

Building Coalitions, Making Policy

*The Politics of the
Clinton, Bush, and Obama Presidencies*

Edited by

Martin A. Levin, Daniel DiSalvo,
and Martin M. Shapiro

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

© 2012 The Johns Hopkins University Press
All rights reserved. Published 2012
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Building coalitions, making policy : the politics of the Clinton,
Bush, and Obama presidencies / edited by Martin A. Levin,
Daniel DiSalvo, and Martin M. Shapiro.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0508-7 (hbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4214-0508-3 (hbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0509-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4214-0509-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0595-7 (electronic)

ISBN-10: 1-4214-0595-4 (electronic)

1. Political planning—United States. 2. Decision making—
United States. 3. Electoral coalitions—United States.
4. United States—Politics and government—1993–2001.
5. United States—Politics and government—2001–2009.
6. United States—Politics and government—2009– I. Levin,
Martin A. II. DiSalvo, Daniel. III. Shapiro, Martin M.

JK468.P64B85 2012

973.93—dc23

2011037771

A catalog record for this book is available from the British
Library.

*Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For
more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or
specialsales@press.jhu.edu.*

The Johns Hopkins University Press uses environmentally
friendly book materials, including recycled text paper that is
composed of at least 30 percent post-consumer waste, whenever
possible.

As I said at the start, all this is too simple and too crude and too much seat-of-the-pants. Core and median and coalition are much to the point and rightly central to this volume, but surely science, including social science, is not the enemy of simple truth. Indeed, contributors to this volume repeatedly acknowledge the personal element in all politics, but most particularly in presidential politics. In the midst of wholly proper social science attempts at precision, rigor, and political neutrality, it seems worthwhile near the end of this volume to emphasize that President Bush, like all the rest of us, in the words of comic George Carlin, was trying to slide home safely, and that home for President Bush is inhabited by our crowd.

Politics, Elections, and Policymaking

David Mayhew

How do presidents and congressional party leaders try to win elections by shaping policy choices? In particular, as this volume asks, what is the record in this regard during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and especially of George W. Bush? Also, what can be said about the early Obama years?

Anthony Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*, a half century after it was published, remains the leading theoretical guide on matters like these.¹ I will draw on it here as an analytic framework, as do Daniel DiSalvo (chap. 11) and Daniel Galvin (chap. 10), yet I will use the work by embroidering it. The history of these recent times, as well as the treatments of that history supplied in this volume, seems to invite the embroidering. I hope that both the resorting to and the embroidering of Downs are of use. I organize my discussion under a series of rubrics that for theoretical or practical reasons seem to merit distinct examination.

The Center versus the Base

In one respect, possibly no president in U.S. history has surpassed George W. Bush. Especially in his first term, Bush stood out as an eyes-open promoter of a policy menu targeting, on the one hand, "the party base" but also, on the other hand, "the center" or "the median voter" or voters who might "expand the party coalition." The "base" may be an ambiguous term, and the median voter may be empirically elusive, swervable to some degree by elite manipulation and responsive in different ways to different issues, but the common-sense frame entailing these terms seems useful enough. The early Bush menu was a judicious inside-outside mix. Bearing the prints of Karl Rove, it has drawn notice for both its astute calculation and the balance of appeal that resulted from that calculation (see chap. 11).

For the Republican base, the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 crowned the agenda, although the White House in crafting these plans did take care to offer aid to the median voter, too. These tax proposals were a marvel of variegated calculation (see chap. 6). In addition, the White House offered to the cultural conservatives of the party base "faith-based" initiatives, which ran into trouble on Capitol Hill, and a ban on partial-birth abortion that won enactment in 2003 (see chaps. 7 and 11). To the Federalist Society, a key wing of the conservative intelligentsia, went a wealth of federal judicial appointments, including those of Supreme Court Justices John Roberts and, after the nomination of Harriet Miers foundered, Samuel Alito (see chap. 7). The White House's energy plans pleased the business community. After a warm-up during Bush's first term, bankruptcy reform and a curb on class action suits pleased business during his second term, although a curb on medical malpractice suits failed (see chaps. 7 and 11).

Yet the early Bush presidency gave the median voter aggressive attention, also.² This kind of thrust suited the leadership of a party struggling at that time for electoral parity, never mind electoral supremacy (see chap. 10). During 2001–4, there were two major drives. In a paradigm instance, the White House "aggressively courted the center" in advancing the No Child Left Behind Act (see chap. 2). This drive and enactment helped put the Bush administration on the boards as "compassionately conservative." No less venture-some was the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003, setting a new government role in making prescription drugs accessible (see chap. 5). In both of these cases, the Republicans sought to show they were not slouches in policy sectors

such as education and health care ordinarily dominated by the Democrats. In the Medicare enactment, the Republicans did not ignore their conservative base: the measure, although expansionary, brought a welcome triumph for private market interests by way of its mechanisms (see chap. 5). Yet in the cases of both education and Medicare, the final enactments ended up rather too "center-seeking" for the tastes of many conservatives. In both of his terms, Bush also pursued a center-seeking strategy, at least in large part, in immigration policy. His program's ingredients of sternness toward illegal immigration sought to please the nativists, and a guest worker program sought to please the business community, two key elements of the party's base, but the Bush White House never gave up on framing a "comprehensive" settlement of immigration policy that would go over well with Hispanic voters (see chap. 3).

