

THE 1976 ELECTION AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

PHILIP WILLIAMS* AND GRAHAM K. WILSON†

* *Nuffield College, Oxford*; † *University of Essex*

Abstract. The elections, remembered as the first in which an incumbent President was defeated since 1932, show other characteristics inconsistent with usual interpretations. The Democratic Party's selection procedure managed to produce a moderate around whom the party could unite for the first time since 1964 while the Republicans experienced a damaging fight which the more extreme candidate almost won. Analysis of the results refutes many common conclusions. The popular vote was not as close as in other postwar elections; regional variations less pronounced and party more important in the campaign than had been supposed. The Republicans showed surprisingly strongly in the Presidential election, but did disastrously again in others. No satisfactory theory explains the discrepancy. Republicans still challenge strongly for the Presidency but consistently fail elsewhere.

1. *The Context*

THE American election of 1976 has shattered much conventional wisdom about the current working of the political system. The surprises began in the primaries, where the successful Democratic candidate broke several accepted rules, while his success was matched only by the equally surprising failure of his Republican rival. In the election campaign itself these roles were reversed, with President Ford almost eroding his opponent's huge lead—but ending as the first President defeated since the great slump. But while the presidential contest was close, in other elections the Republican Party fared appallingly. The old discrepancy between presidential and other elections thus appears starkly in 1976.

In spite of all the political upheavals and institutional reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s, the campaign had a curiously traditional flavour. Two former Governors, Carter and Reagan, had realistic hopes of the Presidency, after a spate of ex-vice-presidents and senators. Regional variations reappeared after a period in which national trends and issues had seemed dominant. The party Conventions, largely formalities since 1952, looked significant again; for months it seemed likely that the Democratic Convention would be dominated by the party's power brokers. The Democratic liberals, so important in 1968 and 1972, were frustrated by an unknown whose position on many issues was equivocal.

The nomination of Governor Carter was surprising in several ways. The first man from the Deep South nominated for the Presidency since 1848, he enjoyed solid support from the black community, without whom he would have won only 180 (perhaps only 133) electoral votes. After twenty years in which no governor had been a serious contender as a Democrat, and only one Republican had been nominated even for vice-president, he was handicapped in the election by the very uncertainty about his views which would once have been a governor's main asset. For it used to be argued that senators made too many enemies by their votes on contentious issues to be 'available'—while governors' views were so unknown that they were almost as ideally available as generals; but more

recently the senators and vice-presidents have benefited from the primacy of foreign policy, the importance of national television exposure, and the growing tendency to vote about issues. Thirdly, Carter began his campaign as an outsider exploiting the anti-Washington mood of the country, unrecognized by those leading liberal media and establishment figures who are regarded by the extreme right (and by themselves) as a kind of sinister (or benevolent) nominating college.

Lastly, Carter emerged through the primary route. Although this is now normal, rather than exceptional, a deadlocked Democratic Convention had seemed likely when that party abolished winner-take-all primaries after 1972; other reforms, opening up caucuses as well as primaries, were assumed to favour ideologically committed activists rather than centrist candidates such as Muskie in 1972. Lastly, then as in 1968, Democrats who had fought bitterly in the primaries would not unite behind the winner. But in 1976 they were eager to return to power and resolved not to split again. Carter's leading rival, Congressman Morris Udall of Arizona, quoted at the Convention a prayer supposedly written for Democratic primaries: 'Oh God, help us to choose words that are sweet and gentle and tender—for tomorrow we may have to eat them'.

At this stage of the campaign the failure of President Ford was as marked as his opponent's success. The advantages of an incumbent President should be overwhelming in a primary: control of the machine, the opportunity to make political news, and the dependence of his party upon his record. But the waning Republican primary electorate is a narrow ideological rump, and Ford very nearly became the first President to lose the nomination since 1884.

The context, of course, was the first resignation of a President and of a vice-president, and the sensational ramifications of Watergate which discredited Cabinet and White House officers and the country's intelligence services. Before and during Nixon's Presidency, trust in government in the United States declined precipitately. President Ford, though an honest man ideally suited to lay the Watergate issue to rest, ensured that it would continue into the 1976 campaign by his blanket pardon for Richard Nixon. In 1974 that produced an immediate slump in Ford's popularity and probably contributed to the Republican rout; in 1976, many who voted against him gave it as their reason.

The President was also blamed for the state of the economy, since unemployment was running at 7.8 per cent on election day—much more for blacks and young people—and tending to rise. Though its political impact is less in the United States than in Britain, unemployment helped to bring back to the Democrats union leaders and members who had defected in 1972, such as the construction workers, the 'hard hat' conservatives of the 1960s. So the Democrats were well placed—but they had a well-known tendency to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by attacking each other rather than the Republicans.

2. The Nominating Process: The Democrats

The experience of 1972 suggested both that squabbles between potential nominees could destroy the opposition party's chance, and that the new participatory system of delegate selection might benefit extremist candidates for the nomination—who had the most committed supporters within the party voting in primaries or attending caucuses, but the least appeal to uncommitted voters outside it; victory in the primaries might thus lead straight to defeat at the polls.

In 1972 Humphrey's unsuccessful attempt to block McGovern powerfully helped the Republicans to label him as a radical.¹ By 1976 there were 30 primaries and no 'winner-take-all' rule; Democratic delegates were allotted proportionately to the votes won in each primary. The expected battle on the Convention floor in turn suggested opportunities for brokerage which helped produce a record number of hopeful candidates—thus increasing the danger of deadlock. Instead, Jimmy Carter confounded all predictions, ensuring the nomination by his victory in Ohio a month before the Convention opened.

Like all recent nominees, Carter began by winning in New Hampshire. He stumbled in New York and Massachusetts. But he beat Governor George Wallace comfortably in Florida (34 to 30 per cent) and Illinois (48 to 28 per cent); Udall narrowly in Wisconsin; and Senator Henry Jackson heavily in Pennsylvania—defeating all his serious rivals where they should have been strongest. By May he had 39 per cent of the delegates chosen, with Udall next with 13 per cent, and only a third of the total remaining to be selected.

