
DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: THE STORY IN THE STATES

By Morris P. Fiorina

The election of George Bush and a Democratic congress in 1988 insured that the United States would experience ten consecutive years of divided control—a national record, since extended to twelve years. The election results also reinforced a growing sense that divided government had become the normal condition of modern American politics rather than an anomaly likely to be corrected by an imminent electoral realignment.

Explanations of divided government normally begin with one of two questions: “Why can’t the Democrats win the presidency?” or “Why can’t the Republicans win the House?” Depending on one’s starting point, different explanations are featured. Democrats don’t win the presidency because they are too eager to tax and spend, or because the nomination process empowers nationally unrepresentative constituency groups, or because seemingly attractive Democratic nominees all turn out to be dorks. Republicans don’t win the House because they are gerrymandered out of their fair share of seats, or because of Democratic incumbency, or because Republicans hesitate to play the local benefits game. Except for gerrymandering, there is probably some truth in each of the proffered explanations. Still, all share a larger weakness—they identify *national level factors* as the explanations of developments that in fact extend in full to the state level.

Divided Control of State Government

Figure 1 shows the declining incidence of unified party control—the same party having the governorship and majority in both houses of the legislature—in the American states. After the consolidation of the New Deal system in the late 1930s, levels of unified control exceeded 80%. But unified control plunged during the early post-war years, recovered somewhat during the Watergate era, then sank again in the 1980s. This trend is not a mere reflection of the break-up of the “solid South,” nor does it appear to have much to do with the redistricting revolution.¹ We have overlooked these subnational developments because they are disguised by continued Democratic success in state elections—the Democrats consistently win more than 60% of the governors’ races and 60% of the legislatures. But the relationship between victories in executive and legislative arenas has virtually disappeared since the 1960s, so that the Democrats have been able to parlay their separate victories into overall control of a majority of states for only six of the past forty-six years: 1964-66, and 1974-78.

State outcomes reveal that the national situation is part of a more general pattern. Some state developments, though, are inconsistent with explanations of divided national govern-

ment. The modal pattern of divided control in the states is like the national pattern, a Republican executive with one or two Democratic legislative chambers. But there are also states with the opposite pattern, something not seen on the national level since Truman and the 80th Congress in 1947-48. Consider Idaho. Since 1970 the Democrats have controlled the governorship while Republicans have controlled both houses of the legislature. National level discussions might lead us to ask whether Idaho Republican legislators benefit from an incumbency advantage that enables them to survive the Democratic gubernatorial tides. Or is it that Idaho Republicans have a fractious gubernatorial nomination process that prevents them from uniting behind an executive candidate? Or do Idaho Democratic executives have a reputation as capable macro-economic managers, while Idaho Republican legislators have a reputation as district servants who bring home the bacon? Explanations based on national perspectives evidently seem strained when applied to state developments.

The Components of Divided State Government

The decline of unified control in the states is basically a decline in *Republican* control; Democratic control fluctuates but shows no trend (figure 2). Moreover, the decline in Republican control largely reflects a drop in Republican *legislative* success—their gubernatorial fortunes fluctuate greatly but show no trend, whereas they have steadily lost ground to Democrats in legislatures (figure 3). Rather than ask “Why can’t Republicans win the House?”, we should ask the more general question “Why can’t Republicans win legislatures?” As of the 1990 elections, Republicans had legislative majorities in only five states: Colorado, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming. Similarly, rather than ask “Why can’t Democrats win the Presidency?”, we should ask “Why don’t Democratic executive candidates match the success of their legislative candidates?” CBS/NYT exit poll data cumulated over the period 1976-1982 show that Democratic identifiers outnumbered Republicans in more than three-quarters of the states. But the Democrats have not approached that level of gubernatorial control since the Watergate years.² Moreover, some Democratic gubernatorial victories come where they “shouldn’t”—in states like Idaho, North Dakota and Utah, which have pluralities of Republican identifiers—a puzzling fact likely to challenge any answer to the larger question.

How Come?

At this preliminary state, I am focusing on a number of potential explanations for this puzzling situation. These are not mutually exclusive and certainly they are not exhaustive.