As a theoretical matter, how should we think about an inside-outside strategy like Bush's and Rove's? For one thing, it was true to the theory of Downs, who does *not* argue that parties dwell only on the median voter. Base voters have a place, too, even if Downs emphasizes the median. In his analysis, a major party in a two-party system always needs to pursue a complex, tension-ridden, inside-outside strategy that appeases the median voter but also, given the existence of a dominant ideological dimension, caters to the range of voters all the way to the left or right extreme on its own side of the median. If a party does not do the latter in both campaigning and governing, enthusiasm and participation may fall off among the base. Appeasing the base is a necessary *electoral* strategy, not just a "deliver the goods" policy payoff that can stem from successfully appeasing the median voter in the last election.³ Certain authors of this volume touch on this argument. Bush's tax policies "served to satisfy and solidify" the Republican base (see chap. 6). The mix of verbs is apt. A base that is not solidified is not solid. In another reflection, both parties are said to depend heavily on "energizing a set of political base constituencies for political contributions, acting as 'foot soldiers' in retail politics, and producing a disproportionate turnout on Election Day" (see chap. 4). That solicitude is, among other things, for a ruling party, a campaign blueprint for next time.

All this is not to say that parties or presidents never make political mistakes. They can alienate their party bases and suffer accordingly. Such failures do not admit to easy measurement, but there are familiar instances. Carter antagonized his liberal base, and they rose up and damaged him in the mid-term party conference of 1978, in the presidential renomination contest of

1980, and probably, although solid evidence is problematic, in a certain sitting on their hands in the November election of 1980.⁴ It is conventional wisdom that George H. W. Bush violated his 1988 "read my lips" pledge of no new taxes by pressing his huge deficit reduction measure of 1990 and thus punctured the enthusiasm of his party base in the later presidential election of 1992 (see chap. 6).

Do we see this kind of mistake in the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies? Probably not, or at least not to the same degree. Clinton, advised in the mid-1990s by Dick Morris, a predecessor to Karl Rove as White House strategist, risked tension with his party base by signing on to the Republican-inspired version of welfare reform in 1996, but Clinton had already paid his dues. He had pressed his liberal program hard in 1993–94 and had heroically staved off Newt Gingrich's drive to enact a comprehensive Republican-flavored budget in 1995. George W. Bush, perhaps heeding his father's difficulties, never positioned himself on the wrong side of his party base on tax policy. Neither of these recent presidents brought on the level of base tension that afflicted the Carter and George H. W. Bush presidencies.

Instrumental versus Intrinsic

Downs's theory of parties, elections, and policymaking has many complexities, but at the core of it is a simple premise that he insists be taken straight. He does not relax it. This premise jibes with a popular understanding of what goes on in the political world. First, last, and always, the political parties are interested in getting elected and staying elected. Everything else, including all policymaking, is a derivative concern. To win and rewin elections, parties will promise whatever they need to and execute in office whatever they need to. This simple premise, even if it shaves off some reality, has proven to have considerable analytic power.

Let me follow this statement with a presentation of certain historical material, much of it abstracted from the chapters of this volume, that is 100 percent true in its own way to the Downsian election-seeking premise. That is, everything in the presentation maps perfectly onto a premise that the parties as leadership teams (think of Karl Rove as the distillation of a leadership team), as well as the presidents and presidential candidates that lead the parties, are pure election seekers.

That is the premise. Again, in line with it in the real American world, parties trying their best to abide by it need, whatever else, to deliver the goods to at least their party bases. Otherwise, as was argued above, they may bring on big base trouble in the next election. Granted, it is not easy to cater to the center and the base simultaneously, but it is not impossible (see, e.g., chap. 7 on the George W. Bush administration's subtle management of judicial politics) and, anyway, the parties do not have a choice. They cannot ignore their bases. The interest groups and ideological activists in the party bases mobilize as well as participate. They purvey ideas, supply campaign money, and flex organizational muscle.

Yet in policy terms the party bases are very insistent folks. They really want policies. Consider the "idea-driven elites" that Daniel DiSalvo discusses as party "factions" (chap. 11)—for example, the New Politics Democrats tracing to the McGovern era and the Christian Right and the Federalist Society nestled in recent decades on the Republican side. There is an additional wrinkle. The ideologues and core interest groups in the party bases probably think more long-term than does the typical median voter.⁵ The median voter, who as a practical matter in campaign strategies tends to morph into something of a floating, volatile, quirky, not very interested, not very ideological voter, does not seem to have much of a time horizon. A good economy right now, a government check in the mail, an agreeable stance on education, or an astute response to a hurricane might be enough to snare the median voter.

But the bases are more astute. They are in it for the long run. As designing intellectuals or as the officials of permanent organizations such as labor unions, the long run is what they are supposed to consider. Also, not only do the bases want policies that promise long-term payoff, but they are canny enough, knowing the vagaries of the American system of institutions, to insist on policies that try to *commit* the government, insofar as that is possible, to policies that promise a long run.

Here is the result. Even if presidents and party managers like Karl Rove are pure election seekers, they do not have any politically appealing escape (although a president like Carter might choose to escape anyway) from catering to policy activists in their base who aim to commit the government to major long-lasting policies. Those policies, at least in the short term, might be met by ignorance, indifference, bewilderment, or antagonism in the mind of the median voter. But for base-oriented political reasons, those policies need to be pressed.

This line of thinking jibes with a good deal of political and policy history during recent decades. Once a party wins a position of power, the activist juices run. Plans are hatched to enact major policies that, by virtue of the ways they are crafted and merchandised, may last forever—or at least for a long time. One effect is to incite immediate activist juices on the other side and thus in turn bring on intense controversy in which, to the cognoscenti of both sides, the stakes are manifest.