Like McGovern in 1972, Carter had learnt the need to run early and almost everywhere—contesting more primaries and doing better in them than anyone else, and collecting some delegates even where he lost. In contrast, his major rivals unwisely husbanded their resources. Governor Brown of California entered too late; Jackson concentrated in vain on large states with many blue collar workers. The liberals failed to choose between their rival champions. Moreover, by entering so many primaries, Carter strengthened his position, matching a setback in New York by a victory the same day in Wisconsin. Perhaps only a former Governor with no responsibilities could afford the time and effort—and the total dedication to electoral victory, which may not be the most desirable characteristic in a president.

The Democratic liberals failed surprisingly, in contrast to 1972. Then, however, McGovern with his enthusiastic band of followers was strongest in the newly opened caucus meetings, where he won more delegates than Muskie, Wallace and Humphrey combined—so that by 1976 the increased number of primaries actually reduced the impact of the most committed activists. Not were they so numerous in 1976, when with the Vietnam war over and jobs scarce, students were more concerned about grades than politics. Finally, in 1972 McGovern understood the new system best because he had proposed it (George Wallace had as many primary votes, but only a third as many delegates). By 1976 others had had time to learn. Yet in one sense the most clearly differentiated candidate was still the beneficiary. In 1968 and 1972 primary candidates differed over issues; in 1976 the main 'issue' was the anti-Washington mood prevailing since Vietnam and Watergate. Jimmy Carter was best placed to exploit it, and, significantly, his most dangerous challenger in the primaries was another Governor, Jerry Brown of California, who also stressed his lack of federal experience, his personal righteousness and his scepticism about the capabilities of government.

Carter's other main asset was his *rapprochement* with blacks. His record on civil rights was exceptional by Southern standards: a racially tolerant family and a performance in the State House, starting with his inaugural speech, which showed that even in the Deep South the time for racial discrimination had ended. (Liberal

¹ R. L. Rubin, *Party Dynamics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 155–6 on the implications.

critics attacked him for being better in office than in his campaign—unhappily a rare accusation against a politician.) Northern liberals with equally good records had not lived their lives among blacks as Carter had, or had to take the same political risks—and it was he, not they, who had trounced George Wallace. Carter won a majority (usually substantial) of the black vote, in every primary except Maryland—while also building a solid base in the South, delighted at finding a favourite son who could win. But his regional background did him some harm in the north-eastern primaries, and he ran poorly in the West.¹

Carter's primary victory helped rally the party faithful round him, but fundamentally he owed his success to their exasperation at the outcome of their past feuding. Four years of Republican rule had painfully taught all northern Democrats that they had more reason to dislike Republicans than each other. President Ford's use of the veto had irritated social reformers; his indifference to the plight of New York worried the cities; high unemployment bore heavily on both black and white workers; the Nixon Court threatened both civil libertarians and labour unions. In 1972 the AFL/CIO had refused to endorse the Democratic presidential candidate for the first time—and instead of a reward, the seamen's and construction unions, which had led the defection, both found their major legislative objectives blocked by the President's veto.

Disillusionment with the Republicans, and a natural will to win, made Democrats willing to bend principle so as to regain power. The liberal United Auto Workers backed Carter not only in Florida against Wallace, but also in Michigan against Udall, because it thought him a stronger candidate. Competing with many rival liberals, and proving more acceptable than the conservative Democrats, Carter achieved his unassailable lead as a candidate of the centre (in national not Democratic Party terms): nearly half his delegates came not from the Democratic heartland but either from states which voted Republican or from the Deep South (last Democratic in 1960). At the Convention, Udall acknowledged defeat with a wit and grace absent among the losers of 1972 and 1968. Carter's acceptance speech was followed by carefully staged benedictions from doves like Bella Abzug, hawks like Henry Jackson, and even George Wallace. The grateful nominee then united the party by choosing the vice-presidential candidate with most appeal to Northern liberals—and also to the country—as a potential successor. In Udall's phrase, the Democratic firing squad for once did not assemble in a circle. This time it was among the Republicans that a bitter fight went right through to their Convention in August.

3. The Republicans Select a Candidate

Voters identifying with the Republican Party, falling in number for years, are now only around 20 per cent. In 1976 the more participatory system of candidate selection helped that intense, motivated and unrepresentative minority in this small and declining party who turned out to vote in primaries or to attend caucus meetings, and nearly enabled their champion Governor Reagan to deny the nomination to the President.

Gerald Ford had not at first intended to seek re-election, and though his decision to do so allowed the prestige and resources of the Presidency to be used

¹ Carter had 21 per cent of Western delegates, 26 per cent from the North-East, 47 per cent of mid-Westerners and 73 per cent of the rest.

in the Republican cause, he proved an unimpressive candidate tainted by having pardoned Nixon. Reagan claimed that being from outside Washington he could better oppose Carter. At first Reagan lost primaries in four states—Florida, Illinois, New York and Pennsylvania (collecting few delegates, since the Republicans retained ‘winner-take-all’). Ford won by less than 1 per cent in New Hampshire, while Reagan took 44 per cent in Wisconsin—but it was the challenger who needed a breakthrough to give his campaign credibility; and with a touch of drama more appropriate to one of his own old cowboy films, Reagan’s luck changed just before he ran out of ammunition. On May Day he won Texas, taking all its 96 delegates, adding 45 in Indiana (to Ford’s 9) and more in Nebraska. Now it was the President whose political life was at risk, even in his home state of Michigan. He survived, but as the Convention approached he was only narrowly ahead, and still unsure of the nomination.