1. The Decline of Republican Legislatures

One development that may be related to the decline of Republican legislative control is the advance of legislative professionalization. Today, there are few "amateur" legislatures left—those which sit for only a few months a year, where compensation—often in the form of per diems—is minimal, and where perks are nonexistent. More and more state legislatures are coming to look like small-scale versions of Congress—full time operations, with large staffs, and other support services and, importantly, with salaries in the \$40,000 range augmented by expense accounts and tax write-offs.

The professionalization impetus reflects the belief that modern government requires the full-time attention of high quality legislators, supported by an expert permanent staff. Compensation and working conditions must be commensurate with the qualifications and responsibilities of the office-holders. While rooted in good government thinking, professionalization may have had the unintended consequence of undercutting Republican legislative strength by shifting the costs and benefits of legislative service in a way that diminishes the attractiveness of legislatures for Republicans and increases it for Democrats.

What sorts of people are willing to serve in an amateur legislature that sits for two months a year and pays little more than daily expenses? Such a legislature seems likely to "attract" professionals and proprietors (and their spouses) who have the flexibility to absent themselves from their principal occupations for significant periods of time without suffering financial hardship. For them, legislative service is a form of public or community service, like serving on a school board. In contrast, wage and salary earners whose compensation is determined by the hours they work will be largely precluded from serving in an amateur legislature. Given the known occupational correlates of party membership, amateur legislatures probably "select for" Republicans rather than Democrats.

Conversely, a professionalized legislature whose full-time members are substantially compensated will be attractive to individuals earning moderate salaries in the not-for-profit sector. (Interestingly, teachers are the fastest growing occupational group in legislatures). In contrast, highly successful professionals and proprietors who would be willing to contribute part of their time to legislative service will be unwilling to abandon lucrative principal occupations for full-time legislative service. These professionalized legislatures, then, may well favor Democrats.

In short, professionalization may constitute a long-term force working against Republican legislative success by raising the opportunity costs of legislative service for Republicans while simultaneously raising the direct benefits of such service for Democrats. And since state legislative service is a stepping stone to Congress, declining Republican fortunes on the state

level are reflected in a lack of experienced candidates for Congress.

It's worth pointing out that if the preceding logic turns out to be empirically correct, as many Democrats suspect, the current movement for terms limitation will have a pro-Republican impact. That is, if service is made temporary and part-time, compensation is reduced, and staffs and other perks are cut back, then legislatures will be pushed back quite a bit toward the amateur end of the continuum.

2. Breaking Up Those Cozy Triangles

A second argument addresses gubernatorial developments: Why do Democratic executive candidates do worse overall than might be expected, while Republicans do better? An interesting hint lies in the finding that the longer unified control endures, the more likely it is to end by a change in executive control. Unified control for longer than 10 years is virtually certain to end with loss of the governorship.

"Power corrupts", wrote Lord Acton. One vehicle of corruption identified by modern political science is the formation of cozy little triangles composed of special interests, legislators, and executive officials, where legislators provide generous appropriations and political cover, bureaucrats favorable policy decisions, and contented interests campaign contributions (or worse). When unified control exists and persists, common interests and stable conditions permit these networks to grow and prosper.

Eventually, the effects are more than voters will sit still for. But how can change be imposed? Changing legislative control often requires changing many majorities. In game theory terms, voters in different districts face a coordination problem. If one district changes but others do not, the changing district has accomplished nothing for the state, and perhaps has harmed itself by replacing a majority party legislator with an inexperienced minority party legislator. Moreover, legislators are specialists in avoiding responsibility for general conditions; they maintain close personal contact with their districts, and emphasize their local achievements. Thus, their districts will be loath to blame them for major state problems in the first place.