In this vein, the Reagan administration pressed its tax cuts in 1981. Those were wrapped in a “tax policy legacy—and fiscal public philosophy” that even today “remains remarkably resilient” (see chap. 6). The Clinton administration in its health care drive in 1993–94 promised health insurance “that can never be taken away.”⁶ It is not surprising that the Republicans went to the wall in opposition. The Republicans in 1996 aimed to kill the traditional Aid to Families with Dependent Children “welfare” program stone-cold dead; once the program was off the books completely, it could never be brought back. The same applied with repealing the estate tax in 2001.⁷ In practical dollar terms, the parties might have seemed to differ little on the estate tax question at that time, but to the politically well tuned in, the complete abolition of the tax had a distinct commitment implication. Once gone, the tax might be gone forever. It had taken a huge emergency defense buildup to get it on the books in the first place in 1916.⁸

The stakes also soared high on Medicare and Social Security policy during the George W. Bush administration. To the median voter, the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 might mean better access to prescription drugs. But to policy activists on both sides, at issue was a welcome, or ominous, drift toward privatizing the American welfare state (see chap. 5), hence the close contestation and the famous three-hour frozen roll call count on the measure in the House of Representatives that brought on great bitterness. Munificent though the new program might be, the ordinarily benefit-conscious Democrats would not buy it although the ordinarily cost-conscious Republicans would. Each side saw that voters might get hooked on a new kind of benefit structure that could infuse into social provision, generally. The stakes soared again in the White House’s 2005 drive to privatize part of Social Security, although that plan’s poor reception by the public warded off any showdown on Capitol Hill (see chap. 6).

The import of these observations is the following. Given the force of policy-directed activism in both parties’ bases, there might be only a slight distance

as an empirical matter between the parties appearing to be *instrumental* policy seekers and their appearing to be *intrinsic* policy seekers. Presidents and party leadership teams aiming solely toward the next election as generic Downsian instrumentalists will come to look like parties whose sole, or at least dominant, aim is lasting policy achievement for its own sake. That is, they will look like intrinsic policy seekers. In the frictionless case, the empirical difference will fall to zero, bringing an observational equivalence in which it is impossible to distinguish an instrumental animation from an intrinsic animation.

Relax an additional assumption and the frictionless case draws even nearer. That is, abandon the theoretical distinction between what animates the party base, on the one hand, and what animates the president and the party leadership team on the other. Allow the president and the party leadership team to become in principle *elements* of the party base rather than calculating politicians who in principle operate outside it and cater to it. Then where are we? This is not a fanciful speculation, given, say, Reagan’s evidently sincere—indeed deeply embedded—attitude toward tax cuts or Clinton’s toward health care reform. In the case of George W. Bush, Kent Weaver in chapter 4 points to that president’s “personal policy conviction” or his “personal belief” as the chief factor in his campaign for Social Security privatization. By himself, Bush was operating as an off-median Republican base.

These are complicated matters. But it is interesting to glimpse a brand of theorizing rather divergent from the central thrust of Downs’s. Tweak the facts and arguments a bit, and the basic question “How do presidents and party leaders seek to win elections through shaping policy choices?” can transmute into the alternative basic question “How do presidents and party leaders win elections in order to shape policy?” Note that in the latter formulation presidents and party leaders will still need to cater to the median voter in sufficient fashion to accomplish their ends.

Root Canal Politics

In a universe where parties seek to win elections through shaping policy choices, and that’s all, there is no room for policies that alienate voters rather than gratify them. There is no room for root canal politics. The Downsian theory has no place for such policies. A qualification arises—indeed, one that is true to the root canal metaphor. A policy move might turn off voters right

now but then promise to turn them back on again before the next election occurs. A canny presidential administration might choose to pay the upfront public opinion costs of a policy *position* that looks bad right now so as to profit from the distant felicitous *effects* of that policy once it is implemented before the next election takes place.⁹ A flavor of that calculation is said to have figured, for example, in the promulgation of the omnibus Clinton budget of 1993. That plan's unpalatable tax hikes were supposed to help along an economy that would be in good shape by 1996.¹⁰ This calculation was at least plausible.

But in the real world, some root canal policies do not promise any such favorable turnaround before the next election—or, at least, the risk is very great in any hope for such a turnaround. A dose of common sense is in order here. There is nothing foolish or mysterious in the idea of presidents or parties engaging in root canal policies that face bleak near-term horizons in the realm of public opinion. Consider the role of Gary Cooper as Sheriff Will Kane in *High Noon*. It is not all that difficult to conceive of policy moves that might be good medicine in some basic sense for the American public—or for the world, for that matter—but that the American public or the world might fall short of appreciating before the next election or possibly ever. At the least, we can envision policy moves that presidents or parties might themselves sincerely categorize that way (see chap. 9). In recent times, Jimmy Carter is probably the closest to a root canal president in this politically bleak sense. His ambitious energy plan of 1977 called for sacrifice—not an easy sell. His Panama Canal treaties pleased many Panamanians but not, on balance (especially if opinion intensities are reckoned with), Americans (see chap. 9). His bleaching of the economy courtesy of Paul Volcker promised better days *after* the 1980 election, not before it.

