

The New American Electoral Map

By William G. Mayer

If the last several presidential elections have taught us nothing else, they have shown that trying to predict the results of the next election two years before it takes place is an enormously risky venture. As of late 1982, for example, only about 40% of the people said that they approved of the way Ronald Reagan was handling his job as president, and he was losing in the polls against all of the major Democratic candidates. Yet, two years later, he carried 49 states in a re-election landslide. Through the first three months of 1991, George Bush had an approval rating of 80%—but he went on to lose. The state of the economy, America's position in world affairs, the roster of salient public concerns, the image of the incumbent president—all can change quite decisively in two years' time.

States You Can Count On

And yet, all such uncertainties notwithstanding, a good bet can be made, two or even four years in advance, that the 1996 presidential election will take on a familiar and predictable geographic pattern. The District of Columbia, for example, will go Democratic—you can bank on it. Over the last five elections, the Democratic national ticket has carried the District by an average margin of 68%. There is also a high probability that the Democrats will do well in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Minnesota. If the Democrats are in serious political trouble by November of 1996, they could lose these states. In 1984, Reagan carried all of them except Minnesota. Still, even in 1984, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maryland were among the relatively strongest Democratic states in the country. Where Mondale lost most states by margins of 20 to 30 percentage points, he lost these states by *only* 3% to 5%.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Republicans will almost certainly carry Utah in 1996. Over the last five elections, their

average winning margin in the Beehive State has been 36%. They have also carried Alaska, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Idaho by averages of 24% or more.

What can be said about the extremes can also be said about the states in the middle. Take Ohio, which was carried by the Republicans in 1980, 1984, and 1988, and by the Democrats in 1976 and 1992. In each instance, Ohio's popular vote closely resembles that in the country as a whole. In 1984, Reagan beat Mondale nationally by 59% to 41%. The tally in Ohio was Reagan

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59%, Mondale 40%. In 1992, George Bush won 37% of the national popular vote, 38% in Ohio. Roughly similar findings can be cited for Michigan, Delaware, New Mexico, and Kentucky.

Over the last five presidential elections, in short, even though the Republicans have won three times and the Democrats twice, and even as the Republican share of the total popular vote has varied between 59% and 37%, the geography of American presidential elections has been steady and dependable. In almost every state, the absolute percentage of the vote won by each party's candidate has varied substantially; but each state's relative ranking—the extent to which it was more or less Democratic than the average for all states—tended to be fairly stable across elections.

This kind of stable recurring geographic alignment can be called an electoral map; and whenever such a map exists, it becomes one of the most important features of the political era, exerting a major influence on both parties' pre-election planning, the composition of their national tickets, and the allocation of campaign resources.

The Old Electoral Map

For almost thirty years, from 1932 up through about 1960, American presidential elections were governed by the New Deal electoral map. In election after election, no matter who the candidates were and which party actually won, one could count on the fact that certain states would be strongly Democratic, others would be relatively Republican, and a third group would wind up in the middle.

The geographic core of the Democratic coalition, of course, was the eleven states of the Solid South. In four races for the White House, Franklin Roosevelt never lost a single state in this region. FDR's worst southern state was Tennessee—which he still managed to win by an average plurality of 32 percentage points. Less well-known, perhaps, is that the New Deal-era Democrats also ran well in the Pacific and Rocky Mountain West states, including Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Montana, and Washington. The best Republican areas were consistently the Northeast and the Great Plains states. Most midwestern states turned out near the national average.