Now Ford began to deploy the resources of the Presidency to the advantage of his campaign, if not of his office. Every uncommitted delegate received an invitation to the White House, or a telephone call from the President on such unlikely topics as federal assistance for Long Island sewerage. Many nevertheless withheld from Ford the handful of votes he needed, so strong were their conservative principles (or their doubts about him as a winner); there was no bandwagon, and the last 100 uncommitted delegates split evenly between Ford and Reagan. Though no closet liberal, as he had shown as House Minority Leader, at the Convention Ford too emerged as the centrist candidate, drawing 63 per cent of his delegates not from the Republican heartland but from states which voted for his opponent.

Yet Reagan misunderstood his supporters’ mood, inviting Senator Schweiker of Pennsylvania to be his running mate. Schweiker was so liberal that he had voted as labour wished on every issue they thought important, and in 1974 had become the first Republican Senate candidate they had ever endorsed. That record was unlikely to attract an average, let alone an uncommitted Republican delegate. Reagan hoped that the Pennsylvania delegation would defect to him and other North Easterners might follow. But Schweiker was an insurgent within the state Republican Party; more significantly, state or regional loyalties no longer override ideological differences in contemporary American politics. Strongest in the South, such loyalties could assist the ideologically ambiguous Carter to become the region’s first nominee for President. But they could not bring Reagan Pennsylvania’s votes, while elsewhere Schweiker cost him support. The affair revealed Reagan’s bad judgement—but also the parlous state of the Republican Party. As a North Eastern liberal, Schweiker did modify Reagan’s Western conservatism in a classic balanced ticket. In rejecting him so vehemently, Reagan’s loyal supporters illustrated their preference for ideological purity over electoral advantage. At least since Senator Goldwater’s rout in 1964, the extreme Right have looked like losers. Ford, with his moderate conservative record, therefore needed to move towards the centre; Reagan’s continuing pressure made that difficult. Further vetoes of domestic bills (like those sought by the unions) hampered Republican chances in November. The party platform repudiated the Secretary of State and much of his foreign policy. Moreover in trying to appease the virulent Right, Ford chose a running-mate quite unfit to be President—and so very likely lost the election. The Democrats gained 3 per cent among voters choosing between not Carter or Ford, but Carter–Mondale or

Ford-Dole; and won four-fifths of the 11 per cent who said that choice had influenced their vote.¹ So, in the Republican instead of the Democratic Party, intra-party democracy again imposed a strategy for winning the nomination which conflicted with the best strategy for winning the election.

4. *The Presidential Campaign*

The election campaign was dispiriting, and the turnout (43.5 per cent of those of voting age and the lowest since 1948) suggests it did little to restore the electorate's trust in government. The media concentrated attention on relative trivia—Ford's claim that the Russians do not dominate Eastern Europe, or Carter's misconstrued reiteration of standard Christian teaching in colloquial language in his *Playboy* interview. The most dramatic feature was Ford's success in almost catching up Carter's lead of over 30 per cent in the opinion polls. For, thanks to Watergate and Nixon, the state of the economy and the fight with Reagan, the President started very weak. But much of Carter's support was always a mile wide and an inch deep. Moreover Ford was at home in the general election where he had been at a loss in the primaries, for since entering Congress he had never fought a fellow-Republican but had regularly campaigned against Democrats; while Carter had plenty of experience of struggles within his own party, but in Georgia had never faced a dangerous Republican opponent.²

Indeed Carter, like Ford, was to find that a strategy good for winning the nomination would not work in the general election. But Ford's real problem derived from the nature of his party, while Carter's was a personal failure to adapt as he knew he must. After successfully stressing his integrity in the primaries while remaining vague on issues, he was slow to switch to a traditional Democratic blast against Republican mishandling of the economy. The post-Watergate electorate was disturbed by both the old allegation of vagueness and the new suspicion that Carter was opportunistically trimming his policies. His Southern background, too, grated on many liberals who prided themselves on their tolerance; and while his devout Baptism had helped him win the nomination as a good man to exorcize Watergate, that religious style is culturally quite alien (especially to Catholics) outside the South. After two recent experiences, too, there was latent uneasiness about an unfamiliar-seeming politician so totally dedicated to winning—and even doubts about his psychological stability, summed up by the Republican jazz trumpeter who said: 'Carter is weird like musicians are supposed to be weird, and I don't want anybody like me running the country'.³

President Ford, in contrast, traded on ordinariness and, being recognized as open, honest and trustworthy, was well placed for a contest in being unlike Nixon. It was he who issued the challenge to the three television debates, and so surprised the voters by appearing as competent as Carter that a majority thought he 'won' the first debate. Moreover, when neither candidate aroused enthusiasm,

¹ *International Herald Tribune*, 1.11.76, and *New York Times*, 5.11.76 (based on polls by Harris, Caddell and C.B.S.). Cf. *Time*, 1 and 15.11.76 (polls by Yankelovitch and N.B.C., showing Mondale ahead of Dole by 15 to 18 per cent).

² See David Broder in *International Herald Tribune*, 6. 10.76.

³ *Time*, 1.11.76.

reluctance to change helped Ford. Incumbent Presidents are not unassailable (those who expect humiliation may not run); and if the presidential mystique alone accounts for Ford's recovery, it is hard to see how he ever fell so far behind. Nevertheless, only Administration candidates have had these outstanding successes in catching up: Presidents Truman and Ford but also Vice-President Humphrey who lacked the mystique but was (all too) closely identified with the outgoing Administration. Very likely American voters, like British ones, are more willing to condemn the government to a pollster at the beginning of the campaign than to do so in the polling-booth at the end.

Ford also benefited from the conservative mood of a country where only 20 per cent called themselves liberals. For to meet the charge of vagueness, and to reassure northern Democrats, Carter invoked the traditions of the New Deal, Fair Deal, and New Frontier. That allowed the President both to rally Republican support and also to tap the hostility to big government so successfully exploited in the primaries by Governor Brown and by Carter himself. The same conservative mood was reflected in numerous state referenda, with several states refusing to limit nuclear power development, California rejecting a migrant farm workers' bill, and Massachusetts heavily defeating gun control. (But the extreme right-wing failed to cripple state activities by financial restrictions in Colorado.)