Did we witness root canal policymaking in this bleak sense during the presidencies of Clinton and George W. Bush? Through 2006, at least, there does not seem to have been much of it. Yet two major initiatives during Bush's last two years may fit the description. There was the White House's "surge" in Iraq in the winter of 2006–7—a direct and emphatic violation of an apparent mandate to do exactly the opposite registered by voters in the 2006 midterm (see chaps. 9 and 11). As James Lindsay reports, Bush's decision "to send five additional brigades to Iraq was not motivated by political calculations. Indeed, he made the decision at considerable cost to his own political capital and to his party's" (chap. 9). True, it is conceivable that a consequent improved U.S. political context in time for the 2008 election figured as a nontrivial theme in the

administration's crystal ball as of late 2006, given a successful Iraq surge, but that seems a stretch. In the Downsian model, surges bearing the unpopularity and the engineering risk of the Iraq one would be rare at best. The second instance came in late 2008. Faced by the Wall Street crash, the Bush White House advanced its \$700 billion bailout of the financial services industries. Getting this plan through Congress was pure root canal politics. Public opinion weighed in somewhere between skeptical and stonily hostile, but President Bush, the presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama, and three of the congressional parties (all but the House Republicans) signed on and the plan was enacted.

Position versus Valence Issues

Donald E. Stokes introduced a distinction between "position" issues, on which the parties stand for opposing goals, and "valence" issues, on which they stand for the same goal yet target each other on the question of whether the goal is being achieved right or who would be better at achieving it.¹¹ The Downsian model accommodates both position and valence issues, although their textures differ. In the case of valence issues, the distinction between the base and median voter seems to shed utility. The median voter remains prominently in the picture by way of performance ratings. Is the White House managing the war well? How about the economy? Would the other party be less corrupt?

Valence issues unquestionably played a role during George W. Bush's presidency. In the wake of the 9/11 attack, the White House's high ratings for management of national security keynoted the 2002 midterm and the 2004 presidential election and possibly tipped both contests to the Republicans. The GOP leadership team did not shrink from calling attention to that management (see chap. 9). During Bush's second term, however, the advantage in the valence sphere lurched to the Democrats. Position issues did not disappear, however: whether it was a good idea to have undertaken the Iraq War at all persisted as a position issue,¹² and the Republicans' stance on the Terri Schiavo matter (see chap. 7)¹³ and their drive to partly privatize Social Security (see chap. 6)¹⁴ brought them woeful results on the position front. Yet during Bush's second term a cascade of mishaps, missteps, and other surprises of near-biblical relentlessness came to mire the Republicans in a classic valence slump. Whether or not the Iraq War had been a good idea, it was going poorly—a profile and judgment that seems to have reached exceptional salience in October of 2006,

just before the congressional midterm.¹⁵ Hurricane Katrina brought on a huge management mess (see chap. 7).¹⁶ Too many Republican members of Congress seemed to be headed to prison. The Mark Foley scandal centering on House pages struck just before the 2006 midterm.¹⁷ Then the Wall Street crash struck just before the presidential election of 2008 and possibly tipped that contest to the Democrats. One cannot size up the electoral politics of the George W. Bush years without giving attention to valence issues.

Foreign Policy versus Domestic Policy

Analysis of parties and elections ordinarily hinges on domestic policy. But as James Lindsay argues, that is a mistake. It is also a misreading of Downsian theory in which *all* of a party's promises and performances of all kinds may have electoral relevance. At the least, foreign policy can bring on position and valence judgments by voters, as happened unquestionably albeit in roller-coaster fashion during the George W. Bush presidency.

As a matter of election-centered theory, what are presidents or parties doing as they craft foreign policies—most relevantly, in light of the Bush years, policies involving wars? Wag-the-dog scenarios posit the idea of war making as a scurrilous route to reelection. But logic and experience do not seem to bear out that hypothesis (see chap. 9). Wars are, and are ordinarily seen to be, inherently unpredictable. They can incur unpopular costs. In practice, wag-the-dog moves are quickly sniffed out. Every politician knows that governments can get bogged down in Korea- or Vietnam-type morasses that cost elections. Also, generally speaking, the American median voter does not seem to care much about the rest of the world.

So why would a president or a party undertake a war? This question is particularly apt in the case of discretionary wars, that is, ones where as a practical matter the American government's choice of whether to go to war or not is unusually open. It is not more or less dictated by the situation at hand. Consider again the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic animation. Presidents and base-led parties are, among other things, intrinsic policy seekers. As policy undertakings, wars can promise future end states just as pleasing as, say, the future end states offered by the enactment of Medicare in 1965 or the Reagan tax cuts in 1981. It is a matter of aspiration. During American history, many wars have been not only discretionary but, in a sense,

party projects. By the latter term I mean a war that (1) a ruling party undertook animated by intrinsic policy aims and (2) the other party opposed in principle from the start or else backed lukewarmly or soon soured on and came to oppose.

Meeting this description are all major American wars before 1917—the War of 1812, the War with Mexico, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War. A war against France in 1798, which almost came about, would have fit. For a variety of reasons involving their nondiscretionary origins or their complicated and evolving cross-party support bases, not meeting this description are the two world wars, the Cold War, and probably the Korean and Vietnam Wars. But a renewed experience of wars as party projects has come in recent times. Thus, against fierce Democratic opposition on Capitol Hill, the Reagan administration backed the Central American Contras in a covert war in the 1980s. The George H. W. Bush administration undertook the Gulf War of 1991 on a party-versus-party congressional vote—a warning signal of all-out Democratic opposition if that enterprise had soured. The Iraq War of 2003 fits into this policy tradition. It joins the War of 1812, the Gulf War of 1991, and the rest as a party project. As for the intrinsic animation, an Iraq victory seemed to promise in the minds of the Bush Republicans a blend of geopolitical and neo-Wilsonian results worth fighting for.

