added only about 1.5 percentage points to the Democratic share of the vote – enough to change only one election outcome. Assuming that Democrats and Republicans split the independent vote evenly has similarly modest effects, giving the Democrats an additional 1.5 percent of the vote. By contrast, the higher defection rate of Democratic partisans cost the Democrats, on average, 7.1 percent of the vote.7

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6 Unless specifically otherwise indicated, all party identification data cited in this article define Democrats, Republicans, and independents by using what I will call the “broad definition” of partisanship: one in which independent leaners are classified as partisans, and independents consist only of so-called pure independents.
7 Figures are computed from Mayer, Divided Democrats, Table 7.2.
In short, Democrats tended to lose presidential elections during this period for a simple reason: lots of Democrats wouldn’t vote for the Democratic candidate. For the nation’s oldest political party, party unity was a regular, recurrent problem.

To get a more vivid sense of the problem, consider the data in Table 2, which shows the actual defection rates for each party in every presidential election between 1952 and 1988. Except in the clearly exceptional case of 1964, the Democratic defection rate – the percentage of Democrats who voted for either a Republican or third-party candidate – was always greater than the Republican defection rate. George McGovern had a particular problem in this regard: fully 42 percent of all Democrats declined to vote for him. But the problem also surfaced in more typical circumstances, even in elections that seemed to favor the Democrats. In 1976, Jimmy Carter enjoyed a relatively smooth road through the primaries, which ended with all his major opponents endorsing his candidacy. Yet, even in this election, one out of every five Democrats voted for Gerald Ford, a candidate that met no one’s criteria of a compelling and charismatic candidate. On average, 25 percent of all Democratic identifiers broke party ranks in presidential elections. The Republican defection rate was 11 percent, less than half as large.

This finding, of course, only begs a further question: Why did so many Democrats bolt their party in presidential elections? It is possible, of course, to devise specific, idiosyncratic explanations for some of the results in Table 2: Eisenhower’s trans-partisan popularity in 1952 and 1956; McGovern’s extremism in 1972; the woeful state of the economy in 1980. But when the same pattern shows up in nine of ten elections, it clearly strains believability to claim that all nine cases can be explained in unique, election-specific terms.
Instead, I argued, the Democrats’ presidential problem had a more general explanation: the Democrats were (and, so far as one can tell, had always been) a much more diverse, heterogeneous, ideologically divided party than the Republicans. The Democratic Party included a broader range of groups and interests and thus encompassed a much wider spectrum of opinions about significant policy issues. In congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative elections, this diversity was a much less significant problem – in fact, it was a probably a net advantage – because the party could nominate a candidate who was specifically suited to the particular opinions and constituencies of each state or district. The Democrats could (and did) nominate one type of candidate in southern white districts, another in northern white ethnic districts, a third type in black congressional districts, and still other variants in suburban and rural, farming areas. The problem came when they contested the presidency and had to run the same candidate everywhere. Inevitably, that candidate would leave large sections of the party feeling dissatisfied, particularly in its southern and conservative wings. Thus, even after relatively peaceful presidential nominations, such as those that took place in 1960, 1976, and 1988, about one-fifth of all Democrats would nevertheless vote Republican.

To test the central premise of this theory – that the Democrats were a more ideologically diverse party than the Republicans – I devised the following procedure. To test the central premise of this theory – that the Democrats were a more ideologically diverse party than the Republicans – I devised the following procedure.8 Using the American National Election Studies, I looked for survey questions that allowed respondents to choose from a multitude of possible answers, ranging from fairly extreme expressions of support or opposition to a given policy, through more qualified opinions to moderate or middle positions. Two types of questions were particularly well-suited to this requirement:

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8 The procedure was actually worked out with the late great Nelson Polsby.
1. Seven-point-scale questions, in which respondents are asked to place themselves at any one of seven points along a policy continuum, where the endpoints (i.e., points 1 and 7) represent two polar, often extreme responses to a particular policy issue.

2. Feeling thermometers, in which respondents are asked to indicate how “warm” or “favorable” they feel toward some politically significant group by locating it along a scale ranging from 0 to 100 degrees.

Having established a large battery of survey questions, I measured ideological cohesion by dividing the full ANES sample into Democratic and Republican party identifiers and then computing the standard deviation of the responses provided by each group’s members. As is well known, the standard deviation measures the extent to which the values of a variable are clustered or dispersed around its mean, and thus provides an excellent indicator of the parties’ relative ideological unity or disagreement.

When I first started research on this subject, I expected the data to provide a sort of general confirmation for the hypothesis that the Democrats were more ideologically divided than the Republicans. In fact, the data supported it overwhelmingly. Across a vast range of issues and politically significant groups, the Democrats emerged as dramatically less unified and cohesive than their partisan opponents. Specifically: from 1968 (when seven-point-scale questions were first included in the ANES) to 1988, Democratic identifiers had a higher standard deviation than Republican identifiers for

-- 87 out of 93 seven-point-scale questions (94 percent); and

-- 81 out of 95 thermometer ratings (85 percent).

