

# THE ELECTIONS OF 2008

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## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Contributors</i>	ix
1. The Setting: Diversifying the Presidential Talent Pool <i>Michael Nelson</i>	1
<i>The 2008 presidential election produced the most diverse field of candidates in U.S. history. Americans elected their first African American president, and they seem ready to elect other candidates who do not fit the traditional profile of white, male, and Christian.</i>	
2. The Nominations: Rules, Strategies, and Uncertainty <i>Barry C. Burden</i>	22
<i>An unpredictable nomination process and differing political environments for the Republican and Democratic parties led to the nominations of John McCain and Barack Obama.</i>	
3. The Presidential Election: Change Comes to America <i>Gerald M. Pomper</i>	45
<i>One of the most dramatic elections in American history overcame the nation's racial history, transformed voting patterns, altered campaign methods, and tested theories of voter behavior. In the midst of economic travail, the outcome may have set the stage for new national electoral coalitions and a major shift in public policies.</i>	
4. The Presidency: The Unexpected Competence of the Barack Obama Administration <i>Paul J. Quirk and Bruce Nesmith</i>	74
<i>Obama entered the White House with extraordinary skills, an experienced team, broad public support, and an intention to govern as a centrist. But, he must work with a Congress that has no political center from which he can draw support, and he faces challenges that may have no solutions.</i>	
5. Congress: The Second Democratic Wave <i>Gary C. Jacobson</i>	100
<i>The 2008 congressional elections extended the pro-Democratic national tide that gave the Democrats control of Congress in 2006, and they did so largely for the same basic reason: ever deepening public unhappiness with the Bush administration's performance.</i>	

6. The Media: Coloring the News 122

**Marjorie Randon Hershey**

*Despite widespread charges of a pro-Obama bias, mainstream media coverage of Obama featured themes promoted by the Republican campaign to a greater extent than their coverage of McCain repeated Democratic themes. The Obama campaign had a clear edge, however, in the use of new media such as text messaging and social networking sites including YouTube.*
7. Voting Behavior: A Blue Nation? 145

**Nicole Mellow**

*An economic crisis helped Democrats secure their biggest victory in more than forty years. Yet despite Democratic success, voters' partisan loyalties largely sustained the red versus blue division of the country that has prevailed in other recent elections.*
8. Campaign Finance: Fundraising and Spending in the 2008 Elections 163

**Marian Currinder**

*Disproportionately heavy spending on behalf of Democratic candidates and causes, combined with difficult political circumstances, proved too much for Republicans in 2008. Many aspects of campaign finance remained constant, however, despite all the talk of change.*
9. The Meaning of the 2008 Election 187

**David R. Mayhew**

*An absence of incumbent candidates, a customary bent toward homeostasis in the electorate, a good showing by Barack Obama among all races, and the Wall Street crash all shaped the Democratic victory of 2008.*

## The Meaning of the 2008 Election

David R. Mayhew

The “meaning” of any election is a socially constructed product. We are still trying to figure out the meaning of the election of 1800, which has generated some interesting books lately.<sup>1</sup> What does it really mean that Jefferson beat Adams? On the practical side, the assessments of elections right after they occur by journalists, academics, politicians, and others are a feature of the electoral cycle itself. What is it that just happened? We need to know. Many voices weigh in. Quick comparisons are made, quick judgments are rendered, and those judgments often enter into the ensuing political life of the country.

Without much question, the paramount meaning or significance of the 2008 election is that an African American candidate was elected president of the United States. That makes it an extraordinary event. It is historic. It may reshape racial relations in the United States. But I have little to say about the matter here, since the significance is plain to all. Also, I have little to say about the election’s demographics, which are pretty well vetted in this volume, as well as in the media. Nor do I say anything about whether the nomination of Sarah Palin for vice president cost the Republicans. Possibly it did, but nobody really knows.

What does that leave? I offer here certain quick comparisons, frames, judgments, and perspectives of other sorts about the presidential and congressional elections of 2008. My bents are toward history and simple statistics.

### An Open-Seat Presidential Election

Counting 2008, the United States has now had fifty-six presidential elections, beginning with the first held in 1788. What can be said about this long experience that might help frame the one in 2008? I would like to steer past any speculation about “realignments” or “critical elections.” I do not believe that these ideas lead anywhere useful.<sup>2</sup> A good basic ordering question for the two-century-plus history of U.S. elections seems to be: When an election took place, did the party then holding the presidency run an incumbent candidate? In two of those fifty-six elections, 1788 and 1824, that question doesn’t seem to make much sense, but in the other fifty-four instances it does.<sup>3</sup> Then, a follow-up question for each of these fifty-four instances is: For an in-office party, did running an incumbent presidential candidate, as opposed to navigating an open-seat election, affect its chances of keeping the presidency?

As can be seen in the top half of Table 9-1, running an incumbent candidate seems to help a party. In roughly two-thirds of the relevant instances—twenty-one cases out of thirty-one—incumbent presidential candidates have won reelection. Most recently, Bill Clinton in 1996 and George W. Bush in 2004 did so. No surprise. There are several reasons for this incumbency advantage.<sup>4</sup> Once in office, presidents acquire skills, enjoy prerogatives, and can deploy resources. Most presidents have conducted previous winning campaigns—an education of sorts. Also, like prize fighters who keep winning fights, presidents are in general alpha politicians by nature, whereas most losers in the presidential realm rank in comparison as betas.<sup>5</sup> Voters, for their part, may be risk averse—why take a chance on a novice in the White House? Or voters may be stuck in their previous voting behavior that favored a particular politician.<sup>6</sup>

Of greater relevance to the election of 2008 is the bottom half of Table 9-1—the twenty-three open-seat presidential elections. Until 2008, in-parties navigating open-seat elections kept the White House only 50 percent of the time. They had eleven wins and eleven losses. The election of 2008 has added another case to the loss column, rendering an up-to-date record of eleven wins and twelve losses. On balance in American history, in-office *parties* trying to keep the White House have enjoyed no electoral advantage whatever when they have failed to run in-office *candidates*.