On election day Ford after all fell 2 per cent short in the popular vote—though the electoral college results were close enough to suggest that for once organization may have made the difference. For, whereas in 1972 President Nixon—if not his party—had far more money and better organization, in 1976 it was a different story. Funds were equal, since a federal grant of \$21 million was available to each major candidate under the new campaign finances act; but the unions' massive efforts for Carter did not count as a campaign contribution and gave the Democrats the balance of organization. They seem to have been effective, for their members' Democratic vote exceeded that of non-unionized blue collar workers by a significant margin. The federal grants, paradoxically, were too meagre for candidates to develop organizations of their own, forcing them back on help from unions, pressure groups and even parties. In one Southern state the Carter organization had 'less than \$50,000, hardly enough for a modest House campaign nowadays . . . we had no separate headquarters, scheduling operation, voter registration effort, etc., but blended into the party campaign . . . what sort of campaign [could] Humphrey in 1968 or McGovern in 1972 have run in the state under these conditions [?]'¹

The opinion polls agreed that Ford was narrowing the gap almost until the end—but also that the trend was reversed in the very last week (though the President's media advertising was concentrated in that period). The later people made up their minds, the likelier they were to vote Democrat. (One English reporter at a rally in New York State spotted a curious banner entitled, 'Undecideds for Carter'.) At the very last minute the doubting Democrats returned home.

5. The Results of the Presidential Election

The election was no landslide, but in the popular vote Carter did better than either Truman or Kennedy (let alone Humphrey).

¹ Letter to one of the authors.

TABLE 1
Four close elections: (A) Historical

	1948	1960	1968	1976
% vote: Dem.	49.6	49.7	42.7	50.1
Ind. Left	2.4			0.9
Rep.	45.1	49.5	43.4	48.0
Deep S.	2.4	0.4	13.5	0.2
Elec. coll. (Dem.)	303	303	191	297

The electoral college vote was so close partly because Eugene McCarthy kept Carter from winning three additional states and 315 electoral votes—more than any Democrat since Roosevelt, apart from Lyndon Johnson in 1964. But more states were decided by small margins, and fewer of these went to the winner, than in previous close elections.¹

TABLE 2
Four close elections: (B) State distribution

<i>Party lead: by states (incl. D.C.)</i>	1948	1960	1968	1976
	Dem. 20% +	5	3	4
4 to 19.9	16	6	6	14
0 to 3.9	7	15	4	7
Rep. 0 to 3.9	7	5	7	11
4 to 19.9	8	18	21	12
20% +	1	2	4	4
Deep South states won by third party candidate	4	1	5	—

The regional distribution of party strengths was basically like that of 1960 and 1968, but the differences were significant. Of the nine states where Carter ran 5 per cent ahead of both his Democratic predecessors, six were in the South and three in the farming Mid-West. He was 5 per cent behind both in five scattered states: Alaska, Utah, Mississippi, Rhode Island and Connecticut (these last two both strongly Catholic). The regional distribution of votes—as of Convention delegates—shows Carter strong in the South and weak in the West. Yet both candidates recognized—by campaigning hard in their opponent's territory—that the country was not nearly as neatly divided as it looks on election maps. The South is not solid as it was before and for Roosevelt; instead of 75–85 per cent of the vote, Carter won only 55 per cent—and in at least three and probably seven of his 10 Southern states he owed his margin of victory to the blacks. Among whites alone he did worst of all in the South, and probably carried only Georgia, Arkansas, and Tennessee. Conversely, west of the Mississippi, where Carter did badly in the primaries, President Ford won 17 out of 19 continental states. Yet the Democrats held in 1976 in the states west of the Mississippi exactly half their senators (19–19), nearly two-thirds of the representatives (76–41) and no less than 17 of their 19 governors.

¹ Ford won 8 of the 11 states decided by 2.0 per cent or less.

TABLE 3
Four close elections: (C) Democratic lead by region

	Truman 1948	Kennedy 1960	Humphrey 1968	Carter 1976
South		2.9		9.8
Border	5.2	-4.4	-3.0	7.0
North-East	-4.4	5.4	7.2	4.5
Mid-West	0.6	-4.4	-3.1	-1.4
West	3.0	-2.2	-5.0	-6.7
South (whites only)				-10

This residual strength of the Democratic Party even in a close presidential election brought Carter back enough votes to win narrowly. Among different social groups the profile of his support is identical to that of Democrats over twenty years, with only one major exception (see Table 4). The blacks, the young, the workers (especially those unionized), the lower income groups and the big

TABLE 4
Group voting for President
(% Democratic difference from national average)

Group	'Normal' (Gallup 1952-72 av.)	1976		
		NBC	CBS	Gallup
White	- 3		- 3	- 4
Non-white	+31	+41	+31	+35
Spanish			+31	
Protestant	- 7*		- 5	- 4
R. Catholic	+10*	+ 5	+ 3	+ 7
Jewish		+21	+17	
Age: 50+	- 3		- 3	+ 2
30-49	+ 3		+ 1?	* - 2
30 or less	+ 6	+ 8	+ 3	+ 3
Prof. & business	- 8		- 8	- 8
Farm	- 6			
White collar	- 3		- 1	0
Manual	+ 8		+ 8	+ 8
T.U. families	+13	+13	+10	+13
High income			-13	
Middle ..			+ 1	
Low ..			+10	
Rural and small			- 1	
Suburb			- 5	
Medium city		+ 7	0	
Big city		+19	+10	
Conservative			-21	
Moderate			+ 2	
Liberal			+22	
Republican	-38		-37	-41
Independent	- 9		- 3	-12
Democratic	+34		+29	+32
Didn't vote			+ 8?	

* excluding 1960.

city dwellers all voted Democratic in much the usual proportions. But Carter carried an unusually small majority of the Catholic vote. This was not because of abortion (which the Catholic Bishops tried to make a campaign issue, but their flock did not follow them). Nor did it show the 'social issue' re-emerging. Rather it was a reflection of a much broader clash of culture, background and style.¹ Probably owing to Catholic reticence, Carter suffered more than average defection among Democrats, though in compensation his share of the Independent vote was unusually large.