The governor, of course, is another matter. A single official, elected statewide, responsible for the larger well being, the governor is the natural focus of sentiment for change. Thus, voters in states with persistent unified control can most easily break the mold by electing a governor of the minority legislative party. This logic is equally consistent with Massachusetts voters ending sixteen years of Democratic control by electing a Republican governor in 1990, and with North Dakota voters ending fourteen years of Republican control by electing a Democratic governor in 1960. Since more states have Democratic legislatures, the overall result of such

a logic operating across the states would be that Democratic candidates for governor “underperform” whereas Republican candidates “overperform”—consistent with the data reported above. Ironically, success in legislative elections may contribute to failure in executive elections.³

3. But Why Does Divided Control Persist?

The preceding argument implies that divided control arises from voter unhappiness with government management. Voters do not choose minority party governors because of issue agreement (although nothing precludes that), but rather as a means of flushing out waste, fraud, and abuse. There is one feature of divided state control, however, that such an argument does not address: the *persistence* of divided control. Once voters have ended unified control, why do they often continue split control election after election—e. g., twenty-two years in the case of Idaho, twenty years in North Dakota, sixteen years in Illinois, ten years in California?

Although direct evidence is hard to come by, this third question is difficult to answer without resorting to some version of what Everett Ladd calls “cognitive Madisonianism,” which I interpret to mean that at some level voters actually prefer to be governed by a divided government rather than one fully controlled by Democrats or Republicans.⁴ To be sure, it is difficult to adduce direct evidence for such ideas. I do not know any voters who go to the polls consciously intent on dividing control between the parties, even if large majorities consistently endorse such an outcome.⁵ Still, the notion is consistent with the outlines of contemporary elections. For example, a formal model of ticket-splitting indicates that: (1) ticket-splitting will be most common among ideological moderates; (2) as the parties diverge, ticket-splitting becomes more common; (3) ticket-splitting favors the executive candidate of the party closer to the median voter, and the legislative candidates of the farther party *when the executive is more powerful than the legislature*, the opposite when the legislature is more powerful. Such hypotheses are not contradicted by modern experience.⁶

What Role for Surveys?

This is a journal devoted to the study of public opinion. What role does that study play in advancing the discussion of divided government, one of the more important discussions now taking place? The ideas outlined in this article illustrate both the relevance and the irrelevance of opinion research, as well as new directions in which it might go.

In his provocative work, *The United States of Ambition*, Alan Ehrenhalt observes that analysts are overly focused on the “demand side” of elections (how voters choose), at the expense of the “supply side” (the choices they are given).⁷ The professionalization argument sketched above is a good illustration of the distinction.⁸ Gary Jacobson has shown that the

proximate cause of poor Republican showings in the elections of the 1980s for the US House is that they had poorer candidates than the Democrats.⁹ Surveys can document that fact by demonstrating that less experienced, more poorly funded candidates have lower name recognition and less favorable images than more experienced candidates. But surveys do not shed light on *why* Republican candidates might be less experienced than their Democratic opponents. To understand that we must probe much farther back into the recruitment processes that produce the candidates we get.

On the other hand, survey research can be very useful in examining the explanation of minority party gubernatorial success that I offered above. Such success should be most likely where voters are relatively happy with their individual legislators, but deeply disturbed by overall conditions in their states. My thinking on this subject was stimulated by events in Massachusetts, where opinion surveys revealed startling levels of voter anger and cynicism, while election handicappers saw no prospect of significant Democratic legislative losses.

Somewhere in between is the cognitive Madisonianism argument. If voters are engaging in such behavior, then it surely takes place at a mental level well below what they can articulate in surveys (although they have no difficulty endorsing divided government after the fact.). Survey items focus on specific offices and candidates. This in turn means that voters are primed to respond purely in terms of the offices and candidates named. If their attitudes and behavior are conditioned by what happens in races for other offices, we are not likely to pick up much of this in surveys, even if voters were capable of articulating it. Could we pose items like, “Does your preference for George Bush make you more or less likely to vote for the Democratic House candidate?” Would we believe the answers if we did?

The architecture of the American system opens up the logical possibility of all manner of interactions among choices for different offices. But those of us in the survey research community have given little thought to such possibilities or to how we might uncover them. The subject demands more attention.

Endnotes

¹ These and other empirical claims in this article are developed in my forthcoming book, *Divided Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

² The data are described in Robert S. Erikson, John P. McIver and Gerald C. Wright, Jr., “State Political Culture and Public Opinion,” *American Political Science Review*, 81(1987): 797-814. Gerald Wright generously made these data available to me.

³ The argument is made at the national level by Robert S. Erikson, “Why the Democrats Lose Presidential Elections,” *PS*, 22(1989): 30-34.

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⁴Everett Carl Ladd, "Public Opinion and the 'Congress Problem,'" *The Public Interest*, 100 (1990): 66-67.

⁵For example, in an October 1990 NBC/WSJ survey 67% favored divided control and 23% unified control. "Public Scrutiny: Divided Government," *The Public Perspective* 2 (January/February 1991): 86.

⁶Fiorina, *Divided Government*, Chapter 5.

⁷Alan Ehrenhalt, *The United States of Ambition* (New York: Random House, 1991): Chapter 1.

⁸Indeed, my argument is a special case of Ehrenhalt's larger, richer argument.

⁹Gary Jacobson, *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), Chapter 4.

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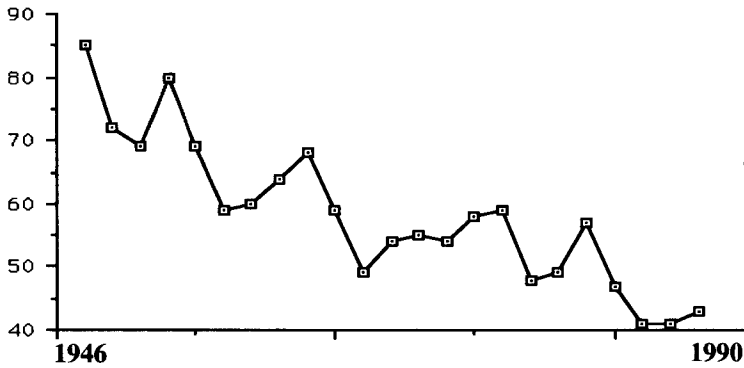


Figure 1

**Percentage of States With Unified Party Control
(One Party Holding Governorship and Majorities
in Both Legislative Chambers)**

Figure 2
**Percentage of States with
Unified Republican Control**

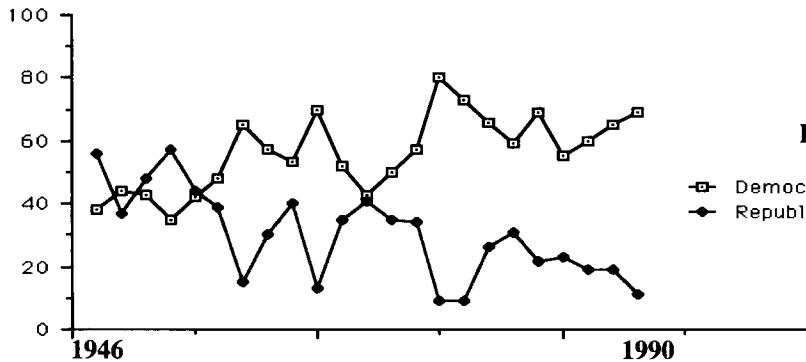
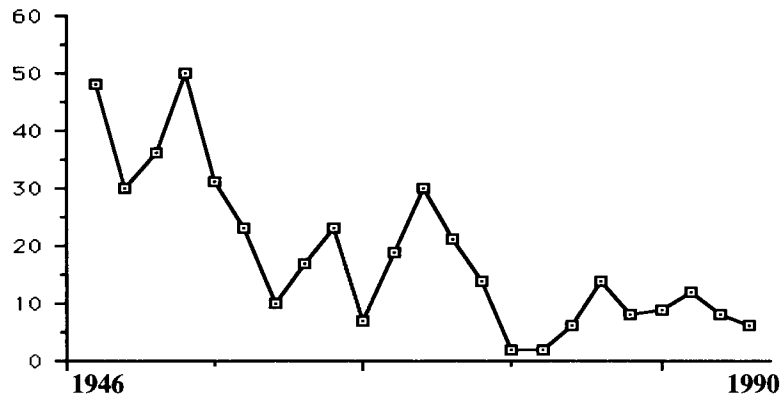


Figure 3

**Percentage of States in Which One Party Controls
Both Legislative Chambers**

□ Democrats
● Republicans