A side question might be: Does it help an in-party to run an incumbent vice president for the presidency? The 2008 election was the only one since 1952 featuring neither an incumbent president nor an incumbent vice president. The historical evidence bearing on this question is vastly too slim to allow much purchase, but I doubt it. The logic seems weak. Serving very publicly as second banana for four years under an all-powerful president doesn't seem to add up to much of a credential. And the retiring presidents haven't always been helpful. In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson made Hubert Humphrey look weak. In 2000, was Bill Clinton a plus for Al Gore? (Gore didn't think so.) For the record, there have been three move-up successes—John Adams in 1796, Martin Van Buren in 1836, and George H. W. Bush in 1988. There have been three move-up failures—Nixon in 1960, Humphrey in 1968, and Gore in 2000. There is also the odd case of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, who won as an incumbent vice president challenging an incumbent president of the other party.

I am arguing here that the full historical universe of open-seat presidential elections provides a kind of yardstick. How does the contest of 2008 register on that yardstick? To draw some comparisons, let me shift from the binary won-loss record to a consideration of popular vote shares. That means dropping the three earliest elections in U.S. history from the open-seat data set of twenty-three, since the early contests of 1796, 1808, and 1816 do not have usable popular vote data.<sup>7</sup> That leaves twenty open-seat contests. For each of them, a question or two can be addressed regarding the major-party share of the national popular vote.

One question is: Lacking an incumbent candidate, how well did the in-party do? See Table 9-2, which ranks the twenty results from worst to best. The median performance is 49.6 percent of the major-party vote—very close

Table 9-1 Has the Party Holding the Presidency Kept It?

Elections with an incumbent candidate running	
Yes, kept the presidency (N = 21)	No, lost the presidency (N = 10)
1792–Washington	1800–J. Adams lost to Jefferson
1804–Jefferson	1828–J. Q. Adams lost to Jackson
1812–Madison	1840–Van Buren lost to W. H. Harrison
1820–Monroe	1888–Cleveland lost to B. Harrison
1832–Jackson	1892–B. Harrison lost to Cleveland
1864–Lincoln	1912–Taft lost to Wilson
1872–Grant	1932–Hoover lost to F. D. Roosevelt
1900–McKinley	1976–Ford lost to Carter
1904–T. Roosevelt	1980–Carter lost to Reagan
1916–Wilson	1992–G. H. W. Bush lost to Clinton
1924–Coolidge	
1936–F. D. Roosevelt	
1940–F. D. Roosevelt	
1944–F. D. Roosevelt	
1948–Truman	
1956–Eisenhower	
1964–L. B. Johnson	
1972–Nixon	
1984–Reagan	
1996–Clinton	
2004–G. W. Bush	
Elections without an incumbent running (with winners named)	
Yes, kept the presidency (N = 11)	No, lost the presidency (N = 12)
1796–J. Adams	1844–Polk
1808–Madison	1848–Taylor
1816–Monroe	1852–Pierce
1836–Van Buren	1860–Lincoln
1856–Buchanan	1884–Cleveland
1868–Grant	1896–McKinley
1876–Hayes	1920–Harding
1880–Garfield	1952–Eisenhower
1908–Taft	1960–Kennedy
1928–Hoover	1968–Nixon
1988–G. H. W. Bush	2000–G. W. Bush
	2008–Obama

Note: Omitted from the calculations are 1788, when the presidency was new, and 1824, when all the serious contenders for the office were of the same hegemonic party.

to 50–50 that the binary win-loss pattern would suggest. Tied at that median figure are the in-party Republicans who lost to Grover Cleveland in 1884 and the in-party Democrats who lost to Nixon in 1968. (Note that this 1968 value, involving just the major-party vote, ignores the third-party vote that year for George Wallace.) Worst-performing, at the top of Table 9-2, were the in-party Democrats in Warren Harding's landslide Republican victory of 1920. Best-performing were the in-party Republicans in 1928, when Herbert Hoover benefited from a booming economy and the Democrats' nomination of a Roman Catholic candidate, Al Smith. In the top half of the table one gets a whiff of

Table 9-2 Percentages of the Major-Party Popular Vote Won by the Incumbent Parties' Candidates in Open-Seat Presidential Elections

Year	Incumbent party	Winning candidate	Incumbent party percentage
1920	Democrat	Harding (Republican)	36.1
1860	Democrat	Lincoln (Republican)	42.5 <sup>1</sup>
1952	Democrat	Eisenhower (Republican)	44.7
1852	Whig	Pierce (Democrat)	46.4
<u>2008</u>	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Obama (Democrat)</u>	<u>46.6</u>
1848	Democrat	Taylor (Whig)	47.3
1896	Democrat	McKinley (Republican)	47.3
1876	Republican	Hayes (Republican)	48.5
1844	Whig	Polk (Democrat)	49.3
1884	Republican	Cleveland (Democrat)	49.6
1968	Democrat	Nixon (Republican)	49.6
1960	Republican	Kennedy (Democrat)	49.9 <sup>2</sup>
1880	Republican	Garfield (Republican)	50.1
2000	Democrat	G. W. Bush (Republican)	50.3
1836	Democrat	Van Buren (Democrat)	50.9 <sup>3</sup>
1868	Republican	Grant (Republican)	52.7
1988	Republican	G. H. W. Bush (Republican)	53.9
1908	Republican	Taft (Republican)	54.5
1856	Democrat	Buchanan (Democrat)	57.8
1928	Republican	Hoover (Republican)	58.8

<sup>1</sup> This is the Stephen Douglas share of the Abraham Lincoln plus Douglas vote.

<sup>2</sup> This is a vexed result. The figure rises to more than 50.0 if the Alabama popular vote is counted in a plausible, albeit unconventional, way.

<sup>3</sup> The Whig vote adds together the vote for three regional candidates.

various kinds of disaster—the grim aftermath of World War I downing the Democrats in 1920, the breakup of the Union depressing the Democrats in 1860, the Korean War harming the Democrats in 1952, the backwash of the Mexican War possibly damaging the Democrats in 1848, and the great, long-lasting depression of 1893 continuing to damage the Democrats in 1896.