All this having been said, it takes a bit of additional shoehorning to adapt war making to a generic view of parties, elections, and policymaking. For one thing, the median voter becomes an unusually multifaceted and volatile creature. The median on what dimension? With abortion, gay rights, or taxing the rich, the answer is relatively easy. But wars bring on valence as well as position judgments, and they proceed unpredictably. On-the-ground volatility in a war zone can bring a matching volatility in voter views at home. And regarding wars, who, what, and where is the party base? On major domestic policy questions, a party's base will more or less stay put before, during, and after any presidential administration. We know who and where the Republican base is on tax cuts or the Democratic base on health care. But wars can renovate, reconfigure, or even create party bases. By 2006, the Republicans had a pro-Iraq-flavored base and the Democrats had an anti-Iraq-flavored base. Possibly no other issue defined or excited the bases as much by then. In both philosophical and empirical terms, it is an interesting question to what degree either party enjoyed *the same* base by 2006 that it had enjoyed in, say, 1999.

Presidential Parties and Congressional Parties

Parties are parties pure and simple in the Downsian model, but of course the American constitutional structure has brought us congressional as well as presidential parties. In theoretical and practical terms, wrinkles arise. A congressional party acting as a collectivity may angle for its own reputation with the public notwithstanding the policy wishes of a president bearing the same party label. The congressional parties acting this way, or else their individual members acting on their own hook, may advance their own intrinsic policy aspirations or else direct their own distinctive pitches to the median voter or the party base.¹⁸ An un-Downsian mix of cacophony, complexity, and conflict can result.

This volume supplies ample evidence of these frictions. Alert to the oncoming median voter in the 2006 midterm, House Republicans undercut the White House's Iraq policy by signing on to creation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which advised withdrawal (see chap. 9). That same oncoming median voter figured in the House GOP's abandonment of Bush's Social Security drive in 2005: "Most congressional Republicans did not share the president's enthusiasm for touching the third rail" (see chap. 4). Yet alternatively, a congressional party acting on its own may cater to the party base rather than to the median voter. That was the story on immigration in 2005–6. The Bush administration pressed a comprehensive plan agreeable to Senate Republicans and to Democrats in both chambers, yet the House GOP stuck with the party's restrictionist base, which was in an uproar at the time, and balked (see chap. 3). That was the end of comprehensive immigration reform, at least for a while.

These instances reflect White House setbacks, but a president can also win victories in the U.S. separation-of-powers context through being, in party terms, flexible. I offer in table 13.1 a list of instances during recent decades in which presidents have gotten their way on Capitol Hill, or at least agreed to overall deals that they found on the whole pleasing, thanks to coalitions that included majorities of the other party in both congressional chambers but that failed to attract a majority of their own party in at least one of the two chambers. This is versatility of a high order. Clinton joined with chiefly Republicans on welfare reform in 1996 and on trade agreements in 1993 and 2000. In something of a family tradition, both Bushes, father and son, joined with majorities of Senate Republicans, Senate Democrats, and House Democrats,

Table 13.1 Major White House legislative victories won since 1980 by working chiefly the other side of the street

Year	President	Measure	Story
1990	G. H. W. Bush	Omnibus deficit reduction act	The White House made a deal that accommodated House Democrats, Senate Democrats, and Senate Republicans, but most House Republicans would not buy.
1993	Clinton	North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	The White House won the support of majorities of Republicans in both chambers but lost most Democrats in both chambers.
1996	Clinton	Welfare reform	The White House made a deal that accommodated Republicans in both chambers and most Senate Democrats but lost exactly half of House Democrats.
2000	Clinton	Permanent Normal Trading Relations with China (PNTR)	The White House won the support of Republican majorities in both chambers and of Senate Democrats but lost a majority of House Democrats.
2008	G. W. Bush	\$300 billion housing industry guarantees (July)	The White House bought into a deal that accommodated most Democrats in both chambers and most Senate Republicans but lost most House Republicans.
2008	G. W. Bush	Paulson's \$700 billion financial industries bailout (October)	The White House agreed to a deal that accommodated most Democrats in both chambers and most Senate Republicans but lost most House Republicans.

Note: These are examples in which the White House joined with majorities of the opposition party in both chambers but lost at least half the members of its own party in at least one chamber.

leaving most House Republicans as outliers, to enact major root canal settlements involving vast money manipulations in the deficit reduction drive of 1990 and the housing and banking bailouts of 2008. Note the policy importance of all six measures listed in table 13.1.

Table 13.2 exhibits versatility of a different kind, although one legislative measure, NAFTA, makes an appearance in both tables. Presidents can be powerful advocates. They can go public. They can speak for national security. On occasion, they can penetrate and divide the congressional parties—even parties that formally control their chambers. In theory, the majority parties of especially the House are posited to be nearly immune to this sort of intrusion.¹⁹ The party leaderships of the House, even if they may not be able to enact measures favored by their party caucuses yet not by the chamber's reluctant median member, are supposed to be able to *block* measures not favored by their typical party member even if the median House member favors enactment. A party leadership should be able to do this blocking, it is theorized, through at least agenda control.