6. *Below the Presidency: The Republican Collapse*

Below the presidential level, the situation of the Republican Party looks bad at first sight—and catastrophic on closer examination. Only five of the 50 states have Republican legislative majorities; only 12 have Republican governors (see Table 5). But that may change, for a few victories were won this year (notably in Illinois), and since the war the party out of power presidentially often does well in the states, like the opposition party at the national level in local elections in Britain.

TABLE 5
Democratic % of state governorships

1936	1952	1958	1968	1974
79	38	70	35	74

It is in Congress, where the Republicans have won control only twice in nearly half a century, that their prospects seem gloomiest. They hold only a third of the seats in the House, and under two-fifths in the Senate. Nine incumbent senators lost this year, but even with this unusual slaughter they made no net gain, ending as they began with 38 senators. Yet the Democrats, defending two-thirds of the seats at stake, should have been vulnerable. In 1978, half those up for election will be Republicans—and the Democrats do even better attacking than defending. In a heavily Democratic year like 1974, they won Republican seats without losing their own; in 1976 losses were equal on both sides but were two-thirds of the

TABLE 6
Democratic % for senate 1974 and 1976 (change since last election)

	1968-74			1970-76		
	Up	Down	Median	Up	Down	Median
For all Dem. seats	9	7	+1½	7	12	+4
For incumbents only	6	6	+0½	6	9	-2½
Against all Rep. seats	11	3	+6½	8	2	+5½
Against incumbents only	6	3	+4	5	1	+4½
S/SW/Border (20 states)	7	2	+4	6	3	+4
In North (30 states)	13	8	+2	9	11	-1½

¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, 'The Catholic Defection', *The New Republic*, Vol. 75, no. 14, October 2, 1976.

Republican seats (7 out of 11), only one-third of the Democratic (7 out of 21). Among incumbents, over half the Republicans were beaten but only one-third of the Democrats (see Table 6). Moreover, while no incumbent lost in a state carried by his party's candidate for president, far more Democrats survived in states won by Ford than Republicans in states carried by Carter (see Table 7).

TABLE 7
Senate 'coat-tails' 1976

	<i>Dems.</i>		<i>Reps.</i>		<i>Elected</i>	
	<i>Defended</i>	<i>Lost</i>	<i>Defended</i>	<i>Lost</i>	<i>Dems.</i>	<i>Reps.</i>
All seats	21	-7	11	-7	21	11
Carter states	9	-2	7	-5	12	4
Ford states	12	-5	4	-2	9	7
Incumbents only	17	-5	7	-4		
Where pres. cand. won	7	-0	2	-0		
Where pres. cand. lost	10	-5	5	-4		

The Republicans are even weaker in the House of Representatives. Incumbent Republican Congressmen have recently proved more vulnerable than Democrats; but in 'open' seats (with no incumbent), nearly half those formerly held by a Republican have gone to the other side (see Table 8). Nor were the Republican losses random, for the post-Watergate flood in 1974 swept away conservatives in droves but hardly any liberals; and in 1976, when few seats were lost and only three which had looked safe, all three had just been vacated by a liberal. But where individual Democrats lost normally safe seats, the reasons varied: the Southern choice of a conservative whose opponent attracted many black votes; the death of a popular Representative whose hastily chosen successor was exposed as a fraud; the indictment of a member for bribery; and the disillusionment of voters (in the very district once selected to illustrate 'the triumph of incumbency') when the hitherto triumphant incumbent was identified, in a newspaper, as one of 'the ten dumbest Congressmen'.¹

TABLE 8
House losses by party

	1974		1976	
	<i>Ran</i>	<i>Lost</i>	<i>Ran</i>	<i>Lost</i>
Dem. incumbents	215	-4	252	-7
Repub. incumbents	162	-36	128	-5
Dem. 'open'	33	-2	38	-3
Repub. 'open'	25	-15	17	-7

¹ For the district (Pennsylvania 24): W. D. Burnham in W. N. Chambers and Burnham, *The American Party System* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975), 2nd edn., pp. 333-4. For the incumbent, M. Barone, D. Matthews and G. Ujifusa, *The American Political Almanac*, 1976, p. 760.

TABLE 9
Congressmen by region over 50 years (Democrats followed by Republicans)

<i>No. of States</i>	<i>1924</i>	<i>1938</i>	<i>1962</i>	<i>1976</i>
9 East	28- 94	50- 72	56- 52	73- 31
11 Midwest	19-104	43- 79	36- 76	60- 51
8/10 West	3- 27	26- 13	35- 28	47- 22
28/30 North	50-225	119-164	127-156	180-104
9 SW/Border	30- 21	44- 3	36- 9	31- 12
11 South	102- 2	100- 2	95- 11	81- 27
50 U.S.	182-248	263-169	258-176	292-143

Over the past half century the Democrats have gained throughout the North. In both Wisconsin and Washington state 25 years ago, the Republicans elected all but one Congressman; now they have two House districts left in the former and one in the latter. In California and Pennsylvania they had half the House seats in bad years and two-thirds in good ones; in each they now hold fewer than a third;¹ so there is now a large Northern majority in the Democratic caucus (see Table 9). Democratic losses in the South contributed to that shift, beginning in the 1950s, accelerating in the 1960s and continuing even in 1964 when the Democrats were sweeping the rest of the country. But in 1974 the Southern decline was reversed, and the ground retrieved was retained this year (see Table 10).