How about Barack Obama's victory in 2008? See the underlined row in Table 9-2. From the perspective of this table, the performance of the in-party Republicans in 2008 was not great. At 46.6 percent, they did three points worse than the historical median.<sup>8</sup>

Another application of the open-seat yardstick is possible. See Table 9-3, which reorganizes the data of Table 9-2 to show something different. Here, the winning presidential candidates are ranked according to their popular vote percentages, regardless of whether they ran as nominees of the in-party. In-party or out-party, how did the winners perform in open-seat contests? At the top of the table, note that the big open-seat winners were Harding in 1920 and Hoover in 1928. At the bottom of the table appear George W. Bush in 2000 and Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876—both lofted to office by the Electoral College despite losing the national popular vote. In general in the table, note that open-seat elections tend to be close. Fifteen of the twenty winners have won with less than 55 percent of the major-party popular vote. Where is Obama? Close to the middle of the pack at 53.4 percent. According to this

Table 9-3 Winning Candidate's Percentage of Major-Party Vote in Open-Seat Presidential Elections, 1936–2008

Year	Winning candidate	Party	Vote percentage
1920	Warren Harding	Republican	63.9
1928	Herbert Hoover	Republican	58.8
1856	James Buchanan	Democrat	57.8
1860	Abraham Lincoln	Republican	57.5 <sup>1</sup>
1952	Dwight Eisenhower	Republican	55.3
1908	William Howard Taft	Republican	54.5
1988	George H. W. Bush	Republican	53.9
1852	Franklin Pierce	Democrat	53.6
<u>2008</u>	<u>Barack Obama</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>53.4</u>
1868	Ulysses Grant	Republican	52.7
1848	Zachary Taylor	Whig	52.5
1896	William McKinley	Republican	52.5
1836	Martin Van Buren	Democrat	50.9 <sup>2</sup>
1844	James Polk	Democrat	50.7
1884	Grover Cleveland	Democrat	50.4
1968	Richard Nixon	Republican	50.4
1880	James Garfield	Republican	50.1
1960	John F. Kennedy	Democrat	50.1 <sup>3</sup>
2000	George W. Bush	Republican	49.7
1876	Rutherford Hayes	Republican	48.5

<sup>1</sup> This is the Abraham Lincoln share of the Lincoln plus Stephen Douglas vote.

<sup>2</sup> The Whig vote adds together the vote for three regional candidates.

<sup>3</sup> This is a vexed result. The figure falls to less than 50.0 if the Alabama popular vote is counted in a plausible, albeit unconventional, way.

standard, he scored slightly higher than William McKinley in 1896, yet slightly lower than George H. W. Bush in 1988.

The 2008 election brought one of the worst showings for an in-party facing an open-seat presidential election in U.S. history. It was the fifth worst showing in the twenty instances. The voters' news for the GOP was bad. Compared with all performances in open-seat circumstances, however—that is, innocent of all considerations of which party held the White House ex ante—the Obama percentage of 53.4 percent was solid yet close to average. He did not win by a landslide margin of ten points or better, as Dwight D. Eisenhower did in 1952 and Harding did in 1920.

At this point, perhaps another comparison is useful. This one assembles popular-vote as well as electoral-vote data for certain recent presidential winners regardless of any considerations having to do with which party was holding the White House at the time or which candidates if any were incumbents. Just the relevant uncooked facts. Table 9-4 lists not all the recent presidential winners but rather those whose victory margins were roughly comparable to Obama's. Omitted are the two close George W. Bush elections and Ronald Reagan's 1984 landslide. Like Reagan in 1980 and George H. W. Bush in 1988, but unlike Bill Clinton in either of his elections, Obama won a majority of the popular vote. Obama's popular-vote edge looks something like Clinton's in 1992.

Table 9-4 Victory Showings, in Recent Presidential Elections, in the Vicinity of Obama's

Year	Winner	Winner's percentage of total popular vote minus runner-up's percentage	Winner's percentage of total popular vote	Electoral votes won
1980	Reagan	9.7	50.7	489
1988	G. H. W. Bush	7.8	53.4	426
1992	Clinton	5.6	43.0	370
1996	Clinton	8.5	49.2	379
2008	Obama	6.8	52.7	365

### Homeostasis

So much for open-seat elections. Here is another perspective. In certain ancient philosophies, the world keeps repeating itself. Things go round and round. By contrast, the idea of progress is modern. In a decently functioning two-party system, the ancient view seems to be right, at least in one respect. Party control of a government goes back and forth. For one thing, if both parties aim for the median voter in a plausible way, updating their ideologies and issue menus as need be, a system should equilibrate. For another, the opposition party is always available to point out mistakes and profit from them.

If all this is true, then each of the parties in a two-party system, over a long period of time, should fare about equally in elections. Has that been true in the case of U.S. presidential elections? The answer is yes. Consider the record from 1828 to 2008—a total of forty-six elections, omitting the pre-Andrew Jackson era. The Democrats have won the White House in twenty-one of these elections, the Republicans (in combination with, before them, the Whigs) in twenty-five. Three of those Republican victories (1876, 1888, and 2000) were Electoral College wins in which the popular vote went the other way.<sup>9</sup> With that correction, the Democrats' record is twenty-four and twenty-two. In those forty-six elections, the median Democratic share of the major-party popular vote has been 50.4 percent.<sup>10</sup> (Their mean share has been 49.5 percent.) In the post-World War II era, the Democrats have won the presidency seven times and the Republicans nine times, with each of the two parties winning the popular vote eight times.<sup>11</sup>

Also, if the equilibration idea is valid, party control of the presidency should bounce back and forth. Generally speaking, it does. The statistician Daniel J. Gans has noted, for example, that in the sequence of presidential elections from 1856 to 1980, the distribution of "runs" by party (Jimmy Carter, for example, was a run of one for the Democrats; Reagan and George H. W. Bush were a run of three for the Republicans) did not differ significantly from what you would expect to get in a distribution of runs of heads and tails through coin flips.<sup>12</sup> Since World War II the party controlling the White House has kept it in eight elections, but lost it in eight. This pattern renders fanciful any idea that the American political system, at least in recent times, has been

fostering any long-lasting party "eras" in the sphere of presidential politics. Things have tended to bounce back and forth. Republican strategist Karl Rove could build for the short term, which is a major accomplishment, but probably no one can build for the long term. Not at the presidential level.