Yet in practice presidents often pull off such intrusions. They “roll” the House majority party by assembling a winning floor coalition that includes the bulk of the House minority party plus a pivotal dissenting rump of the House majority party. Table 13.2 presents a list of seven White House victories

Table 13.2 Major White House legislative victories won since 1980 by “rolling” the majority party of the House

Year	President	Majority-party vote	Minority-party vote	Measure
1981	Reagan	48–194	190–1	Tax cuts (ERTA)
1981	Reagan	63–176	190–0	Expenditure cuts (OBRA)
1991	G. H. W. Bush	86–179	164–3	Gulf War resolution
1993	Clinton	102–156	132–43	North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
2007	G. W. Bush	86–140	194–2	Fund Iraq War
2008	G. W. Bush	80–151	188–4	Fund Iraq War
2008	G. W. Bush	105–128	188–1	Authorize domestic surveillance procedures (the FISA fix)

Note: These are examples in which the bulk of the House minority party combined with a dissenting rump of the House majority party to win a showdown roll call victory. In all cases, the Democrats were the House majority party.

of this sort racked up during recent decades. I selected them for their importance, and all of them are indeed significant. Included are the two major legislative instruments of the Reagan revolution, George H. W. Bush's Gulf War resolution, and Clinton's NAFTA. Most recently, it is not possible to understand the last phase of the George W. Bush presidency absent recognition of such majority-party “rolls” in the House of Representatives. At stake then were highly publicized showdown votes over the funding of the Iraq War (twice, in 2007 and 2008) and the authorization of domestic surveillance procedures (the FISA fix in 2008). A grudging yet compliant Nancy Pelosi commented in arranging the procedure that yielded the war funding in 2007, “I’m the Speaker of the House. . . . I have to take into consideration something broader than the majority of the majority in the Democratic Caucus.”²⁰

Is the System “Off-Center”?

Some political scientists suggest a wrinkle of a different kind. A Downsian universe is perfectly symmetrical. In theory, the parties in a two-party system compete and perform in equal terms. They contest elections and make policy without anybody's thumbs on the scale. But is that true of the United States these days? Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson argued in 2005 that the American system has grown “off center” (see chaps. 4 and 6).²¹ During the George W. Bush years, it is said, the Republicans managed to jam down a thumb on their side of the scales. Through an alarming capacity to firm up their base, mobilize voters, discipline their politicians, and “frame” issues in mind-clouding ways—not least by using “terrorism” as a trope—the Republicans crafted a procedural unfairness that swerved government policy their way unfairly. Larry M. Bartels, using data from 1952 through 2004, has introduced a similar argument. During these years, the Republicans are said to have excelled in presidential elections by revving up the economy in the fourth years of their presidencies—an achievement that the Democrats did not match.²²

I do not see much in this volume's accounts, or in the full record of the Clinton and George W. Bush years through 2008, that bears out these ideas. In conducting their major policy drives, these presidents of both parties could run into a wall of public opinion. In the spring of 1994, it was apparently curtains for Clinton's health care drive when two-thirds of respondents in a national Gallup poll reckoned that “quality of care would decline and

they would be worse off" if the Clinton plan passed.²³ An equal-opportunity killing occurred in 2005 when George W. Bush's plan to partly privatize Social Security faced public opinion (see chap. 4). In addition, both Clinton and George W. Bush could run into filibuster walls in the Senate—Clinton, for example, on an economic stimulus plan, campaign finance reform, and lobbying reform in 1993–94, Bush on repeal of the estate tax, oil drilling in Alaska, and curbing medical malpractice suits in 2005–6. On the whole, Clinton and Bush probably enjoyed roughly equal success in pressing their domestic policies. Also, during the full eight-year span of the George W. Bush administration, the capacities of the two parties to mobilize voters, raise campaign money, and frame issues seem to have equilibrated. In all these venues the Democrats were on top by 2008. Both Clinton and Bush entered office with their parties already controlling both houses of Congresses, yet both of them blew that advantage before exiting. Finally, in 2008 the Republican White House spectacularly failed to present a revved-up economy to presidential voters. So much for the Republican rev-up generalization. Paging Herbert Hoover as of 1932. The extraordinary Wall Street crash of election year 2008 took place on the GOP watch. In general, on the evidence of these recent times, the Downsian idea of competitive symmetry looks pretty good.

Building a Permanent Party Advantage?

If a specter haunts this volume, it is that of Karl Rove (see chaps. 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11). Rove, "the Architect" of George W. Bush's presidency, laid plans for not only the short run but, more ambitiously and interestingly, the long run. He was billed as a new Mark Hanna. In Rove's imagination, it is said, "the Bush administration could forge a political realignment that would ensure a 'permanent' Republican majority." This could be done by "transforming the political environment through policymaking" (see chap. 5), hence the "compassionate conservatism" and the calculated policy appeals on education, Medicare, immigration, and, following 9/11, terrorism and national security.

Where are we now on Rove and his plans? Well, the White House designs for domestic policy were probably a plus for the 2002 and 2004 election cycles. This case is at least plausible, although it is hard to peer beyond the intruding effects of the 9/11 attack. In general, tax cuts are popular with voters.²⁴ Education and Medicare reform gave the Bush administration something of a centrist profile and disarmed the Democrats of signature issues. Yet,

in the longer term, these policies designed to build a permanent Republican majority have not been great popular hits (see chaps. 2, 4, 5, and 11),²⁵ and the permanent Republican majority was not built. In 2006 and 2008, the Democrats came back. Does this mean that Rove was a failure? It does not. He was a striking managerial success for a few years, and in American presidential politics that is probably the best anyone can reasonably aspire to. That realm is inherently too volatile to accommodate any building of permanent party coalitions. In the elections since World War II, for example, now including 2008, the party controlling the White House has kept it eight times but lost it eight times. You cannot get any more even than that. There is no reason to believe that anything Karl Rove could have done, or that anything anyone else could have done or could still do, might impair that fundamental volatility.²⁶

Not the least of the reasons for that volatility is luck. The George W. Bush presidency described an arc of luck. Absent the supreme adventitious gift of the butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County in 2000, leaving aside everything else that happened in Florida that year, Bush would not have reached the White House.²⁷ Absent the grim events of 9/11, the 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 irreversible sectarian violence just before that year's U.S. midterm elections. Then during the election season of 2008 came the Wall Street crash. In the long term, beyond everything else, a major guarantee of the not-off-center symmetry of the U.S. system seems to be luck.