This, then, is the general outline of the two-tiered party system that existed from at least 1952 until the late 1980s. The Democrats had a large lead among party identifiers and
dominated elections at every level of American government – except the presidency. In presidential elections, recurrent problems of Democratic party unity meant that it was actually the Republicans who won most of the presidential elections held during this period.

The System Changes

As most readers will probably have noticed, most of the generalizations recounted in the last section no longer hold. On the one hand, Democrats have started to win a larger share of presidential elections – specifically, four of the last six, though as I will argue later, there is at least some reason to wonder how enduring this Democratic advantage will be. Ironically, however, even as the Democrats were doing markedly better in presidential elections, they were losing their dominance in other types of elections.

Table 3 provides a summary of American election results from 1990 to 2012 similar to the one given in Table 1. Presidential elections aside, in every other major type of U.S. election, Democrats and Republicans have fought each other essentially to a draw. Since 1990, the U.S. Senate has had a Democratic majority six times, a Republican majority five times, and one 50-50 tie. Each party has controlled a plurality of state legislatures six times. The Republicans held a majority of governorships seven times, the Democrats had a majority five times.

[TABLE 3 about here]

Why did the pattern of American electoral outcomes change so decisively? As I will try to show in the rest of this paper, two important changes are primarily responsible.

The first change actually began in 1984. From 1952 to 1982, as we have seen, survey questions on party identification showed the Democrats with a consistent lead over the
Republicans of about 20 percentage points. In 1984, as shown in Table 3, that margin suddenly fell to about 10 percentage points. The size of the difference has fluctuated a bit since then, rising to 16 percentage points in 1990 and 1992, falling to just 5 percent in 1994. But the change has clearly been an enduring one. Since 1984, Democrats have never come close to achieving the 20 percentage-point lead over the Republicans that they regularly posted from 1952 to 1982. And by 1994, the larger Republican electorate started to have an impact on American elections. Since that time, the “normal” Democratic majority in congressional and state elections has disappeared.

For Democrats, this was the bad news. The good news is that, as many of their more conservative members left the party, those Democrats that remained became substantially more unified in ideological terms. To demonstrate this point, I have used the same procedure employed earlier in the *Divided Democrats*. Again using the American National Election Study surveys, I took the seven-point-scale questions and thermometer ratings of politically significant groups, divided the full sample into Republican and Democratic identifiers, and then computed the standard deviation of the responses provided by each party’s adherents.

These results for the years 1990 to 2008 are summarized in Table 4, along with comparison data from 1968 to 1988. In the earlier period, it will be recalled, the Democrats were more divided than the Republicans on 94 percent of the seven-point-scale questions. In the years since 1988, the Democratic disadvantage has been substantially reduced: the Republicans are more united on just 75 percent of the scale questions. On the thermometer rating questions, the Republican advantage has essentially disappeared. Between 1990 and 2008, the Democrats were more divided on 46 percent of the 92 questions asked, a result statistically indistinguishable from a 50-50 split. In short, the Democrats are now a smaller but significantly more unified party.
The most dramatic reflection of the Democrats’ increased unity has been their voting behavior in presidential elections. From 1952 to 1988, about a quarter of all Democrats defected from their own party’s presidential candidate. In the five presidential elections from 1992 to 2008 (2012 data were not available as of this writing), the Democratic defection rate has been a mere 11 percent. Indeed, as shown in Table 5, in three of these five elections, the Democratic level of intraparty unity actually exceeded that of the Republicans. Viewed in historical perspective, the Democrats’ recent unity can only be termed remarkable. During what I have called the two-tier party system, the Democratic nominee’s best showing among Democrats came in 1964; and even in one of the two best Democratic showings in the Twentieth Century, 11 percent of Democrats declined to vote for Lyndon Johnson. Since 1992, all four of the Democratic standard bearers have met or exceeded this benchmark. Unfortunately, we do not have comparable data for any of the elections before 1952; but if we did, a good guess is that the Democrats are more ideologically unified today than they have been since the late 1800s, possibly in their entire history.

Do the changes examined here constitute a realignment? As a comparison of Tables 1 and 3 makes clear, the pattern of election outcomes today is radically different from the pattern we had come to expect in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet I am skeptical that calling these changes a realignment helps us understand what happened. For unlike the traditional notion of a
realignment that prevailed in academic discourse over the last half century, what is noteworthy
about the decline of the old New Deal party system is that it didn’t end with a bang, but with a
long, drawn-out whimper. Rather than being a sharp, sudden change centered around just one or
two elections, as had occurred in 1860, 1896, and 1932, there were a series of important steps on
the road to the present system. The once-Solid South, the unshakeable base of the Democratic
majority, came apart at the presidential level in 1964 and 1968, but lasted much longer at the
state and congressional levels. For all the Republican successes in presidential elections, the
ranks of Republican identifiers did not begin to grow until 1984. Virtually no one believed that a
Republican majority in Congress was possible until it actually occurred in 1994. And even as
that was taking place, the Republicans were losing what had once been seen as a “lock” on the
electoral college.

Contrary to what David Mayhew argued in his book on *Electoral Realignments* in 2002, I
think that realignment is a useful concept for understanding the past. But if recent trends are any
indication, it may no longer describe the way that elections and electoral coalitions change in the
United States.