Here is the commonsense point. The election of 2008 was, among other things, an equilibrating election. Parties in power tend to slip. Parties out of power tend to rise. On the former point, one authoritative estimate has it that, controlling for all else, the party occupying the White House loses half a percentage point of the popular vote for every four years in office.<sup>13</sup> In the present case, all else equal, that would mean a slash of the Republican share of the vote in 2000, 49.7 percent, to 48.7 percent in 2008, which is just two points off John McCain's showing of 46.6 percent.

There are reasons for such equilibration. One line of theorizing is that, over time, parties out of power succeed in assembling "coalitions of minorities" of various types that for whatever reason grow discontented with the incumbent. Governments tend to disappoint.<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is that, generally speaking, we are too optimistic in life. Stylized psychology seems to say so. Optimism is good for individual survival. Perhaps incoming parties, and the electorates that support them, systematically overestimate what is accomplishable in office and then are disappointed. Yet another possibility is ontological. From the standpoint of a chief executive—an elected one or not—what is the world really like out there? Anyone who has ever run an organization has probably reflected that unfavorable items turn up more often in the in-basket than favorable ones. That kind of pattern can take a political toll.

Finally, in a very convincing interpretation, one recent line of scholarship points to ideological equilibration.<sup>15</sup> Once in office, the argument goes, a party tends to enact policies suited to its own ideological side of the median voter—Democrats to the left, Republican to the right. This goes down well for awhile, since it may be a corrective to the previous party's off-center performance in the opposite direction. But then such behavior gets on voters' nerves, and they correct by switching back to the other party. The history of officeholding and policymaking, that is, tends to be dialectical.

This is a simple, basic idea that has good empirical grounding in the American experience of recent decades. Certainly the idea resonates if it is applied to the eight-year George W. Bush administration and its surrounding politics. In both domestic and foreign policy, the Bush White House operated on the right-hand side of the line. Its rightward bent was emphatic, from the tax cuts of 2001 through the Iraq War through, for example, energy policy, environmental policy, cultural policy, and the White House's attempt to partially privatize Social Security in 2005. By this reckoning Obama's victory was a theoretically well-grounded ideological correction. Many elections have had that quality.

### Events, Contingency, Luck

Here is yet another perspective. In offering it, I waded deeper into waters of overdetermination, but so be it. As political scientists, we like to traffic in

measurable regularities and, generally speaking, that is what we do. The two perspectives on the meaning of the 2008 election discussed above are instances of that propensity. So is the kind of econometric analysis that uses regularly measurable economic data to explain the outcome of elections. Data on inflation, unemployment, and changes in per capita income can be marshaled and deployed with elegance and profit. The confidence intervals may be wide, and the explained variance may fall considerably short of completeness, but the enterprise tends to work. In the 2008 election, for example, Ray Fair's prediction model worked well.<sup>16</sup>

Yet we tend to overlook unique, or at least odd or sparsely occurring, kinds of events as causes of electoral patterns or results. Such happenings are not so tractable. They don't fit into equations well. Historians dwell on them, but social scientists tend not to. The kinds of events I have in mind might be a shock to everybody, such as volcanic eruptions, or they might be spurred by governments, the instruments of governments, or other actors. But generally speaking, they come as a surprise. A paradigmatic instance is the blowing up of the Madrid trains three days before the Spanish election of 2004. Spain's conservative government had been heading toward a victory or at worst a photo finish, but the bombing of the trains discombobulated Spanish politics, although not in any simple or deterministic way. Instead, the governing party seems to have reacted to the event foolishly, or been perceived to do so, and the opposition Socialists, apparently as a consequence, walked away with the election. Had no trains blown up, there would have been no opportunity for the government to react foolishly. A result like this cannot be explained by claiming that it was predetermined by conventional indicators, or by the match-up of well-embedded left-right voter preferences to the ideological offerings of the politicians.

How about the American experience? In this country's history, there seems to be an ample helping. Here are some instances, both events and plausible non-events—the latter of which are, although especially dicey propositions, intriguing and empirically rooted parts of the record. In 1864, absent the surprising victories by Union armies in Atlanta and the Shenandoah Valley in September and October, the Democrat George McClellan, rather than Abraham Lincoln, seems to have been headed for victory in the November election—Lincoln certainly thought so.<sup>17</sup> During World War II, a non-event seems to have undermined the incumbent Democrats in the 1942 midterm, while an event seems to have helped them in the 1944 presidential election. Unfortunately for FDR, the successful Allied landing in North Africa didn't quite meet the November 1942 election deadline, but D-Day in June 1944 was more propitiously timed. President Roosevelt was not pressuring the military, but he was apparently aware of the political implications both times: "Just as the 1942 mid-terms had influenced the Torch [North Africa] decision, so the looming 1944 presidential elections affected the Trident [D-Day] ones."<sup>18</sup>

Two more non-events. In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson angled to announce Vietnam peace talks just before the presidential election, which might have helped the Democratic candidate Humphrey. Yet the Republican

candidate Nixon did not fancy a peace move just then, and apparently his agents dickered with the South Vietnamese government to help ward one off. No peace move occurred.<sup>19</sup> In 1980 President Carter would have loved to wire a settlement of the Iranian hostage crisis just before the election, but the Iranian government wasn't amenable. Politicians know the electoral potential of events and of their opposite: non-events that are all too visible or tangible.