The Early Obama Years

During its first two years, did the experience of the Obama administration violate the analytic themes of this chapter? It did not. As in the Bush/Rove case, the idea of a new permanent majority party has proven, at least so far, to be groundless. The Democrats no less than the Republicans can fall victim to bad luck—in Obama's case an obdurately lame job market, an inherited war in Afghanistan, and the Gulf oil spill. Each side can experience a general valence-issues slump. Each side can suffer a homeostatic kickback in elections.²⁸ Now, as an instance of voter reaction, the midterm election of 2006 has acquired an opposite bookend in the midterm election of 2010. In voter kickback effects, the Republicans' off-median positioning under Bush on the

Iraq War, partly privatizing Social Security, and a stream of lesser domestic issues came to be matched by the Democrats' off-median positioning under Obama on vast stimulus spending, cap and trade energy reform, and health care reform. The voter verdict was deadly both times.²⁹ As for symmetry otherwise, I do not see any improvement these days for the idea of an ingrained systemic bias favoring either party in any major process or policy respect. For one thing, Bush won his tax cuts in 2001, Obama his health care reform in 2009–10.

The Obama health care drive offers rich fodder for analysis. In one aspect, this ambitious initiative seems to have been aimed at the median voter. Even if the reform appeared questionable while being enacted, its actual benefits, the hope was, would win friends by the time of the 2010 or at least the 2012 election. But that account of the enactment politics has limits. In fact, of core importance were "ideological conviction and commitment to the Democratic base" (chap. 5). The party's activist base was insistent: enact health care or else, at whatever cost; remember what Carter's sluggishness on this front had brought him. In animation terms for the ruling Democrats, the instrumental—the base needed to be satisfied—blended with the intrinsic in a quest for a long-term, irrevocable government policy commitment. The result was a strained and curious exercise in coalition building. Neither the base nor the center ended up pleased. For much of the party's liberal base, the reform as enacted fell considerably short. For the median voter of 2010, the measure seemed to approach root canal territory—a costly, invasive, and gratuitous liberal enterprise.

Against the background of the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies, there is one clear dissimilarity. The transition from Clinton to Bush was not a time of crisis management. The transition from Bush to Obama was. Wars and an economic crash were on offer. On both these fronts, the policy continuity from 2008 through 2009 and 2010 has been striking. In the case of the economy, I would guess that future historians will point to, among other things, a sequence of responsive legislative moves that sprawled across the Bush and Obama administrations. This included a Bush \$168 billion stimulus package in early 2008, a \$300 billion housing market guarantee in mid-2008, the \$700 billion TARP bailout of the financial sector in October 2008, the Democrats' \$787 billion stimulus package of early 2009, and the Democrats' ambitious reform of the financial sector in mid-2010. The first three of these instruments bore the imprints of both parties. It goes without saying that the

contents of the latter two instruments had a distinctive Democratic flavor, yet it is an excellent bet that a Republican Party in power would have devised its own kinds of enactments under similar labels.

Capping the reach of this volume is the explosive midterm election of November 2010. Two reflections seem in order. First, the era of Clinton, Bush, and Obama now seems all of a piece in its openness to a striking voter volatility that has levered, in turn, party alternation in power in both Congress and the White House. There has been no stability. One cause of this instability, dented though it sometimes might be by a dualistic center-cum-base strategy like that of Bush and Rove in 2001, has been the parties' apparent inability, or unwillingness, to contain their bases. Victorious in elections for whatever reasons, spurred by their activist bases that seem to have grown unusually crystallized and demanding in recent times, the parties have come storming into power bent on pleasing those bases. If such catering is done in defiance of the median voter,³⁰ homeostatic kickback in later elections is an unsurprising reaction. A further effect might be long-term policy instability. Here today, gone tomorrow is a plausible trajectory for policies enacted in such a whirl of volatility.

Second, the 2010 midterm election returned the country to a condition of divided party control. In statistical terms, for better or worse, this has become a normal condition. As of 2012, American government has seen divided party control 61 percent of the time since World War II. Every president since Carter, now including Obama, has faced it for at least a while. It is well to remember that a formally divided legislative context does not mean the end of lawmaking. Under divided control, key laws have passed addressing, for example, taxation under Truman, Nixon, and Reagan; infrastructure development under Eisenhower (the national highway system); the minimum wage under Eisenhower, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush; education under Eisenhower and George W. Bush; the environment under Nixon and George H. W. Bush; campaign finance reform under Ford and George W. Bush; the financing of Social Security under Reagan; deficit reduction under Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton; immigration under Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton; welfare reform under Clinton; and trade under Eisenhower, Ford, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush.³¹ In recent years, the on-point legislative responses to the 9/11 crisis and the Wall Street crash occurred during divided control. There is also the realm of appointments. Since World War II, Justices John Marshall Harlan, William Brennan, Charles Whittaker,

Potter Stewart, Warren Burger, Harry Blackmun, Lewis Powell, William Rehnquist, John Paul Stevens, Anthony Kennedy, David Souter, and Clarence Thomas have joined the Supreme Court during times of divided control.³² For presidents and members of Congress, the condition of divided control may call for a certain inventiveness in coalition making. Tables 13.1 and 13.2 offer exhibits of such inventiveness.