Most ominous of all for the Republicans is the defection of the suburbs. The cities have been Democratic for decades, except in the South where the Republicans gains were urban. But until recently most of suburbia, the fastest-growing section of the American electorate, was assumed to be a Republican stronghold constituting, with the expanding 'sunbelt', the foundation of the 'emerging

TABLE 10
(1) Congressmen by region over 14 years (Democrats followed by Republicans)

<i>No. of States</i>	<i>1962</i>	<i>1972</i>	<i>1974</i>	<i>1976</i>
5 Deep South	37- 0	27- 9	28- 8	28- 8
6 Rim South	58- 11	47- 25	53- 19	53- 19
9 SW/Border	36- 9	29- 14	32- 11	31- 12
20 S/SW/B	131- 20	103- 48	113- 38	112- 39
30 North	127-156	140-144	178-106	180-104
50 U.S.	258-176	243-192	291-144	292-143

(2) House regional democratic majorities over 20 years

30 North	-29	-4	72	76
9 SW/Border	27	15	21	19
11 South	84	40	54	54
50 U.S.	82	51	147	149

¹ Republicans also had six of the eight senators in these four states, but retain only three; and all the four governors, but now have none.

TABLE 11
Cities and suburbs in the 1970s

No. of States	1972		Net D 1974-6	1976	
	Dem.	Rep.		Dem.	Rep.
Cities					
39 North	67	14	+6	73	8
11 South	16	8	-1	15	9
Suburbs					
39 North	41	72	+22	63	50
11 South	9	3	+3	12	—
All seats					
39 North	169	158	+42	211	116
11 South	74	34	+7	81	27
U.S.	243	192	+49	292	143

Republican majority'. But in 1974 the Democrats made sweeping gains, half of them in the suburbs, which they held in 1976 (see Table 11).¹

In the new Congress the senior members no longer dominate in either numbers or influence. Turnover has been so rapid recently that 42 of the 100 Senators are in their first term and 150 of the 435 Representatives in their first or second. The new members have chosen new majority leaders in both chambers and a new Speaker of the House, and all are likely to use their authority more than their self-effacing predecessors. Recent procedural reforms have expanded that authority while weakening their rivals for power, the committee chairmen. Few survive of the old extreme conservative Southerners who once formed a powerful oligarchy opposed to the political outlook of most congressional Democrats. Nor does the senior majority member automatically accede to the chair of his committee; he can now be rejected by the caucus (three were, and all know it). The caucus meets monthly, instead of every two years; its resolutions are not binding, but its Steering and Policy Committee (half chosen by the leadership, half elected by regions) provides a policy-making instrument for the leaders. Several notorious stumbling blocks have gone: Northern liberals have succeeded Southern conservatives as chairmen of both the Ways and Means and the Rules Committees; the former has lost (to the new Steering Committee) its power to assign all Democratic members to their committees; the latter consists of the Speaker's nominees (as it did before 1910). Three-fifths of the Senate instead of two-thirds can break a filibuster.

Besides the changes of rules and membership, the Democratic majority over the last four years in opposition to the President has painfully discovered that it is too weak to generate its own policy-making leadership. In reaction to Vietnam and Watergate, Congress asserted its independence of the White House—but with a Republican President and a Democratic legislature, both sides felt frustrated. During their debates President Ford's staff hoped to discredit Governor Carter by using a lie detector, but could not because the President himself registered heavy stress whenever he uttered the word 'Congress';² while

¹ Districts with at least 51 per cent 'central city' or 'suburban' according to the *Almanac of American Politics*.

² *International Herald Tribune*, 8.11.76.

the Democrats with their two-thirds majority were chastened to find they could rarely override Ford's vetoes. The mere fact of a common party interest by no means guarantees that a Democratic President will work amicably with a Democrat-controlled Congress. Yet with a rejuvenated Congressional rank and file, new leaders wielding new instruments to influence their followers, fewer and vastly weaker conservative chairmen to obstruct, and a new sense of the need for cooperation with the President, Jimmy Carter enjoys perhaps the best opportunity for creative political leadership of any Democrat since Roosevelt. And, having won so narrow a victory while his Congressional colleagues were winning overwhelmingly, the new President too has reason to understand that they need one another.

7. *The 'Separation of Parties': Many Theories, no Explanation*

The election of 1976 showed again the astonishing discrepancy between the Republican performance in elections for Congress and for the Presidency (see Table 12). Where the Democrats were defending senatorial seats, Governor

TABLE 12
Presidency, Senate and Governors in 1976: party results

	<i>For Senate (and Pres.)</i>			<i>For Gov. (and Pres.)</i>		
	<i>Ahead</i>	<i>Behind</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Ahead</i>	<i>Behind</i>	<i>Median</i>
Dem.: All candidates as vs. Carter	14	5	+11%	5	3	+51%
Incumbents only vs. Carter	12	3	+12	3	1	
Rep.: All candidates as vs. Ford	4	7	-3	3	3	0
Incumbents only vs. Ford	3	4	-1	3	0	

Carter ran far behind his party and ahead of only three incumbents: just ahead of Senator Tunney of California, and comfortably in front of Hartke of Indiana and Montoya of New Mexico (an outcome suggesting some discrimination among the voters). Conversely President Ford, in losing the election, did better than most Republican candidates. This discrepancy has persisted since the New Deal. The Republicans since the war have won control of Congress only twice—comfortably in 1946 and narrowly in 1952. For a century, no President had entered the White House without carrying the House of Representatives for his party—yet subsequently three Republican Presidents have done so: Eisenhower in 1956 and Nixon in 1968 and 1972. Yet though keeping control of both branches of Congress since 1954, the Democrats have only once won more than 51 per cent of the vote in any presidential election (see Table 13).

TABLE 13
Presidency and house 1946-76: % Democratic

	'46	'48	'50	'52	'54	'56	'58	'60	'62	'64	'66	'68	'70	'72	'74	'76
Pres.		49½		44½		42		50		61		43		38		51
House		54		50		51		55		58		51		53		57
House	43		50+		53		56		52		51		54		59	

At first this contrast was attributed to accident. General Eisenhower was so 'available'—since nobody knew what he thought—that he had been favoured for the Presidency by Southern Democrats and Northern liberals as well as Republicans. 'Ticket splitting' was first explained by his personal popularity, and then when it outlasted him, by the advantages of incumbency with which the Democrats, once they achieved a Congressional majority, could entrench themselves. These advantages have indeed enabled many Democrats to make safe seats out of former Republican districts, retaining most of those won in 1958 and (so far) in 1974—though not so many of the 1964 gains. But far fewer Republicans have succeeded in exploiting these advantages.