Events and non-events such as these lie in the noneconomic realm. Of more relevance to 2008 is the economic realm. American history is, among other things, a saga of economic panics, crashes, banking crises, and the like. These events are not easily measured or plugged into equations. They can affect the conventional economic indicators, and often do, but not always in the short term, and their widespread immediate effects can include fear among voters about mortgages, credit, bank accounts, and job loss. In the econometrics tradition, these fears are not conventional indicator material. Also, panics or crashes can by themselves be scary spectacles—like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 in a different vein—even if they do not generate widespread economic hardships in the short run.

Voters can react to scary economic spectacles. Yet there is an odd aspect to American history. Never before 2008 did a major panic or crash occur during the run-up to an election—either a presidential election or a midterm. The list of panics or crashes looks something like the following: 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, 1907 (a currency crisis), 1929, 1937, and 1987 (a Wall Street crash).<sup>20</sup> Certainly, some of these events had electoral effects—but at a temporal distance. Until 2008, no panic coincided with an election.

Now we have an instance.<sup>21</sup> Wall Street and a good deal more crashed in September 2008. With what consequence? "Crushed by the crash" is probably as good a judgment as any about what happened to John McCain during the 2008 election. True, the economic indicators for the year were not great anyway, and the various homeostatic factors discussed above were operating to his disadvantage. Yet the polls showed that the race was roughly even in early September (McCain was even slightly ahead for awhile), and it takes a brave prognosticator to predict an election outcome when close competitors face two more months of happenings, which may include gaffes, scandals, revelations, media bombshells, al-Qaida videotapes, driving-under-the-influence leaks, and the rest.<sup>22</sup>

The crash in September 2008 seems to have sent south not only McCain's numbers, but also those of Republican candidates for the House and Senate. "In the postmortem analyses of the presidential contest," one pre-election analysis of the election went, "the financial meltdown will likely mark the tipping point."<sup>23</sup> A post-election assessment agreed: "As the economy sank, the fortunes of Obama—as the Democratic candidate after eight years of Republican rule—inevitably rose. McCain could have performed flawlessly and still succumbed to economic reality."<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, additional House districts tipped toward the Democrats, and what had seemed like five endangered Republican Senate seats expanded into eight.



As with the Madrid trains in 2004, the causal path at work here was apparently complex and contingent rather than simple and deterministic. National security, McCain's strong point, gave way to economics as a popular concern. A premium got placed on economic management as opposed to cultural expression. The Republicans looked somewhat foolish when McCain rushed back to Washington, D.C., in hopes of brokering a settlement, only to meet House Republicans scattering like stirred-up chickens as the \$700 billion bailout loomed. As much as anything, a primal fire-the-management verdict seems to have set in among voters—even if McCain wasn't exactly the management.

Paging Machiavelli and the tides of *fortuna*. In political terms, the eight-year administration of George W. Bush followed an arc of, among other things, luck. Absent the supreme gift of the butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County, Florida, in 2000, leaving aside everything else that happened in Florida that year, Bush wouldn't have reached the White House.<sup>25</sup> Absent the grim events of 9/11, Republicans might have fared worse in the elections of 2002 and 2004, which were dominated by national security concerns. In 2006 Iraq collapsed into apparently irretrievable (although on today's evidence, it wasn't) sectarian violence in exactly October of that year, just before the midterm. For the Republicans, the 2006 midterm was devastating. Then in September 2008 came the Wall Street crash. The gods have their ways.

### The Electoral College

No one can tell exactly what elections would be like if American presidents were selected directly by nationwide popular vote. The issues and mobilization strategies might change somewhat. Also, tactical maneuvers under the current system—the parties' battleground state appeals and the rest—can swerve the popular vote share in particular states by tenths of a percentage point or more. For this reason, there is no reason to rate the precise state-specific results that we see now as being somehow an exact gold-standard truth.

Still, it is interesting to witness how presidential elections have played out within the existing Electoral College system. Table 9-5 uses a technique to probe into deviations, so to speak, and into possible party bias, in the sixteen presidential elections since World War II, including 2008.<sup>26</sup> The first column of percentages gives each Democratic presidential candidate's share of the major-party national popular vote. The second column gives the Democratic candidate's popular vote share in the median Electoral College state, counting the District of Columbia as a state.<sup>27</sup> That is the state that turns out to be pivotal once all the fifty-one are weighted according to their Electoral College votes and laid end to end according to their Democratic presidential vote share. The pivotal state is the one that contains the median elector. In 2004, for example, it was Ohio with 48.9 percent for John Kerry. In 2000, it was Florida with 49.995 percent for Al Gore. The last column in Table 9-5 gives, for each election, the difference between the values supplied in the two preceding columns.

Table 9-5 Democratic Share of Major-Party Presidential Vote

Year	Winner	Percentage share of nationwide popular vote	Percentage share of median Electoral College unit	Difference
1948	Truman	52.3	50.5	+1.8
1952	Eisenhower	44.5	44.2	+0.3
1956	Eisenhower	42.2	42.6	-0.4
1960	Kennedy	50.1	50.4	-0.3
1964	Johnson	61.3	62.4	-1.1
1968	Nixon	49.6	48.7	+0.9
1972	Nixon	38.2	38.7	-0.5
1976	Carter	51.1	50.9	+0.2
1980	Reagan	44.7	45.7	-1.0
1984	Reagan	40.8	40.5	+0.3
1988	Bush 41	46.1	46.0	+0.1
1992	Clinton	53.5	52.8	+0.7
1996	Clinton	54.7	55.2	-0.5
2000	Bush 43	50.3	49.995	+0.3
2004	Bush 43	48.8	48.9	-0.1
2008	Obama	53.4	54.0	-0.6
Mean		48.85	48.84	+0.006

During these sixteen elections, ignoring the pluses and minuses, the mean absolute divergence between the nationwide popular vote share, taken straight, and its expression in the median Electoral College unit has been 0.575 percent—a bit more than half a percentage point. A split result came to pass in 2000, when Gore won the national popular vote but lost the election. But the deviations, so to speak, have been very small. They have ranged as high as 1.0 percent in 1980 and 1.8 percent in 1948—although the high absolute values for those two years may be related to the presence of third-party candidates.<sup>28</sup>

That is the deviations data. As for partisan bias, it has on average hugged zero. See the reading in the lower right-hand corner of Table 9-5. In eight of the sixteen elections, the Electoral College deviations have slightly favored the Democrats; in the other eight they have slightly favored the Republicans. In the two most recent elections, 2004 and 2008, favor has gone slightly to the Democrats. Here is one way of presenting the intuition. Consider the following counterfactual: if, say, 3.5 percent of the popular vote were arbitrarily shaved off Obama's major-party percentage in every state, he would fall slightly behind McCain in the national popular vote. But he would still win at least an Electoral College tie by taking Iowa with 54.7 percent and then secure a sure-fire victory in the House of Representatives in which the Democrats dominate most state delegations.<sup>29</sup> George W. Bush's victory in 2000 tracked a similar, although in that case Republican advantage, featuring Florida.