The New Deal electoral map took some time to come apart. The first fracture occurred in 1948, but the outlines of the old alignment are still quite visible in the Eisenhower-Stevenson contests in the 1950s, and in the vote that Richard Nixon (though not his Democratic opponents) received in 1960 and 1968. Whatever remained of that coalition, however, was decisively shattered by the upheavals of the

Table 1
Average State Partisanship in Presidential Elections, 1976-92

State	Number of Electoral Votes	Average Percentage Democrat	Average Percentage Republican	Average Plurality	No. of Times Carried by Democrats/Republicans
GROUP 1: States with DEMOCRATIC PLURALITIES					
District of Columbia	3	82%	13%	68% D	5/0
Rhode Island	4	51	41	10 D	4/1
Massachusetts	12	49	42	8 D	3/2
Minnesota	10	50	42	7 D	5/0
West Virginia	5	51	45	6 D	4/1
Maryland	10	49	46	3 D	3/2
Hawaii	4	48	46	3 D	4/1
New York	33	49	46	3 D	3/2
Arkansas	6	49	47	2 D	2/3
Georgia	13	49	47	2 D	3/2
Total	100				
GROUP 2: States with NARROW REPUBLICAN PLURALITIES (less than 4%)					
Wisconsin	11	46	47	1 R	3/2
Iowa	7	46	47	1 R	2/3
Pennsylvania	23	47	48	1 R	2/3
Oregon	7	45	46	2 R	2/3
Illinois	22	46	48	2 R	1/4
Tennessee	11	47	50	3 R	2/3
Washington	11	44	47	3 R	2/3
Missouri	11	46	49	3 R	2/3
Total	103				
GROUP 3: States with MODERATE REPUBLICAN PLURALITIES (4-8%)					
Delaware	3	45	49	4 R	2/3
Vermont	3	43	48	4 R	1/4
Kentucky	8	46	50	5 R	2/3
California	54	44	49	5 R	1/4
Louisiana	9	45	51	6 R	2/3
Maine	4	42	48	6 R	1/4
Michigan	18	44	50	6 R	1/4
North Carolina	14	45	51	6 R	1/4
Connecticut	8	43	50	7 R	1/4
Alabama	9	44	52	7 R	1/4
New Mexico	5	43	51	8 R	1/4
Ohio	21	43	51	8 R	2/3
Total	156				
GROUP 4: States with ABOVE AVERAGE REPUBLICAN PLURALITIES (9-14%)					
New Jersey	15	42	52	10 R	1/4
South Carolina	8	44	53	10 R	1/4
Mississippi	7	43	54	11 R	1/4
Texas	32	42	53	11 R	1/4
Montana	3	40	52	12 R	1/4
Virginia	13	41	54	13 R	0/5
Florida	25	41	54	13 R	1/4
South Dakota	3	40	54	13 R	0/5
Colorado	8	39	52	14 R	1/4
Total	114				
GROUP 5: States with LOPSIDEDLY REPUBLICAN PLURALITIES (15% or more)					
Indiana	12	40	55	15 R	0/5
Kansas	6	37	54	17 R	0/5
Oklahoma	8	38	56	18 R	0/5
Nevada	4	36	54	18 R	1/4
North Dakota	3	36	56	20 R	0/5
New Hampshire	4	36	56	21 R	1/4
Arizona	8	35	56	21 R	0/5
Alaska	3	32	56	24 R	0/5
Wyoming	3	34	59	25 R	0/5
Nebraska	5	32	60	28 R	0/5
Idaho	4	31	61	30 R	0/5
Utah	5	27	64	37 R	0/5
Total	65				

1960s and early 1970s. Of the last eight Democratic presidential candidates, only Jimmy Carter managed to assemble a geographic coalition that even remotely resembled the one that had elected Franklin Roosevelt.¹

The New Electoral Map

The decline of the New Deal electoral coalition is a story that has been told previously.² What has not been as widely recognized, however, is that by the mid-1970s, a new period of geographic electoral stability—a new electoral map—had clearly come into existence and still persists today.³ Table 1 rank orders all 50 states and the District of Columbia according to how strongly Democratic or Republican they have voted, on average, over the last five presidential elections.

As this table makes clear, the geographic core of the new Republican presidential coalition—the most strongly and consistently Republican area—has been the Great Plains and non-Pacific West. Between 1976 and 1992, there were twelve states in which the average Republican presidential vote exceeded the average Democratic vote by 15 percentage points or more. Ten of these states—all except New Hampshire and Indiana—lie west of the Mississippi River. In the elections of 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1988, the Republican presidential ticket carried all twelve of these states. Even in 1992, running their weakest candidate in almost three decades, the GOP triumphed in ten of the twelve, losing only New Hampshire and Nevada.

The second tier of Republican support comprises nine states where the average Republican plurality over the Democratic contender ranged between 9% and 15%. Three of these states are also in the West-Great Plains region (Colorado, South Dakota, and Montana), but the category also includes five important southern states: Florida, Virginia, Texas, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

The Democratic electoral base is more difficult to characterize. To begin with, if by “base” one means those states that the Democrats can count on carrying in just

about every election, the Democratic base is clearly a good deal smaller than that of the Republicans. The only “states” the Democrats have managed to win in all of the last five presidential elections are Minnesota and the District of Columbia. Three other states have gone Democratic in four opportunities out of five. But if we adopt a somewhat looser criterion, there are ten states in which the average Democratic presidential vote has exceeded the average Republican vote. Six of the ten are in the Northeast: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Maryland, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. The others include one midwestern state (Minnesota), one in the West (Hawaii), and two southern states (Arkansas and Georgia), which, not coincidentally, are also the states in which three of the last five Democratic candidates have lived.

It is not impossible for a Democratic presidential candidate to concede the South and win the White House—but it is extraordinarily difficult. Small wonder that the last three successful Democratic contenders have all been native Southerners.

One rung down the ladder are eight states (Group 2 in Table 1) that the Democrats have usually lost, but by comparatively narrow margins: four percentage points or less. These, too, are a heterogeneous lot, including two Border South states (Tennessee and Missouri), three from the Midwest (Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois), two from the Pacific Coast (Oregon and Washington), and one more from the Northeast (Pennsylvania).

The remaining category, Group 3, contains the twelve states in the middle of the distribution—states that have usually voted Republican by an average margin of 4% to 8%. As the electoral college vote totals make clear, these states are crucial to the political fortunes of both parties. A suc-

cessful Republican presidential ticket need not carry any states in Groups 1 and 2, and a Democratic candidate can win the White House without cracking the Republican base—but both parties need at least 65 electoral votes from Group 3. The biggest jewel in this cluster, of course, is the 54 electoral votes in California; but substantial numbers can also be picked up in Ohio, Michigan, and North Carolina.

One advantage of displaying the states in this way is the perspective it offers on the Democratic Party’s predicament in the electoral college. If the past is any guide to the future, the odds are surely stacked against the Democrats—but the party’s task is considerably more “doable” than many previous discussions have suggested.⁴ Specifically, if a Democratic candidate can carry all of the states in which the party’s average vote has exceeded that of the Republicans (Group 1), and then add in all the states that the Democrats have usually lost by 5% or less (Group 2 and all the states in Group 3 down through California), he (or she) would wind up with 271 electoral votes, one more than needed for a four-year lease on the White House. In fact, the Clinton-Gore ticket did carry every one of these states in 1992, and then threw in eleven other states for good measure.

Some Implications for 1996

What does all this mean for the presidential campaigns of 1996? To begin with, it is worth stressing that the “average plurality” figures in Table 1 are only a description of what has occurred in the recent past, and not necessarily a prediction of what will happen in the next go-around. In particular, as we have seen, a stable electoral map does not provide much purchase for predicting the absolute percentage of each party’s vote in a given state.

On the other hand, the relative ordering of the states in 1996 is likely to be quite similar to that which prevailed between 1976 and 1992. Given the continuity in state attitudes and population characteristics, and in the images and platforms of the two major parties, it is a good bet that the District of Columbia will once again be the banner Democratic “state”; that Utah, Idaho,

and Nebraska will go Republican; and that Michigan, North Carolina, and Connecticut will all be somewhere in the middle.

In general, a detailed, state-by-state electoral college strategy is something that a presidential campaign needs to worry about only if the election is likely to be close. If Clinton's current political troubles continue and he winds up with only 47% of the two-party vote (the Democratic average between 1976 and 1992), he will lose quite decisively in the electoral college. If the President's fortunes revive and he wins 53% of the combined Democratic-and-Republican vote, then, as we have already seen in 1992, he will carry enough states to prevail in the electoral college. But if the popular vote is expected to wind up somewhere in between these figures, then electoral college strategy could become quite important. The Republicans may then do some serious thinking about the geographic origins of their vice presidential candidate; and decisions within both parties about where to target such scarce resources as candidate travel time and television advertising funds will take on a heightened significance.

Perhaps because they have not been involved in a lot of close elections lately, the Democrats have not spent a great deal of time theorizing about the mathematics of the electoral college. But when they have, party strategists have usually come up with two basic game plans: (1) Go West and (2) Go South.

Since the South clearly shows up in survey data as the most conservative region in the country, especially on social and cultural issues, a number of Democratically-affiliated pundits have suggested that it is time to abandon the party's quest for southern electoral votes, and look for a new electoral base in the West.⁵ And given the current state of American electoral geography, it is hard to conceive of a Democrat getting elected president without carrying Washington, Oregon, and California. But recent voting data also show the distinct limitations of this strategy. For after these three states and Hawaii have been added to the Democratic column, the possibilities for further Democratic gains in the West

seem slim, indeed. Almost every other state in this region is solidly, even monolithically Republican at the presidential level. Putting a western candidate on the ticket, paying special heed to western policy interests, and targeting campaign resources to this area might increase the Democratic vote in some of these states by a few percentage points. However, the Republicans start out with such large leads in these states that even gaining ten percentage points in every state in the region would yield remarkably few additional electoral votes. Absent a radical pro-Democratic realignment in the non-Pacific West, then, in most years, any Democratic presidential ticket that hopes to have a fighting chance of victory must count on carrying at least a few states in the South.

This point can be made more vividly by looking at the numbers from a Republican perspective. In the eleven former Confederate states, plus the Border South states of Missouri and Kentucky, there are now 166 electoral votes. To concede the South to the Republicans, thus puts the Democrats at an enormous tactical disadvantage. Any Republican candidate who sweeps the South, and then adds in Indiana, New Hampshire, and the heavily Republican states in the West (those in Groups 4 and 5), starts with a secure base of about 240 electoral votes. The general election campaign then becomes a relatively easy task of carrying one or two populous states in the West, Midwest, or Northeast, with about fifteen to choose from.

In short, it is not impossible for a Democratic presidential candidate to concede the South and win the White House—but it is extraordinarily difficult. Small wonder that the last three successful Democratic contenders have all been native Southerners.

At least one other strategic insight can be drawn from these data. If 1996 does turn out to be a close election, the key battleground, as I have already noted, will be the far-flung collection of states in Group 3. And while all of the states in this category are likely to be contested, California stands out as especially crucial to Democratic fortunes. If we assume, for the moment, that

the Republicans carry every state whose average Republican plurality exceeds California's, while the Democrats win every state more Democratic than the Golden State, then the electoral college tally would read: Republicans 267, Democrats 217. In short, even without California, there are all sorts of plausible state coalitions that could bring victory to the Republicans. But if the Democrats lose California, their hopes of victory become substantially dimmer. To make up for the loss of these 54 electoral votes, the Democratic ticket would need to win at least three—and probably as many as six—other states, all of which have historically been less likely to vote Democratic than California.

So don't be surprised if California gets a lot of attention from the White House over the next two years.

Endnotes:

¹ For a more detailed discussion of these conclusions, including the data they are based upon, see William G. Mayer, "Changes in Elections and the Party System: 1992 in Historical Perspective," in *The New American Politics*, ed. Bryan D. Jones (Boulder, CO: Westview, forthcoming).

² See, in particular, Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., and Charles D. Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s* (New York: Norton, 1975); and Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

³ For a demonstration of this, see Mayer, "Changes in Elections and the Party System."

⁴ See, for example, George F. Will, *The New Season: A Spectator's Guide to the 1988 Election* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 96-98.

⁵ See the data in William G. Mayer, *The Changing American Mind: How and Why American Public Opinion Changed between 1960 and 1988* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), ch. 8.

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