Subsequently a series of structural explanations have been developed to account for the discrepancy. The Democrats are handicapped because poorer and less well-educated Americans vote less: in 1976 a poll found that Governor Carter led by 52–35 per cent among non-voters; had they all voted he would have won by 8 instead of 2 per cent.¹ But if that factor were decisive, the Democrats should do worse not better for Congress, since turnout in off years falls about 15 per cent. A second popular explanation was that the Democrats were a 'broad church', favouring different policies in different parts of the country to win seats in Congress, where they can vote on both sides of every issue; but in a presidential election they have found it hard to agree on one candidate to support throughout the nation. Valid up to twenty years ago, this explanation has lost most of its point with the tremendous changes in Southern politics, as the Republicans take over the old Southern Democrats' conservative heritage. The newer Southern Democrats, though no radicals, are far less conservative than the Republicans, and nearly all Democratic candidates throughout the nation are now much more liberal than their Republican opponents.

Another popular explanation pointed to biases in the electoral system: in Congress, bad apportionment of seats to population over-represented the rural areas and favoured long-serving conservatives; while block voting in the presidential electoral college put a premium on carrying the large industrial states; to win them, Democrats had to stimulate a high city turnout to overcome the suburban and rural Republican majorities, while Republicans had to avoid playing into their hands by alienating the city voters. Consequently liberals were at a premium in both parties in elections for President and Governor, just as conservatives were for Congress, and a 'four-party system' arose: conservative Democrats and Republicans in the legislature, liberals of each party in the executive offices. But both halves of the 'double gerrymander' have now disappeared. Reapportionment has destroyed the rural majorities in the legislatures; while the rapidly growing suburbs, not the big cities, now decide the electoral vote of the big states. Since James McGregor Burns wrote in 1963, the situation has so changed that the conservative wing has given the Republican Party three presidential candidates (and its last governor of the largest state) but has no majority among its Senators. For Schweiker is only an extreme example of the Eastern Republican Senator who carries an industrial state by voting liberal, and not only wins over normally Democratic voters—Catholics and union members—himself, but creates a habit of defection which helps Republican Presidential

¹ *International Herald Tribune*, 20–21.11.76 (CBS poll). Carter won 8 of the 10 states where turnout was up 3 per cent or more, and lost 9 of the 12 where it was down by that amount.

candidates too.¹ A last explanation for the discrepancy, popular a few years ago, was that the electorate positively preferred a divided government, choosing one party for Congress and the other for the White House. President Ford even argued at one stage that he should be re-elected to veto the spendthrift plans of a Democratic Congress. But the theory, like ticket-splitting and incumbency, works one way only: landslides which carry Republicans into the White House make no visible impact on Congress, but in 1964 a landslide Democratic victor swept huge majorities into Congress on his coat-tails.

8. *The Role of the Ideologues*

It is not the Democratic domination of Congress which makes the above discrepancy surprising. Voting behaviour surveys showed the electorate to be ill-informed, indifferent and incoherent about politics in 1956, but much more alert by 1964. American voters now care about issues, have consistent views on them, and correctly appraise the Democrats as the more liberal party.² The Republicans steadily shrink to a rump both in voter identification and in Congressional seats because their politicians (or their primary electorate) demand domestic policies too conservative for the average voter.³ Republicans have fallen in party identification; the Democrats have fluctuated around 42 per cent; Independents have grown rapidly, especially among the young and among conservative southerners—while the Democrats, as in Congress, recoup losses there by northern gains.⁴ In Congress an occasional Democrat may stray too far to the Left for local opinion—which in the South may not be very far; or an elderly or corrupt or ineffective incumbent (of either side) may lose; or a popular liberal Republican may deter or defeat primary challengers. But broadly the Republicans' conservative commitment explains why ticket-splitting, or incumbency, or presidential landslides sweep Democrats into office and then entrench them there, but rarely help their rivals in comparable circumstances.

The problem is thus the Democrats' inability to translate dominance in Congress, reflecting nowadays the electorate's clear preference for their political outlook, into any comparable advantage, even against conservative Republicans, in elections for the most powerful office of all. For that office voters try to choose the man not the party—yet why cannot the Democrats, with a wider pool of experienced talent, pick the more attractive leader? Why, in a generation which has seen only one really popular candidate, do unappealing men from the unpopular party perform so well?

¹ Rubin, *Party Dynamics*, Ch. 4.

² N. H. Nie, S. Verba, and J. R. Petrochik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976) especially Chs. 8–12 and 19. R. G. Niemi and H. F. Weisberg, *Controversies in American Voting Behaviour* (San Francisco, Freeman, 1976) especially Chs. 5–13. G. Pomper, *Voters' Choice* (New York, Harper & Row, 1975), Chs. 2, 8.

³ Surveys find a huge gap between those giving liberal answers to abstract ideological questions (16 per cent) and to questions about specific policies (65 per cent): Rubin, *Party Dynamics*, pp. 42–4; J. G. Stewart, *One Last Chance* (New York, Praeger, 1974), pp. 106–12.

⁴ E. C. Ladd, Jr. and C. D. Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System* (New York, Norton, 1975), pp. 125, 143–5, 159–61, 231, 259; Burnham, *American Party System*, p. 318 (both based on Gallup figures). Cf. Nie et al, *Changing American Voter*, pp. 60, 83, 217–23 (figures from S.R.C. data). Stewart, *One Last Chance*, pp. 99–101. J. L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, Brookings Institution, 1975), pp. 346–50.

Any hypotheses should be tentative, for too many commentators confidently generalize from the latest election, the best of them sometimes condemning the practice and committing it in the same breath.¹ It is clear that the Democrats are still a 'broad church', though in a new form. Once their problem was to reconcile the solid South and the Northern Catholic working class; since Roosevelt, pressure from northern blacks and liberals destroyed that coalition. Over 30 years the South has become a terrain for party competition around much the same issues as in the North (though further to the Right); but while southern politics turn increasingly on class instead of race, in the North the shift has been the other way. The Democrats have steadily expanded their middle class clientele, attracting half the managerial and professional voters of 1972 (for Congress) compared to a third in 1948;² their suburban gains reflect that change.³ The strains of resolving the old conflict between northern integrationists and southern segregationists have declined as the latter die off or change party or capitulate (even the rival Mississippi Democratic parties have merged, and Senators Eastland and Stennis campaigned alongside Charles Evers and Aaron Henry to give Carter his narrow victory there). But now, with the Vietnam war over and the 'social issue' apparently in abeyance, the coalition is still under heavy strain even on the economic front. For the 1976 campaign has shown that even when race is not salient, Democrats terrified of unemployment have to be reconciled with other Democrats alarmed at inflation.

Such conflicts would once have been mediated by pragmatic politicians, concerned for their own local power and not for ideology, using the Convention to work out a compromise on men and measures which could bring victory at the polls. That is much harder with declining hereditary party identification, weaker organisation, the rise of issue politics and of the middle class activist. Presidential primaries have spread rapidly since 1968, reviving the old Progressive tradition, which promoted individualist popular participation and insurgency against the party regulars. But the primary voters are less concerned than the professional politicians with choosing a winner: many are enthusiasts seeking to stamp their party with their own image. Like the earliest Progressive reforms, these help the leisured and educated middle-class activist against the urban politicians and union leaders based on the working class. So, in recent presidential elections, issue politics and the primacy of primaries have changed both the rules of the game and the character of the players. Goldwater in 1964, McCarthy in 1968, McGovern in 1972 showed that a party's enthusiasts, committed to an ideological cause rather than an electoral victory, could impose on it too heavy a handicap to be overcome.⁴

Yet there were major differences as well as similarities between Goldwater's campaign and those of the liberal Democrats. The former depended on amateur enthusiasts, but he won (narrowly) only one primary; McCarthy relied on these; McGovern did well in them but best in the caucuses. Moreover, Goldwater expressed long-standing frustrations against the compromises of the eastern moderates rather than concern about the war. Normally the Republicans benefit

¹ Ladd and Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, pp. 341-3.

² Ladd and Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, pp. 98-9, 237.

³ Rubin, *Party Dynamics*, pp. 18, 98ff.

⁴ Ladd and Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, Ch. 6; Rubin, *Party Dynamics*, pp. 96-106, 156-71; Nie et al, *Changing American Voter*, Chs. 17 and 18.

when external affairs are salient—if only because the unlucky Democrats, as Senator Dole gleefully said, held office when every twentieth-century war began. External affairs have been salient for the Presidency—though not for Congress—ever since 1945; especially so when the country is at war, as it was during three (technically four) of those eight elections. Both McCarthy and McGovern concentrated on the very issue which was most damaging to them; and perhaps it is not accidental that the first Democrat nominated after the return of peace should be a moderate winning through the primaries which, after 1972, were expected to wreck them and their party—but instead demonstrated that the Republicans also suffer from activists committed to purity rather than power.

It may be that future presidential elections will be less detached from party politics than many since the war, for a characteristic of one party has too easily been projected onto the other. Republican candidates will doubtless play down their party identification in order to appeal to the wider electorate—and will have trouble appealing also to their own primary electorate seeking a candidate not to win but to witness. But that Democrats must fight personal campaigns independent of the party is neither confirmed by past experience nor evident for the future: even since 1950 fewer Democratic candidates have obscured their party allegiance than have stressed it. Stevenson, who began the supposed trend, never sought the nomination, built no personal base but merely tried to keep his distance from an unpopular Administration; in 1956 he took a different approach (though with no better success). Humphrey might have been wise to emulate Stevenson's 1952 strategy, but did not, for he owed his nomination to the party regulars. Kennedy won his through a personal machine, but worked closely with many established leaders. Carter, like McCarthy and McGovern, set out to wrest it from them by creating his own organization; but though at first he tried to rely on the same staff in the general election, he soon reverted to working closely with the party. Like Kennedy, he plainly could not have reached the White House without it—while McGovern, who sought and failed to remake it in his own image, went down to disaster. No generalization can reasonably be based on the completely opposite cases of 1972 and 1964—when President Johnson neglected the party for exactly the contrary reason: he was an incumbent whose unpopular challenger split the opposition, and he played down party identification to encourage its dissidents to defect. (And while like Nixon in 1972 he won a landslide victory as a 'loner', both men found themselves paying a heavy price before their term was out.) Americans expect their President to be competent and able to govern; suspicion on that account, much more than his programme, cost McGovern so dearly in 1972. Americans expect their President to reflect and embody certain values and standards of conduct, and they react against those they think have betrayed them. Even landslide victors are not immune from such a reaction, which prevented Lyndon B. Johnson from governing effectively and Richard M. Nixon from governing at all.¹

Some recent generalizations about the American political system therefore deserve reconsideration, and some traditions, supposedly buried, may still have life in them. The nationalization of political conflict has not only brought the South back into party competition but made individual Southerners again available for national office. Increasing issue awareness among voters has not

¹ Stewart, *One Last Chance*, Ch. 6.

prevented governors re-emerging from their ideological obscurity as formidable contenders, or moderate candidates from winning primaries. The primaries themselves confounded expectations, eliminating not the Democratic moderates but the liberals (and George Wallace), and producing not a quarrelsome deadlock but a clear winner who could also unite the party. Instead they damaged the Republicans, whose incumbent (though unelected) President was humiliated by his own followers and rejected by the voters. In spite of the decline in party identification, in 1976 the first President since 1960 will enter the White House thanks to his own party. For only the second time since the New Deal he has the opportunity—frustrated twelve years ago by war and racial conflict—for constructive cooperation with a potentially congenial majority in Congress.

Copyright of Political Studies is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.