By this standard, the lack of a systematic partisan bias in the Electoral College during the last sixteen elections comes close to being uncanny. It probably explains why there is so little interest in getting rid of the Electoral

College. In general, neither party has been consistently disfavored. Neither party can expect to be disfavored next time. After 2000, there was a brief ripple of reform sentiment among Democrats. But it went away and seems unlikely to return.

### Race

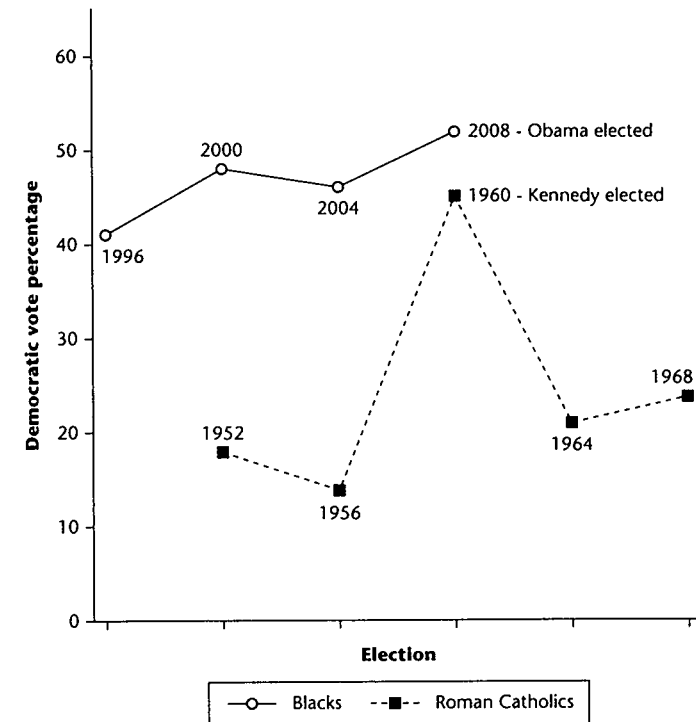
Nothing caused more comment during the 2008 election than race. Would there be a “Bradley effect” in which the African American candidate fared much worse than the polls had predicted? In other ways, would Barack Obama be significantly damaged by being an African American? The answer to these questions seems to be no, or not much. For the Democrats, using 2004 as a baseline, the white vote did indeed subside in parts of the South and in Appalachia.<sup>30</sup> Yet across the country as a whole it did not, and Obama carried three southern states compared to none for Gore and Kerry. Exit polls showed Obama running about two percentage points better than Kerry among white voters, about five points better among blacks (who had already been voting 90 percent Democratic anyway), and about eleven points better among Hispanics.

What can be said about these demographic patterns of voting? On the one hand, the white vote for the Democratic presidential candidate certainly did not implode. That is a major result. For the very long term it is even an astonishing result, given the Democrats’ long history, lasting into the Woodrow Wilson presidency in the 1910s, as the party of white supremacy.

With some hesitation, I offer a possibly illuminating comparison in Figure 9-1. It juxtaposes Obama’s victory in 2008 with that of Kennedy, the only Roman Catholic elected to the presidency, in 1960. How does religion then compare with race now? The comparison has difficulties. Roman Catholics considerably outnumber African Americans. And the black vote, as noted, has registered very high for Democrats in recent times and could scarcely have risen much higher in 2008.

Even so, Figure 9-1 offers a comparison by featuring an “index of religious voting” for 1960 and an “index of race voting” for 2008.<sup>31</sup> The percentage of Catholics, as opposed to Protestants, who voted for Kennedy in 1960, is compared to the percentage of blacks, as opposed to whites, who voted for Obama in 2008.<sup>32</sup> In 1960, for example, 78 percent of Catholics voted for Kennedy, but only 38 percent of Protestants voted for him, yielding an index value of 40. In Figure 9-1, the 1960 and 2008 elections are juxtaposed vertically, with the immediately preceding and (in 1960’s case) succeeding elections branching to the left and right. As can be seen, the candidates’ religious identities in 1960 seem to have brought an enormous (although temporary) jolt to the parties’ coalitional structure.<sup>33</sup> Millions of Catholics voted Democratic who likely otherwise wouldn’t have. Millions of Protestants voted Republican who likely otherwise wouldn’t have. In 2008, race seems to have brought a much smaller jolt. The index value for race did

Figure 9-1 Indexes of Race and Religious Voting



Sources: Religious voting index from Nelson W. Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics*, 10th ed. (New York: Chatham House, 2000), 317–319. Race voting index from “Dissecting the Changing Electorate,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2008, WK5.

Notes: The solid line indicates the percentage of blacks voting for the Democratic presidential candidate, minus the percentage of whites voting that way. The dashed line indicates the percentage of Roman Catholics voting for the Democratic presidential candidate minus the percentage of Protestants voting that way.

reach a peak in 2008,<sup>34</sup> but, generally speaking, the white vote stayed about the same for the Democrats. In all likelihood, if the white vote had caved for the Democrats in 2008 to the degree that the Protestant vote did for them in 1960, John McCain would be president.

Yet there is more to the story. The differential gains for the Democrats, by race, between 2004 and 2008, are noteworthy.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, African-, Hispanic-, and Asian-Americans are supplying a new edge to the Democratic Party coalition. This trend is not new. It is, among other things, a gradually appearing product of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965.