In the wake of the Democrats' midterm disaster, the congressional lame-duck session of December 2010 came to *feel* like an exercise, perhaps a rehearsal, of divided party control even if it was not exactly that. In the large area of economic policy, the Obama White House swiftly jettisoned its customary deference to House Democrats and the liberal party base. Promoted instead, thanks to a cross-partisan compromise, was that season's "surprisingly large \$858 billion package that gave Republicans a temporary extension of all of the Bush-era tax cuts" in combination with various outlays agreeable to the Democrats (chap. 6). Here was an exercise of centrism. In opinion surveys, the median voter seemed to sign on. Was this agreement a clue to dealings between the parties during 2011–12? It was hard to say. Vistas of accord were available in the areas of education, trade, and deficit reduction. Tougher would be immigration, where neither party's base was showing much give (chap. 3), and energy. Health care reform promised a motif of continuing conflict. Programmed for 2012 was another joust on the Bush tax cuts.

NOTES

1. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
2. For a statement of this case regarding Bush and the median voter, see David W. Brady, John Ferejohn, and Laurel Harbridge, "Polarization and Public Policy: A General Assessment," chap. 5 in *Red and Blue Nation*, vol. 2, *Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 191–95.
3. *Ibid.*, 117–18, 131–35.
4. For one thing, there was a drain of votes to the independent candidate John Anderson.
5. For a discussion of the distinctive far-sightedness that well-organized sectoral interests such as business and labor can impart to the policy process, see Alan M. Jacobs, "The Politics of When: Redistribution, Investment and Policy Making for the Long Term," *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (2008): 193–220.
6. Haynes Johnson and David S. Broder, *The System: The American Way of Politics at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), 267.

7. Michael J. Graetz and Ian Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
8. W. Elliot Brownlee, "Woodrow Wilson and Financing the Modern State: The Revenue Act of 1916," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 129, no. 2 (1985): 173–210.
9. Note that aiming for an election four years away can play fast and loose with the electoral fortunes of congressional members of the president's party facing voters two years away.
10. For a sense of the discursive setting and the considerations relevant to this argument that entered into the Clinton budget plan in 1993, see Bob Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 69–70, 74, 83–84, 121, 246–47, 262–63. Also as of 1993, according to Woodward, the Clinton plan for comprehensive health care reform was seen to offer an electoral payoff in 1996. "You don't understand," Hillary [Clinton] replied. "If we don't get this done this year, we are three years away from the benefits. And the only savings will be in the fourth year. So we've got to get it done right away, or we're going to be beaten in 1996" (120).
11. Donald E. Stokes, "Spatial Models of Party Competition," chap. 9 in Angus Campbell et al., *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: Wiley, 1966).
12. Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).
13. Jacobson, *Divider Not a Uniter*, 219–21; Donald P. Haider-Markel and Carol K. Carr, "The Political Fallout of Taking a Stand: The President, Congress, and the Schiavo Case," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (September 2007): 449–67.
14. Jacobson, *Divider Not a Uniter*, 206–17.
15. *Ibid.*, 222–32.
16. *Ibid.*, 253–58.
17. Michael D. Cobb, "Paging Congressional Democrats: It Was the Immorality, Stupid" (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2007).
18. On the parties acting as collectivities, see Gary W. Cox and Mathew McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). On the individual members acting alone, see David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).
19. Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the House of Representatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
20. Susan Davis, "Pelosi Brings End to 'Hastert Rule,'" *Roll Call*, May 29, 2007, 1.
21. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
22. Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), chap. 4.
23. Reported in Johnson and Broder, *System*, 371.
24. The Bush tax cuts of 2001 were. See Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, chap. 6.
25. On the non-resonance of the Medicare reform, see also David Blumenthal and James A. Morone, *The Heart of Power: Health and Politics in the Oval Office* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 405.

26. For a full statement of this argument, see David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignment: A Critique of an American Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

27. Henry E. Brady et al., "'Law and Data': The Butterfly Ballot Episode," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (2001): 59–69.

28. On the general pattern of homeostatic kickback, see Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 9.

29. For an analysis of the nontrivial electoral costs incurred by individual House Democrats who voted for the economic stimulus, cap and trade, and health care reform in 2009–10 (as well as TARP earlier in October 2008), see "Did Controversial Roll Call Votes Doom the Democrats?" *The Monkey Cage*, November 5, 2010, www.monkeycage.org/2010/11/did_controversial_roll_call_vo.html. For the particular electoral costs incurred by voting for health care reform, see David W. Brady, Morris P. Fiorina, and Arjun S. Wilkins, "The 2010 Elections: Why Did Political Science Forecasts Go Awry?," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 2 (April 2011): 247–50.

30. Possibly aiding this vision of defiance is an idea of "distortion" recently proposed by HeeMin Kim, G. Bingham Powell Jr., and Richard C. Ford. "Distortion" is defined as "short-term representation failure—the distance [on a left-right dimension] between the median voter and the legislature or government immediately after the election." Thus defined, and with suitable measurement, distortion according to the authors tends to peak in single-member-district electoral systems. The United States has such a system, and the study's logic may thus apply, although the United States is not included in the twenty countries in the analysis. See "Electoral Systems, Party Systems, and Ideological Representation," *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 1 (January 2010): 167–85, quotation at 167. On this question, see also Joseph Bafumi and Michael C. Herron, "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 519–42.

31. On trade, the Clinton reference is to the establishment of normal trade with China in 2000. NAFTA was ushered through by Clinton in 1993 at a time of unified party control, although the measure did depend on chiefly Republican congressional votes.

32. In this context, divided control refers to a party distinction between the presidency and the Senate. The justices appointed during times of unified party control correspondingly defined beginning with the Truman presidency have been Harold Burton, Fred Vinson, Tom Clark, Sherman Minton, Earl Warren, Byron White, Arthur Goldberg, Abe Fortas, Thurgood Marshall, Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer, John Roberts, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan.