

# part Retro New Age *The election of 2000*

By Rhodes Cook



The first anniversary of the election of 2000 is fast approaching. Whether that is cause for celebration or a gnashing of teeth is in the eye of the beholder. But there is little doubt that the vote last November was one of the closest, most competitive, and downright ironic in the nation's history.

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Ironic, because Republicans won both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue for the first time in nearly half a century, even though they lost seats in both the House and the Senate and their party's presidential candidate was beaten in the nationwide popular vote.

As for the election's place in history: it may be too soon to say. But it clearly combined elements of both "new age" and "retro."

Last November's balloting confirmed several trends present in other recent elections: the emergence of the once-solid Democratic South as the linchpin of the modern Republican Party;

the decline in highly competitive congressional races to a comparative handful; and the considerable disconnection between a party's presidential candidate and the success of its candidates for Congress—in short, the shrinkage of presidential coattails.

Yet in another vital respect, the first election of the new millennium was a throwback to the presidential contests of 50 to 100 years ago, when there was little talk of divided government, and a high level of correlation existed in partisan voting for president and Congress.

Back at the turn of the last century, straight-ticket voting was almost universal. In the first elections of the twentieth century, only a handful of districts did not vote for the same party for president and the House of Representatives, whether that was Democratic or Republican.

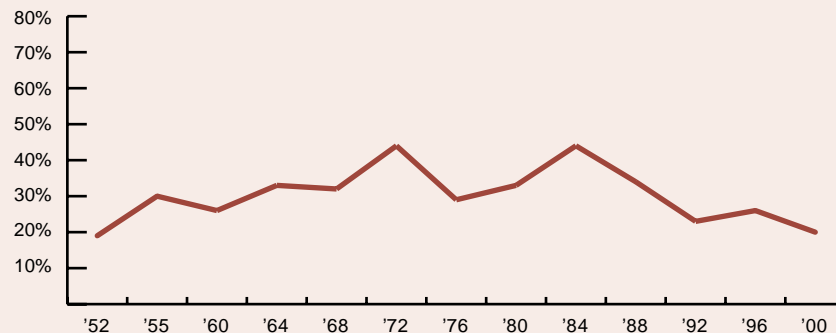
By mid-century, the amount of split-ticket voting had grown dramatically, as the electorate became more mobile, more independent, and less wedded to one party or the other. In the election of 1952—the last one before 2000 in which Republicans won both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue—nearly 20% of the districts (84 of 435) voted for one party for president and the other for the House.

Over the last half of the twentieth century, split-ticket voting has become a way of life. In each of the presidential elections from 1956 through 1996, at least 23% of the nation's congressional districts voted for a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of the other. And occasionally, the number of split-ticket districts surpassed

40% (see Figure 1). The result, more often than not, was divided government—with a Republican president and a Democratic Congress through much of the 1950s, '70s and '80s; and a Democratic president and a Republican Congress in the mid and late 1990s.

Figure 1  
**Split Ticket Voting a Way of Life**

Percentage of congressional districts with ticket splitting between presidential and House candidates, 1952-2000.



Source: *Vital Statistics on Congress 1999-2000* (The AEI Press) for elections from 1952-96; *Presidential Election, 2000 Congressional Districts Preliminary Summary* (Polidata Election Reports) for the 2000 election.

Year	Percent splitting tickets
1952	19%
1956	30
1960	26
1964	33
1968	32
1972	44
1976	29
1980	33
1984	44
1988	34
1992	23
1996	26
2000	20

But in 2000, the number of split-ticket districts fell back to 20% (88 of 435), the lowest level since 1952. What changed? Basically, the ability of one party to control the presidency and the other to control Congress has been at least temporarily muted.

For much of the previous half century, the Republicans were dominant at the presidential level while the Democrats enjoyed hegemony on Capitol Hill (due in large part to their lingering monopoly of congressional seats in the South).

In the 1990s, though, that was no longer the case. While Democratic presidential candidates continued to emphasize the more liberal agenda that was strengthening their appeal across the industrial Frost Belt and in the Far West, the Republicans finally broke through at the congressional level in Dixie, helped by favorable redistricting and a host of Democratic retirements.

The result: the two parties came out of the 2000 election roughly even in voting for both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and with the national political map of presidential and congressional voting in greater alignment than at any point in a generation.

Where the map is still a bit out of sync is in the South and the Northeast. Half of all House Democrats (23 of 46) holding districts that voted Republican for president in 2000 are from the South. More than half of all House Republicans (21 of 40) representing districts that voted Democratic for president are from the Northeast. (The other two split-ticket districts are held by the House's two independents, Bernard Sanders of Vermont and Virgil H. Goode, Jr., of Virginia.)