Nor is this the first time in U.S. history that a major expansion of the electorate by race, religion, or ethnicity has elevated one of the parties. The coming into politics of the Scotch-Irish aided the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democrats during the early nineteenth century. In the 1850s and 1860s, Irish

Catholic immigration augmented the Democrats, and accretions of German Protestants and newly enfranchised African Americans augmented the Republicans. From the 1890s through the 1930s, Italian, Jewish, and Slavic immigrants augmented the Democrats (who also benefited politically as their southern state parties disfranchised African Americans). In recent times, the coming into politics of African-, Hispanic-, and Asian-Americans seems to be replicating, for the Democrats, the eastern and southern European script of a century ago. Trends like these can be powerful aids to a party. Yet note that in the end, at least in this country's two-party system, such trends have not countermanded the forces of luck and homeostasis. Opposition parties, even if demographically challenged, have a way of bouncing back and catching up.

### How Big Was Obama's Victory in 2008?

Well, it certainly was solid. A 53.4 percent showing is impressive, not least because Obama won a majority of the popular vote. He is only the fifth Democrat since the Civil War to do that, the others being Samuel Tilden in 1876, Franklin D. Roosevelt (four times), Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, and Jimmy Carter (very narrowly) in 1976. Also, the 2008 election brought the Democrats a party-wide victory. Their share of the national popular vote for the House of Representatives exceeded 54 percent in the 2006 midterm. In 2008, it rose above 55 percent. Rare is the record of sequential gains in House and Senate seats that the Democrats enjoyed in 2006 and 2008.

Yet there are caveats. Voter turnout did not balloon in 2008 as many had projected.<sup>36</sup> The Democrats' victory was peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, a Washington, D.C., victory. The party's performance tailed off in elections for governor and state legislature.<sup>37</sup> Exhibiting rare discrimination, voters seem to have taken dead aim at just the Bush White House and congressional Republicans. Also, in the face of a difficult political context, the Republican showing at the presidential level in 2008, 46.6 percent, arguably wasn't all that bad. The party came out of the election damaged but alive. It is out there; it will come back.<sup>38</sup> Even the 2008 turnout pattern offers grounds for Republican optimism. One reason that turnout didn't soar as much as it might have is because many unenthusiastic Republicans stayed home. They probably won't stay at home forever.<sup>39</sup>

Luck also played a role in 2008. In purely partisan terms, perhaps the best long-term news for the Democrats is that the Wall Street crash of 2008 occurred on the Republican watch. A disaster like that can delegitimize a party for quite awhile. Witness the Democrats under Grover Cleveland confronted by the depression of 1893, the Hoover Republicans confronting the depression of 1929, or the Carter Democrats confronting the double-digit inflation and other economic troubles of the late 1970s.<sup>40</sup> In all three cases, it wasn't just a governing party that was discredited. Also left in the dust was each governing party's doctrine of political economy.<sup>41</sup> Association with disaster is not a winning hand.

Yet there is a caution. In these previous cases, the governing party was not only afflicted by economic disaster but had an extended chance—years—to wrestle with it. Generally speaking, those parties flailed around. In the present case, the Wall Street crash of 2008 afflicted the Bush administration too late to allow that administration much of a chance to wrestle with it. It's the Obama administration that will have to do so.

### Notes

Thanks to Joseph Sempolinski for his help on this work.

1. See Bernard A. Weisberger, *America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800* (New York: William Morrow, 2000); Bruce Ackerman, *The Failure of the Founding Fathers: Jefferson, Marshall, and the Rise of Presidential Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007); and Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
2. For an extended statement on this question, see David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignment: A Critique of an American Genre* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).
3. For a full presentation of this analysis, see David R. Mayhew, "Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 201–228. In 1788, there was no incumbent party. In 1824, during a brief one-party era, the incumbent party collapsed into competing factions of various ideological shades.
4. The statistical advantage accruing to incumbent candidates in presidential elections is discussed in Herbert F. Weisberg, "Partisanship and Incumbency in Presidential Elections," *Political Behavior* 24 (December 2002): 339–360; Ray C. Fair, *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 46–51; and David Samuels, "Presidentialism and Accountability for the Economy in Comparative Perspective," *American Political Science Review* 98 (August 2004): 425–436, at 428–429.
5. See John Zaller, "Politicians as Prize Fighters: Electoral Selection and Incumbency Advantage," in *Politicians and Party Politics*, ed. John G. Geer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
6. See Sendhil Mullainathan and Ebonya Washington, "Sticking with Your Vote: Cognitive Dissonance and Voting," paper presented at the American Politics Seminar, Yale University, September 5, 2007. Another possibility that lurks here is strategic behavior. Do the out-parties put up weak presidential candidates because they see that they can't win? Do incumbents of the in-party decide not to run again when the electoral omens are bad? These possibilities are discussed in Mayhew, "Incumbency Advantage," pp. 219–225. It seems likely that strategic behavior makes a minor contribution, at best, to the pattern here in Table 9-1.
7. In all those three, by the way, the in-party kept the White House. Absent those three contests, the in-party's historical win-loss record since the 1820s falls to a lackluster eight and twelve.
8. The reading for 2008 is based on early unofficial returns.
9. On the other side, however, there is the vexed instance of 1960. It is not clear which candidate won a national popular-vote edge in the Kennedy-Nixon contest of that year. Conventional wisdom has it that Kennedy did, but the facts are complex. At issue is the count of the popular vote in Alabama. See Neal R. Peirce, *The People's President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 102–107; Brian

- J. Gaines, "Popular Myths about Popular Vote-Electoral College Splits," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March 2001): 71–75; George C. Edwards III, *Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 48–51; and V. O. Key Jr., "Interpreting the Election Returns," in *The Presidential Election and Transition 1960–61*, ed. Paul T. David (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1961), 150.
10. The Whig vote for 1836 adds together the vote for three regional candidates. The Stephen Douglas vote is the Democratic vote for 1860. Since this calculation involves the major parties, the William Howard Taft vote is the Republican value for 1912.
11. That is, the record is eight and eight if the clouded 1960 result is counted as a Democratic popular-vote win.
12. Daniel J. Gans, "Persistence of Party Success in American Presidential Elections," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Winter 1986): 228–230. Gans also finds (230–233) that in the absence of repeat major-party candidates (such as George W. Bush in 2004 and Adlai Stevenson in 1956), the previous presidential election holds virtually no predictive value for the current election—either in predicting the victorious party or the parties' shares of the popular vote.
13. See Larry M. Bartels and John Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March 2001): 17.
14. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).
15. Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
16. <http://fairmodel.econ.yale.edu/vote2008/index2.htm>. On the other hand, well-executed election forecasts can be embarrassing, as most of them were in 2000.
17. See the analysis in James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin, 2008), chap. 10.
18. Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 370. On this aspect of the 1942 midterm, see also H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 685–686, 690–691.
19. See Larry Berman, *Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 29–36.
20. A brief discussion appears in John Steele Gordon, "A Short Banking History of the United States," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2008, A17.
21. It has been argued that Republican presidents during recent decades, as opposed to Democratic ones, have excelled in rigging the economy in their party's favor as a new presidential election rolls around. The experience of 2008 looks like, among other things, a world-class disconfirmation of that idea.
22. On this subject, see the time-line analysis of the last few months of the presidential election of 2000 in Richard Johnston, Michael G. Hagen, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations of Party Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
23. Jennifer E. Duffy, "Senate GOP Downsizing Again," *National Journal*, November 1, 2008, 18. Other pre-election assessments of the effects of the crash include Jay Cost, "On the State of the Race," September 30, 2008, [www.realclearpolitics.com/horseraceblog/2008/09/on\\_the\\_state\\_of\\_the\\_race\\_1.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/horseraceblog/2008/09/on_the_state_of_the_race_1.html); and Adam Nagourney and Megan Thee, "Poll Finds Obama Gaining Support and McCain Weakened in Bailout Crisis," *New York Times*, October 2, 2008.
24. "The Great Debates," *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 106.
25. On the butterfly ballot, see Henry Brady et al., "Law and Data: The Butterfly Ballot Episode," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March 2001): 59–69.
26. For purposes of calculation here, I have assigned all of Nebraska's five electoral votes in 2008 to McCain. That is despite the success of the Democrats in winning one of those votes by prevailing in the Omaha congressional district.
27. The District of Columbia enters the calculations in 1964.
28. The Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond candidacies in 1948; the John Anderson candidacy in 1980.
29. As I have calculated the immediate post-election returns, the median Electoral College unit for 2008 is, as it happens, a blend of Colorado and Iowa since those two Obama states meet at the 269-269 juncture once the 51 units are arrayed in the order of their Obama percentages. In Table 9-5, the value in the Electoral College column for 2008 is an average of Colorado's 53.4 percent and Iowa's 54.7 percent. I have pegged Colorado at 53.4 percent and also the Obama nationwide share at 53.4 percent. But those figures are fragile as I write, so there is a certain lack of closure.
30. See "For Most of the Country, a Blue Shift," *New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P1.
31. The model for these calculations is an "index of class voting" employed by Robert R. Alford in *Party and Society* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963).
32. These are percentages of the total popular vote. Races other than whites and blacks are ignored in the calculations for 1960, as are religions other than Catholics and Protestants in 1960.
33. See the analysis in Philip E. Converse et al., "Stability and Change in 1960: A Reinstating Election," *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 2 (June 1961): 269–280.
34. Actually, the race index reading for 1984, when whites flocked to Reagan in his reelection landslide but blacks didn't budge, surpassed that of 2008. The value for 1984 is 54.
35. This is leaving aside any differential changes by race in voter turnout, which at any rate do not seem to have been overwhelming.
36. Early assessments include: "Report: '08 Turnout Same As or Only Slightly Higher than '04," *CNN Political Ticker*, November 7, 2008; and Chris Cillizza, "5 Myths about an Election of Mythic Proportions," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2008.
37. Charles Cook, "Obama's Short Coattails: Democrats' Downballot Gains Weren't as Great as Some Had Hoped: It May Take a While to Figure Out Why," *NationalJournal.com*, November 7, 2008; and Alan Greenblatt, "Slow and Steady Wins in State Races; Democrats Take Over One More Governorship and Modestly Expand Their Power in State Legislatures," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, November 10, 2008, 3019–3021.
38. It is not unknown for a major party to collapse and vanish. The Whigs did so in the 1850s. But that fate is most unlikely for a major American party today. One reason is that the states around 1900, through detailed regulation of the parties' organizations and nominating processes, turned the Democrats and Republicans into something like public utilities. By law, the barriers to entry are low: Ambitious politicians and popular ideas can infuse rather easily into one or the other of the major parties. By contrast, the legal barriers to entry are rather high for third parties bidding to enter the system. On the move to heavy regulation of the American parties, see Leon D. Epstein, *Political Parties in the American Mold* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), chap. 6.
39. This could be a reversion. Earlier in U.S. history, it is estimated, inter-electoral change in party fortunes depended more on differential party mobilization and turnout, as compared to inter-election change via voter conversion. The latter pattern is said to have become more prominent in the latter half of the twentieth century. See W. Phillips Shively, "From Differential Abstention to Conversion: A



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Change in Electoral Change, 1864–1988,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 2 (May 1992): 309–330.

40. On the Carter case, see Robert J. Samuelson, *The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath: The Past and Future of American Affluence* (New York: Random House, 2008).
41. Although the record is less clear, another possible case is the fate of the Democrats in the late 1830s. The panic of 1837 and its painful aftermath seemed to help lift the Whigs to power in the 1840 election and also cast doubt on the doctrine of political economy espoused by the governing Democrats under Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren in the 1830s. See Michael F. Holt, “The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second American Party System: A Reappraisal of Jacksonian Voting Behavior,” 16–58 in *A Master’s Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald*, eds. William J. Cooper Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCordell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).