While the list of political "misfits" is comparatively small, it includes some of the more prominent members of Congress. Among the "Gore Republicans" are Christopher Shays of Connecticut, co-sponsor of the Shays-Meehan campaign finance reform bill, and Thomas M. Davis, III, of suburban Northern Virginia, who heads the GOP's congressional campaign committee.

Among the "Bush Democrats" are David E. Bonior of Michigan, the House minority whip, and the beleaguered Gary A. Condit of California, who represents a district in California's Central Valley that George W. Bush carried in the 2000 presidential vot-

ing by a margin of nearly 10 percentage points.

Generally, though, these political "misfits" are not that electorally vulnerable. Most of them have strong political survival skills, handily winning term after term as they lend credence to Tip O'Neill's famous adage that "all politics is local." Condit, for instance, is in his sixth full two-year term; Shays is in his seventh full term; Bonior is in his thirteenth and final term in the House. He has already indicated that he will run next year for governor of Michigan.

Like the vast majority of other House incumbents, the "misfits" have largely been able to insulate themselves through assiduous attention to constituent service, voting records that tend to mirror their constituencies, and a fixation on fund raising that usually deters significant opposition. Last November, more than half a dozen "misfits" did not draw opposition from the other party at all. One of them, Democrat Lloyd Doggett, represents Bush's home base of Austin, Texas.

Altogether, more House members were elected in 2000 without major party opposition (63) than won with less

than 55% of the total vote (57), a percentage often regarded as the quantitative benchmark for a competitive race.

Put another way, only 13% of the current House

had to break a sweat to win their seats last November; 72% coasted to victory, drawing an opponent from the other party but winning with 55% of the vote or more (usually much more); and nearly 15% were elected without any major-party opposition at all.

As for the Senate, races last year for the nation's "most exclusive club" were not demonstrably more competitive than for the House. Less than 30% of the Senate elections (10 of 34) were won with less than 55% of the vote; fully two-thirds (23) of the winners defeated their Democratic or Republican opponent with at least 55% of the vote; and one senator, Republican Jon Kyl of Arizona, was handed a second term without Democratic opposition.

A generation or two ago, presidential coattails might have offset this pro-incumbent, anti-competition dynamic. But that pull from the top of the ticket is not as powerful as it used to be.

Coattails are often measured by comparing district-by-district the vote percentages for the victorious presidential candidate and his party's successful House candidates. A complete but unofficial breakdown of the presidential vote by district in 2000 shows that Bush drew a higher vote percentage than barely two dozen Republican House winners, while Democrat Al Gore, the nationwide popular vote winner, ran ahead of fewer than 20 Democratic House winners.

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1964 and Republican Richard M. Nixon in 1972. Each ran ahead of more than 100 House winners of his own party.

But these are different times. Back when Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon were winning, there was an ebb and flow to congressional elections. Landslide presidential winners pulled into office dozens of their party's House candidates, who were often swept away in the midterm election two years later when the president was not on the ballot. The Democrats in 1966, for instance, and the Republicans in 1958 and 1974 each lost more than 45 House seats and at least four Senate seats.

In recent years, though, many members of Congress have been able to run well-financed campaigns that produced easy victories, while the showing of presidential winners has been comparatively weak.

No presidential candidate since George Bush in 1988 has won a majority of the popular vote, and only three successful presidential candidates since 1960—Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, and Ronald Reagan in 1984—have captured more than 55% of the popular vote. Yet even Reagan, who swept all but one state in 1984, ran ahead of fewer than 60 victorious House Republicans.

**Q**uite simply, when it comes to short coattails, George W. Bush is in good company.

Both numbers pale in comparison to the coattail pull of Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in

John F. Kennedy (in 1960), Bill Clinton (in 1992 and 1996) and Bush's own father—old number "41" (in 1988)—at best, ran ahead of about two dozen House winners of their own party. And as coattails have shrunk and congressional campaigns have become more independent of their national tickets, the ebb and flow of congressional seats has slowed to a trickle.

There are still occasional political tsunamis, such as the one in 1994 that carried the GOP to control of the House and Senate. But in this "new age" of politics, that election stands out as an aberration. The norm of late, especially in House contests, has been a small movement of seats within narrow parameters.

Is that where this story ends? Not necessarily. The dynamic of the last election will not dictate what happens in 2002. The political landscape is always evolving. And no more so than right now, as state after state redraws its legislative and congressional district lines for the next decade.

**"Quite simply, when it comes to short coattails, George W. Bush is in good company."**

Some congressional incumbents will become vulnerable as a result of the new lines. Some will decide to retire, as will many governors, who, either voluntarily or because of term limits, will step aside next year. As a consequence, there is certain to be a volatile environment in the election of 2002 that should not only help define the politics of the present decade but add further perspective to the part "new age," part "retro," election of 2000.